

The “Quiet” Side of Counter Terrorism Operations: Combating Islamic Extremism in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This paper examines a specific case study in combating Islamic Extremism in Southeast Asia., namely the Philippine islands. Specifically, this article reviews the Philippine islands in detail, provides a brief history of the inhabitants, the Philippine government and defense forces, and then discusses rarely publicized issues surrounding Islamic terrorism within the archipelago. Islamic terrorism and insurgency in the Philippines is an issue with global ramifications that needs to be carefully addressed. The US government heavily engaged in this regional conflict without much assistance from allies or even the host nation. Extremist behavior, from any locale, threatens the security of the world as a whole and can be effectively curtailed through cooperation and deterrence.

Key words: International terrorism, Southeast Asia, Philippine Islands, Counterterrorism

Introduction

The main intent for pursuing this particular topic is to bring attention to the activities of Islamic terrorist groups currently operating in areas other than the Middle-East. Most people in the world today, when they think of “*terrorists*” or “*terrorism*” imagine the turban wearing, AK-47 wielding, bearded Middle-Eastern male killing innocent people in the name of “*Allah*.” The majority of the world is unaware that Southeast Asia has been the home for indigenous Islamic militant (terrorist) groups for decades. (Vaughn, B. et al [2005] in *Terrorism in Southeast Asia*, 3). In fact, since the events of September 11, 2001, the United States Government (USG) has considered Southeast Asia to be a “*second front*” in the global campaign against Islamic terrorism. (Vaughn, B. et al [2005] in *Terrorism in Southeast Asia*, 2). There are many different terrorist groups operating in Southeast Asia and their guiding objective set is the creation of independent “*Islamic*” states in majority Muslim areas, the elimination of secular governments, and/or the establishment of a supra-national Islamic state encompassing many different countries within the Southeast Asian region. (Vaughn, B. et al [2005] in *Terrorism in Southeast Asia*, 2).

These groups are not as “*famous*” as Al Qaeda and are therefore not at the “*forefront*” or leading edge of the current Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Additionally, the involvement of elements of the USG, including the military, in combating these terrorist groups is not all that well known to the American public. Despite the lack of world wide attention paid to these groups, or to this particular conflict, efforts being employed in Southeast Asia have uncovered links to, as well as support from, the Iranian Government, Al Qaeda and other leading Islamic extremist groups. (Byman, D. [2005] in *Deadly*

The “Quiet” Side of Counter Terrorism Operations: Combating Islamic Extremism in Southeast Asia

Connections, 79). Therefore, the Southeast Asian element, of the GWOT is every bit as critical to global security as coalition efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This paper will mainly focus on the insurgent/terrorist groups operating out of the southern Philippine areas of Mindanao and the islands along the Sulu Archipelago. Additionally, while academic references have been used at various points throughout this paper, a significant portion of the data herein was derived from the personal experiences of the author obtained while serving as an advisor to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and various other USG organizations.

The Philippines, the Islands, and the People

One can not truly appreciate the many issues that plague the people of the Republic of the Philippines, or the world as it relates to the Philippine people, without first reviewing a bit of information regarding the history of the islands and the unique culture.

The Philippines, officially known as the Republic of the Philippines, is a democratic nation comprised of over 7,000 individual islands located in the western Pacific Ocean area of Southeast Asia. (CIA World Fact Book [2010] Philippine Geography). The country sits southeast across the Luzon Strait from Taiwan and east across the South China Sea from Viet Nam. The Sulu Sea is located to the southwest and separates the country from the island of Borneo, and the Celebes Sea lies between the Philippines and the islands of Indonesia. The 7,107 islands that make up the Philippines are divided into three main geographical divisions with Luzon, which includes the capital city of Manila, making up the northern third, the Visayas in the center, and Mindanao comprising the southern third. The Philippine islands enjoy a tropical climate which is home to arguably the richest area of bio-diversity in the world.

The Republic of the Philippines sustains an estimated population of about 92 million people making it the world’s 12th largest in terms of population. In addition to the population at home, there are an estimated 11 million Filipinos living around the world. The Philippine people are thriving in all walks of society abroad as they assimilate very well into their surroundings and into new populations.

