

Abu Sayyaf: The Father of the Swordsman

A review of the rise of Islamic insurgency in the southern Philippines

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IN BRIEF

- The Islamic insurgency movement in the southern Philippines has been ongoing since the initial colonization efforts of the Spanish. It has continued through the American, and later Philippine Republic controlled governments, and is controlled by a number of indigenous groups that share the cultural identity of the Moro, or Filipino Muslim.
- Abu Sayyaf Group, which is one of the smallest but most violent Muslim movements in the Philippines, has conducted a series of terrorist actions in the hopes of establishing an independent Islamic state.
- Although the attempts to establish an autonomous Islamic republic by ethno-nationalistic groups in the southern Philippines have failed thus far, the ASG has managed to establish a trademark of extreme ruthlessness and an increasing willingness to perpetrate mass casualty attacks designed to inflict the maximum loss of life.

Introduction

Abu Sayyaf, which in Arabic means “Father of the Swordsman”¹, is the name of the smallest but most feared and violent of all Philippine terrorist organizations².

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) primarily operates on the Southern most island of Mindanao, in the Sulu island chain.

The inhabitants here have a unique cultural identity as Filipino Muslims, called Moros by the Spanish³. The term “Moro” is a derivation of the word Moor, a derogatory name used by the Spanish to refer to the Islamic Negroes of North Africa⁴. The Christian majority of the Philippines would adopt the negative association of the word Moro to mean cruel, ruthless and cunning after a long series of violent encounters with their Muslim neighbors to the South over the course of several centuries.



Understanding the origins of the ASG and the long standing hostilities between the Muslim minority and Christian majority requires a thorough examination of the historical forces that have shaped the Philippines and the resulting conflicts that still persist to this day.

The history of violent conflict in this region cannot be over-emphasized when attempting to discuss the origin and evolution of the ASG.

For centuries, the Moro people have been fighting for an independent, autonomous Islamic state; during the course of this struggle they have built a reputation of ruthless violence and banditry in the minds of Filipino Christians and outside observers ⁵.

Historical Background

Ferdinand Magellan discovered the South East island chain that would eventually be named the Philippines in 1521 ⁶.

One hundred and fifty years prior to the arrival of the Spanish, the religion of Islam had spread throughout the Indonesian archipelago to include the Southern islands of Mindanao and Basilan ⁷. As the Spanish began to arrive in the Philippines, they discovered a vast network of individual fiefdoms, but no real central leadership or authority had united the island chains people. As such, the mighty Spanish easily defeated the small pockets of resistance they encountered.

After successfully establishing their colonial authority and dominance, the Spanish began the task of converting the nation's inhabitants to Christianity. This process went surprisingly well in all areas except the South, which would prove much more difficult due to the established Muslim religion and cultural identity of those people.

What started out as small enclaves of resistance among the Muslim population following the arrival of the Spanish, eventually escalated into a full-blown rebellion, referred to as the "Moro Wars", beginning in 1565 and lasting until the late 19th century ⁸.

In 1897, the Spanish were forced to cede the Philippines to the United States as a result of their defeat in the Spanish-American war and the signing of the Treaty of Paris ⁹.

The Philippines was now a protectorate of the United States.

This transfer of power from Spanish to American rule was first perceived as a welcome change to the tyranny imposed upon the Moros at the hands of the Spanish. Unfortunately, it wasn't long until new pockets of resistance and rebellion erupted, this time in opposition to American influence. Western forces, like the previous power, found that the Southern islands proved the most problematic to deal with.

The U.S. military conducted a number of campaigns to suppress Muslim insurgency from 1899 to 1914. These operations were heavily criticized due to the large numbers of civilian casualties associated with them. One account even goes as far as saying that the 45-caliber pistol was developed specifically for hunting down rampaging Muslim bandits, formally called *Tulisanes*, or outlaws, before the brand of Moro was adopted.



After almost fifty years under American rule, the Philippines were finally granted their independence on July 4, 1946¹⁰. The transfer of power from American to Filipino rule brought about its own problems between the Catholic and Muslim inhabitants of the Philippines.

Since the beginning of foreign rule, the Southern islands had always been a problem area. As a result, little if any progress had been made in terms of infrastructure or economic development. The growing Christian populations of the northern Philippines were, therefore, encouraged by the government to migrate south and begin developing the areas that were historically Muslim. The southern regions were literally transformed from a Muslim majority to a Muslim minority overnight.

This invasion of non-Islamic Filipino settlers in what was originally a Muslim dominated area would spark the next chapter in a long history of violence that has persisted in this area since its discovery and colonization by foreign powers.

The Philippines has experienced the longest sustained insurgency of any Asian Country in history¹¹.

The mass migration of non-Muslims to the south resulted in a dramatic increase of violent confrontations between the two armed groups. As conflicts between Muslims and Christian settlers increased, the area of Mindanao was transformed into “the wild west in the south”¹².

Growing concerns regarding government support for anti-Muslim forces lead to the creation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the stated objective of which was the creation of an independent Islamic state in the traditional Moro homelands of Mindanao.

During the 1970’s, it is estimated that over 120,000 people died as a result of the fighting between MNLF and Philippine Armed Forces (PAF)¹³. As time progressed, a series of compromises and arrangements would be negotiated between the MNLF and government leadership, finally culminating in the 1996 autonomy agreement between MNLF leader Nur Misuari and Philippine President Ramos.

