



RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 134/2014 dated 9 July 2014

A new “caliphate” in the Middle East: Is there an Abu Sayyaf-ISIS Link?

By Joseph Franco

Synopsis

A video of a purported member of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) pledging support to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) surfaced recently. With an apparent spike in ASG-related activities, this is interpreted as evidence of convergence between the groups. However, the localised factors that motivate ASG factions should not be ignored.

Commentary

AN AUDIO recording of a purported Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) member pledging support to the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) was uploaded to YouTube on 24 June 2014. The pledge was made in Arabic and played over jihadist-inspired graphics. The objective of the clip remains unclear.

The month of June also saw major incidents involving the ASG. A top ASG leader, Khair Mundos, who had a US\$500,000 bounty on his head, was captured by the police in Manila. Further arrests followed of ASG operatives associated with Mundos involved in plots to kidnap local businessmen in Zamboanga City, a Christian enclave in Mindanao. Thrusting the ASG further into the limelight was a fierce skirmish that resulted in several deaths, including of a junior officer.

The non-ideological heritage of the ASG

Some pundits claim that recent events indicated new links between the ASG and ISIS. Particularly after ISIS declared itself the new “caliphate”, henceforth the Islamic State (IS); security stakeholders in Southeast Asia (SEA) especially in countries where militant Islamist groups operate were expectedly concerned. This stems from the popular narrative of how terrorist organisations in the Philippines maintain alliances with groups outside SEA.

While Al Qaeda elements provided seed funding in the early years of the ASG, radicalization based on ideology does not factor heavily for the new ASG recruit. The demise of ASG founder Abdurajak Janjalani in 1998, arguably the only ideologue in its history, stunted the group’s ideological development. No other ASG faction leader has produced something to complement or rival Janjalani’s one written tract, the *Jumaah Abu Sayyaf*. The few dozen pages of the *Jumaah* pale in comparison to the voluminous body of literature produced by other extremist Islamist groups such as Indonesia’s *Jemaah Islamiyah*.

In the milieu of Mindanao, recruits join the ranks of ASG factions for more practical motivations – to earn ransom money. The ASG, specifically its Sulu-based faction, gained international notoriety when it kidnapped 21 Western tourists in Sipadan Island in 2000. During the protracted captivity of the victims, the average individual, even entire clans, swelled the ranks of the ASG, expecting to benefit from the potential windfall. Once the estimated US\$20 million ransom was paid out, another cycle of financially motivated but transitory involvement in the ASG occurred.

For such opportunistic individuals, joining the ASG is a way to monetise their possession of illicit firearms. Mindanao is a region beset with small arms proliferation, where firearm possession is part of a wider gun culture. Decades of conflict allowed the flourishing of an arms black market from captured or diverted government stockpiles. In Sulu alone, international NGOs peg the number of illicit firearms at 100,000. Mindanao's illicit arms surplus had in fact been a major source for Islamist and Christian militias operating in Indonesia's Sulawesi and Ambon. The relationship between small arms smugglers on both sides of Philippine-Indonesia border had been largely transactional, across sectarian lines.

The recent ASG kidnappings in Eastern Malaysia between late 2013 and early 2014, viewed with this more practical perspective, reveals the group's weakness as an ideological movement. ASG had not even attempted to posture the kidnappings as political acts; their profit-making preoccupation overshadowing their ideological moorings.

An Offline ASG in an Online world

The local roots of ASG's continuity go hand-in-hand with its lack of online presence, further disputing assertions of its link to extra-regional groups like ISIS. To date, the ASG has remained an offline organisation. A 2014 Australian study of "neojihadism" in the Philippines followed the activities of three Facebook pages, claiming them as evidence of the online presence of Islamist groups in the Philippines. However, the study itself admits that the pages are mostly passive repositories of links to other jihadist websites.

A simple digital ethnography reveals that the audience of all the pages combined amounted to only 15,000 Facebook "likes" – including fake and duplicate accounts – originating from only a single urban centre in Mindanao. The number is dismal considering the Philippines' stature as the "Social Media Capital of the World" with nearly a third of its 100 million-strong population active on Facebook. Moreover, the pages were arguably run by "jihobbyists" — an Internet subculture of young men interested in Islamist content but having neither capabilities nor intent to engage in violence.

The tepid presence of Philippine-based militants is in stark contrast to the more active online jihadists found in the Western context where notorious online "disseminators" propagate global jihadist ideology despite not being officially part of groups like ISIS such as Australian Musa Cerantonio. Curiously, Cerantonio is currently reported to be seeking refuge in "the mountains of Sulu". The claim remains unconfirmed. Even if it were true, the appeal of the likes of Cerantonio owes much to their take on armed jihad as an individualistic duty, which does not align with the more communitarian social structures of Mindanao. Neither would theological arguments gain traction in communities involved with the ASG because of the primacy of financial motivations.

The importance of context

The ASG remains a localised movement. Its subscription to the jihadist narrative is passive and superficial. It has yet to make its mark in the online world and would unlikely do so in the near future. Thus, state responses should always be aware of and be cautious of quickly ascribing ideological motivations to what essentially are socio-economic issues. The Philippines's social and economic milieu creates distinct dynamics that may be wholly different even from close neighbours like Indonesia or Malaysia.

Joseph Franco is an Associate Research Fellow with the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.