The Philippine history is really a history of occupation and colonization. In fact, the country’s very name “*Philippines*” was in honor of King Philip II of Spain following the 1542 expedition of Spanish explorer Ruy Lopez de Villalobos. While different islands within the Philippine collection had various names throughout history, eventually all of the islands in the archipelago became known as Las Islas Filipinas. Through various occupations the name changed but always reflected the Philippine name in some form and now is officially known in diplomatic circles as the Republic of the Philippines.

The earliest human remains attributed to the islands date back approximately 25,000 years. Other early inhabitants were known as Negritos and eventually Malayo-Polynesian societies that inhabited the islands from about 4,000 to 1,000 BC. At around 1,000 BC a section of the island’s society began to engage in maritime trading with other Asian countries bring back influences of Hinduism, Buddhism, and *Islam*. During this time, the country was ruled by divided and competing thalassocracies all trying to impose greater influence which provided little continuity of rule for the islands as a whole. It was during these tumultuous decades that Islam took hold in the Philippines through proselytizers from Indonesia and Malaysia.

It was not until the mid-1500s that the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan landed in the Philippines and claimed the islands in the name of the King of Spain. Fifty years later, the Spanish established a colony in what is now Cebu (located in the eastern Visayas) and then created Manila as the capital city of the “*Spanish East Indies*”. For nearly three-hundred years the Spanish governed the Philippines as a territory of the Vice Royalty of New Spain and the islands were administered directly from Madrid. Spanish rule did much to unite the 7,107 islands and bring modernization, religion, and education to the islands. It was during this time that Roman Catholic missionaries founded schools, churches, universities and hospitals and succeeded in converting the majority of the inhabitants to Catholicism. Today, the majority of the Philippine people have surnames that reflect the Spanish heritage and the dominant religion is Roman Catholicism.

Spain eventually lost control of the Philippine Islands when they ceded the colony to the United States following their loss of the Spanish-American War. As stated in the 1898 Treaty of Paris, Spain handed over their Philippine Colony to the United States for the sum of \$20 million U.S. dollars. Following this transaction, due to the dissatisfaction of the Philippine people, there was a brief American-Filipino War which ended with the United States formally in control of the Philippine Islands. The United States remained in control of the islands until the Japanese invaded the Philippines and defeated the American forces stationed there. The Japanese governed the islands until they were defeated by allied troops in 1945 when control of the Philippines returned to the United States. However, on July 4, 1946 the Philippines were granted independence from the United States and the country was formally recognized as a sovereign state.

In the years following independence, the Philippines faced many challenges including war recovery, communist insurgencies (some of which still exist today), corrupt politicians, and martial law. To visit the Republic of the Philippines today, one would find a nation, with a government and military that directly emulates the United States of America. Their official language is English, their armed forces are organized along the lines of the United States, and their system of government and public services reflect American influence. It is even interesting to observe a military retreat ceremony and watch members of an honor guard fold the Philippine flag in the exact same manner as a U.S. honor guard folds the American flag.

Direct Action Operations and the Philippine Military

Like many things in the Philippines, the AFP is patterned after, and organized along the lines of the United States Armed Forces. With the democratically elected president as the Commander-in-Chief, the AFP is comprised of three main services, the Army, Air Force, Navy, and under the Navy the Philippine Marine Corps. All these services wear uniforms similar to their U.S. counterparts, are organized and equipped like the American armed forces, as well as administered much like their U.S. counterparts.

Unlike the United States Armed Forces, there is only one general of four-star rank in the AFP, and he is the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces. The commanders of the component forces only ascend to the rank of Lieutenant General (three-star rank) so that they are clearly subordinate to the AFP Chief of Staff. The AFP is an all-volunteer force consisting of approximately 114,000 active duty personnel. The officer corps is made up of graduates of the Philippine Military Academy (PMA), which is run almost exactly like the

The “Quiet” Side of Counter Terrorism Operations: Combating Islamic Extremism in Southeast Asia

United States Military Academy at West Point, and ROTC-type programs at various universities. Unlike the United States, the class bond of graduates of PMA is an un-written chain within the AFP. As an American advisor, a major challenge to the conduct of successful operations is this “*PMA protection agency*”. Seniority in class is paramount, and to get anything done an outsider must befriend a PMA graduate from the same class as an officer in power in order to solicit support. This was, and is, a major obstacle to counter-terrorist and foreign internal defense (FID) operations that had to be overcome by American advisory personnel conducting GWOT operations in the Philippines.

The AFP, while organized like and supported by the United States military is not a very strong or capable military force. Their equipment is old and poorly maintained, their personnel are under-paid and ill-equipped, and the opportunities for those outside the officer corps are very limited. They do not have the same standards of occupational health and safety as members of the United States military, nor do they have the same standards of conduct or sense of mission accomplishment. Corruption is rampant among the members of the AFP, to the point of tipping off insurgent/terrorist leaders to upcoming operations in return for kickbacks due to ill-gotten funds. This was seen first hand as general officers would decline sensible engagement plans in favor of more arduous and cumbersome plans that were passed through informants to the enemy. These actions extended operations such that continued engagement plans led to continued financial gains for AFP leadership. Additionally, equipment and fuel provided by the USG to AFP units was often stolen and sold on the local economy by AFP officers for personal financial gain. This was particularly frustrating as an advisor because there was often little to show for great expense of U.S. funds.

As an outsider, meaning the “American”, how can operational success in counter-terrorist operations be obtained with AFP units? This was a difficult lesson to learn, but it really came down to “*diplomacy*”. This ranged from tactical diplomacy with the AFP commanders in the field, operational diplomacy with the AFP commanders in the rear areas, and even strategic diplomacy with not only the AFP leaders in Manila, but with U.S. leaders at the Embassy and at McDill Air Force Base, Florida.

With regard to the members of the AFP, as an advisor, the best way to garner cooperation and enhance success is to “make them think an idea is theirs”. Also, make the AFP commander “look good” to his boss(es) because more than money they wanted power and increased power, and increased power and influence came through increase in rank. How do they get promoted? Make the boss look good and hopefully he will take care of the one who did it. Therefore, any plan designed as the “American advisor” was passed on to an AFP officer who was directed to tell the commanders above that the plan was “his” and so on. Believe it or not, this worked, and with that the small U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) began to realize some success.

The High Value Insurgent and Terrorist Targets

The Islamic terrorist organizations in the Philippines, as stated earlier, control many areas of, and operate in, Mindanao and the islands that extend southeast from Mindanao toward Indonesia known as the Sulu Archipelago. One of the major players in Islamic

terrorism in this area is an organization known as the Abu Sayyef Group (ASG). This organization was led by the late Khadaffy Janjalani (KJ) who was killed in 2006 by members of the AFP.

Although Islamic insurgent groups have been operating in the southern Philippines for almost thirty years, the ASG is one of the most well known and feared terrorist groups in Mindanao. The ASG had direct links to, and support from, Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Abdurajik Abubakar Janjalani, (killed in December 1998 by the AFP), was one of many Islamic expatriates who flocked to Afghanistan to receive terrorist training in Al Qaeda training camps. On completing with his training, he returned to his native Philippines and established the ASG with his younger brother Khadaffy Janjalani (KJ). (Sageman, M. [2004] in *Understanding Terror Networks*, 38). Once established in the Philippines, the ASG enjoyed financial and material support from Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda as an organization fighting to restore Muslim lands to Islam. The ASG actively conducted bombings, kidnappings, assassinations, and extortion all with the stated goal of establishing an independent Islamic state within the 7,107 islands that comprise the Philippines. Like most terrorists groups, their violent actions resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians as in the Christmas bombing of a shopping mall in Zamboanga City which killed and/or wounded 60 Christian civilians who were shopping for Christmas gifts. (Hoffman, B. [2006] in *Inside Terrorism*, 87).

The members of the ASG are extremely hard core, seasoned terrorists with significant operational experience fighting in the name of Islam abroad. Some ASG members have studied and worked in Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Afghanistan, and have solidified strong ties to the Mujahadeen while fighting and training during the war against the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. Members of the ASG have proclaimed themselves as Mujahideen freedom fighters but are not strongly supported by many people in the Philippines including its Muslim clerics. Currently the ASG is estimated to have a membership list of approximately 200 people with an extended membership estimated at close 2,000 people.

Funding and support for the ASG from Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden abruptly ceased when the group fell from favor with Osama bin Laden. (Sageman, M. [2004] in *Understanding Terror Networks*, 44). Once the ASG began to use kidnappings for a source of financial gain, Osama bin Laden viewed the ASG as more of a criminal organization and not an organization dedicated to the Islamic ideals he supported. Although probably the largest, Al Qaeda was not the only Islamic extremist organization that supported the ASG; it is believed that the ASG received funding from multiple Islamic benefactors in the Middle East, to include Libya and Iran. However, it is interesting to note that it has been estimated that in 2000 the ASG received upwards of \$20 million dollars in revenue from kidnap and ransom operations.

When the ASG fell from Osama bin Laden's favor, he passed his support onto another radical Islamic terrorist group operating in the Philippines, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MILF became Al Qaeda's favorite Filipino terrorist group and its main ally in Southeast Asia. (Sageman, M. [2004] in *Understanding Terror Networks*, 44). Like the ASG, members of the MILF are seasoned terrorists fighting for separate Islamic state within the Philippines. Many of the MILF members have trained in Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and have taken that knowledge and established their own training camps in Mindanao. (Huang, R. [2002] In the *Spotlight: Moro Islamic Liberation Front*, 1).

The MILF was created in 1977 when its founder, Salamat Hashim, took some

The "Quiet" Side of Counter Terrorism Operations: Combating Islamic Extremism in Southeast Asia

followers and split from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) due to the former group's lack of ability or desire to engage in insurgent operations against the Philippine government. (Huang, R. [2002] In the Spotlight: Moro Islamic Liberation Front, 1). Since the MILF's creation, the group has recruited 15,000 members and has become the largest Islamic terrorist group in the Philippines. The MILF has engaged in various terrorist attacks and assassinations in pursuit of their stated goal of an autonomous Islamic state. Additionally, the MILF and ASG have been known to work in concert conducting terrorist attacks against government troops and other major targets throughout the country, such as the airport in the city of Davao in 2003. (Huang, R. [2002] In the Spotlight: Moro Islamic Liberation Front, 1). However, recently the MILF has been distancing itself from the ASG in an attempt to engage in peace talks aimed at a disassociation from the global anti-terrorism agenda. (Huang, R. [2002] In the Spotlight: Moro Islamic Liberation Front, 2). With a weakened ASG, the U.S. and Philippine governments may be able to use this "split" as leverage to eradicate the ASG and reduce terrorist activity conducted by MILF operators.

The two aforementioned groups, the ASG and MILF, consume the bulk of USG counter-terrorist resources in the Philippines. JSOTF units operating throughout the entire country, from the northern tip of Luzon all the way to the southern most island of Tawi Tawi, work by, with, and through AFP units to combat these terrorist groups. These groups are essential players in the GWOT, and of great concern to the security of American interests in Southeast Asia.

Unfortunately these two groups are NOT the main concern of the AFP or the Philippine government. In terms of funding and corruption, the impression is that the AFP tolerates the U.S. presence (and assistance) in order to receive money, equipment, and status. However, as an advisor on the ground in the Philippines intimately involved in this conflict, it was unofficially made clear by AFP leaders that these Islamic terrorist organizations were not the priority. The priority was the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). How this was made clear was the frequent diversion of AFP assets the day before the initiation of intended GWOT direct action missions to engage CPP targets.

The CPP is an underground political organization that was founded in the late 1960s that has been clandestinely striving for the overthrow of the democratically elected Philippine government through armed revolution. Although considered a foreign terrorist organization by the USG, this group was/is strictly "off-limits" to USG personnel as an internal problem to the Philippine government.

Unlike the Islamic terrorist organizations previously discussed, the CPP did not establish bases in Mindanao or the Sulu Archipelago. It mainly operates in Luzon and northern areas of the Philippine islands. The CPP adheres to Marxism-Leninism-Maoism as its guiding ideology in analyzing and summing up the experience of the party and its creative application to the current conditions in the Philippines, in fighting what it views as American imperialism, feudalism and corruption through capitalism.

The CPP considers Maoism as the highest development of Marxism-Leninism and strives to overthrow the current government and establish a new state under Maoist leadership within the next decade. In contrast to everything studied through the previous weeks, what sets this organization apart from the Islamic extremist organizations in Mindanao is that they do not commit violent acts against innocent civilians or targets. The CPP believes they are fighting a people's war and therefore seem to confine their operations

to what they view as bona fide military targets. Whether or not this restraint will endure remains to be seen, particularly as younger members move into leadership positions the CPP may adopt the more violent ways of other insurgent groups to advance their goals.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the Philippine islands in detail, a brief history of the inhabitants, the Philippine government and defense forces, and the rarely publicized issues surrounding Islamic terrorism within the archipelago. While many people in the world may think that the terrorist groups operating in the little known islands of the southern Philippines pose little or no threat to the United States or the western world they should be encouraged to think again. These islands are close together and the members of the ASG and MILF can easily hop between these islands and right on down to Islamic allies in Indonesia or Malaysia in just one day. How can these groups be effectively stopped?

One strategy that can be employed in this area of operations (AOR) is that of deterrence. However, can deterrence in the Philippines work? There are those experts out there who assert that "deterrent strategies have no significant role to play in countering a terrorist threat." (Trager, R. & Zagorcheva, D. [2003] in *Deterring Terrorism*, 87). There are others who state that "deterrence has limited efficacy for modern counterterrorism and that the concept of deterrence is both too limiting and too naïve to be applicable to the GWOT." (Trager, R. & Zagorcheva, D. [2003] in *Deterring Terrorism*, 87). These statements are short-sighted; deterrence can be employed successfully if done with the cooperation of all those involved.

Many terrorist groups can be deterred from violent actions that harm the populations of targeted states; therefore deterrence should remain a primary weapon in the counterterrorism arena. (Trager, R. & Zagorcheva, D. [2003] in *Deterring Terrorism*, 88). However for this to work effectively, particularly in the case of the Philippines, there needs to be complete "buy-in" from the host nation government. The individual agendas of the AFP and Philippine government need to be set aside and all the countries involved need to work together in order to eradicate this threat. While the ASG and MILF pose little threat to the continental United States, they do pose a threat to U.S. and western interests in Southeast Asia. Therefore, another aspect of this deterrence strategy is to involve other nations, particularly those states within the region, in the deterrence strategy.

Working together can have a great impact on terrorism in the region. As stated above, the ASG has turned to forms of banditry to achieve financial gains in order to support their Islamic separatist agenda, while the MILF, apparently more ideologically motivated, has refrained from criminal activity but still pursues the goal of a separate Islamic state. The most highly motivated terrorist groups can be deterred from violent courses of action by holding their political goals at risk as opposed to their life or liberty. (Trager, R. & Zagorcheva, D. [2003] in *Deterring Terrorism*, 88). Terrorist organizations are often difficult to locate, however some powerful states do have the ability to influence their political goals and objectives. (Trager, R. & Zagorcheva, D. [2003] in *Deterring Terrorism*, 89). Holding their political objectives at risk stands a better chance of deterring a terrorist network or single organization if their dedicated to their objectives. This can be done by the powerful nations in the Southeast Asian region, to include the United States and of course the Philippines, coming together to threaten action(s) designed to increase the terrorist group's

The “Quiet” Side of Counter Terrorism Operations: Combating Islamic Extremism in Southeast Asia

perceived cost of “*doing business*” or engaging in violent terrorist activity. (Trager, R. & Zagorcheva, D. [2003] in *Deterring Terrorism*, 90). As in the case of the MILF, groups that are primarily focused on local concerns can be coerced into denying sanctuary (and other assistance) to members of more dangerous groups such as Al Qaeda or even local groups like the ASG.

Further, the use of force against terrorists and insurgencies often fails to achieve political objectives (as in the case of Abu Sayyef), and “may radicalize the whole movement or create a new splinter faction.” (Trager, R. & Zagorcheva, D. [2003] in *Deterring Terrorism*, 121). The application of force, and other aggressive policies, against radical terrorist groups can also create powerful common interests, pushing them toward mutual cooperation. A pertinent example being that as an apparent reaction to being identified as a “*foreign terrorist group*” and having assets frozen by western governments, the CPP announced it may combine forces with the MILF. (Prelypchan, E. [2003] in *Manila’s Twin Nightmare*, 36). In fact, the very effectiveness of local anti-terrorism efforts may even turn a local movement into a bigger one. Although some may not view this result in a positive light, it is an example of how deterrence can weaken an individual organization beyond its ability to operate autonomously.

Islamic terrorism and insurgency in the Philippines is an issue with global ramifications that needs to be carefully addressed. The USG is heavily engaged in this regional conflict without much assistance from allies or even the host nation. Extremist behavior, from any locale, threatens the security of the world as a whole and can be effectively curtailed through cooperation and deterrence.

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