The ultimate goal of an independent Islamic state was sacrificed by the MNLF in return for an autonomous Muslim region. This situation did not sit well with some members of the MNLF, most notably Abubakar Janjalani and his followers, the original founders of what would become the Abu Sayyaf Group

Origins of the Abu Sayyaf Group

There are several accounts concerning just how the ASG came to be, not all of which have been endorsed by its founders. What is considered as a universal truth is that Janjalani and a small group of followers formed an unnamed group to advance the idea of an Iranian style Islamic state in the Southern Philippines¹⁴. This unnamed group was officially established in 1989 as the Mujahedeen Commando Freedom Fighters (MCFF).



Zamboanga Moros, 1911

After the creation of the MCFF, Janjalani and his followers formally separated from the MNLF in 1991.

The MCFF was known as Janjalani’s group in Mindanao, and this name would later evolve into what we know today as the Abu

Sayyaf Group. This was due to the fact that while in Afghanistan fighting the Soviets, Janjalani developed the nickname of Abu Sayyaf “in honor of the Afghan resistance leader Professor Abdul Rasul Sayyaf”¹⁵.

The Janjalani group, or MCFF, would later come to be known as the Abu Sayyaf Group in August 1991, when their first terrorist bombing took place against the M/V Doulos, a Christian missionary ship docked in the Southern Philippine city of Zamboanga¹⁶.

Abuza suggests that the origin and evolution of the ASG can be divided into 5 phases: Founding years (1988-1991), Anti-Christian/Islamic State Terrorism, including deepening ties with Al Qaeda, (1991-1995), Degeneration (1995-2001), Post-9/11 Global War on Terrorism (2001-2003), and Regeneration (2003-Present)¹⁷.

The history of the ASG has demonstrated that this group is alive and well, despite government efforts to eradicate the group. This is in no small part a result of the group’s blind obedience and devotion to their cause.

ASG Ideology and Motivations

The Abu Sayyaf group is one of many radical Muslim movements that collectively have been fighting for centuries to establish an independent Islamic state in the Southern Philippines. What makes the ASG ideology somewhat unique is the fact that its founder, Abubakar Janjalani, was deeply inspired by Wahhabi Islam as a result of his religious education and radicalization in Saudi Arabia.

Janjalani was acutely aware of the historical, religious, economic, political and social conditions that contributed to the longstanding Muslim rejection of state authority in the Philippines. Over the course of several centuries, the Moro national identity had been forged as a unified Muslim resistance to Christian rule and the pursuit of an autonomous Islamic state¹⁸. This is partly because of early colonial efforts to group the several distinct ethno-linguistic Muslim groups of the Southern Philippines into a broad category, which was coined “Moro”.

While this classification proved a useful tool of the crown to target and pursue Muslim Filipino radicals, it also had the effect of creating a universal Filipino Muslim identity that did not exist between the different groups prior to this branding. Many Moros view their history as four centuries of struggles to defend “their fundamental right of self-determination”¹⁹.

When attempting to understand the deeply held beliefs and motivations of the ASG, it is imperative to grasp the deep-seated feelings of protracted struggle and injustice that has embodied the Moro identity.

The Bangsamoro problem can be accurately summarized as “the historical and systematic marginalization and minoritization of the Islamized ethno-linguistic groups, collectively called Moros”²⁰.

Janjalani’s original motivation behind the creation of the ASG was to actively seek kaadilan, or justice in Arabic, for all Muslims but especially those in the annexed area of Moro land in the Southern Philippines. According to Janjalani, Jihad Fi-Sabil-lillah, which translates to jihad, is the noblest form of “struggle in the cause of Allah”²¹.

Prior to his death in 1998, Abubakar Janjalani released eight radical ideological discourses, called Khutbahs, in which he argued that jihad was misinterpreted by many Muslims, to include Ulama Muslim scholars who, according to Janjalani, were lacking in knowledge and understanding of the Quran. He also complained that many of his fellow Moros were not practicing the true form of Islam as described in Wahabism, which included the practice of martyrdom or suicide terrorism as the ultimate sacrifice²².

Strategic and Operational Objectives

The ultimate objective of the ASG is the formation of an Iranian inspired Islamic state that uses Sharia or Islamic law as the moral authority from which the laws of the state are based, and the conduct that its citizens abide by. Banlaoi²³ describes the “Four Basic Truths” that Janjalani issued between 1993 and 1994 in regards to the ASG organization:

(1) our goal is not to establish nor promote factions between Muslim struggles, as this would be contrary to the teachings of Islam. The objective of the ASG is to serve as a bridge between the revolutionary forces of both the MNLF and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) whose roles and leadership in this struggle cannot be ignored;

(2) The ultimate strategic objective is the creation of a purely Islamic state whose “nature, meaning, emblem and objective”²⁴ are synonymous with peace. The ASG claims that it has always respected the freedom of religion; they even went so far as to assert that even in an Islamic state “the rights of Christians will be protected for as long as they abide by the laws of the Islamic state”²⁵. The actions of the ASG are contrary to this statement of supposed peace, as the history of the ASG has been characterized by ruthlessly violent acts specifically targeted towards Christians;

(3) The advocacy of war is a necessity so long as the “oppression, injustice, capricious ambitions, and arbitrary claims imposed on Muslims” remain²⁶.

The fourth (4) edict of Janjalani’s Basic Truth states that “war disturbs peace only for the attainment of the true and real objective of humanity – the establishment of justice and righteousness for all under the law of the noble Quran and the purified Sunnah,” or path²⁷.

Although the ASG has, thus far, been unable to achieve its strategic goal of an Islamic state, the members of ASG have, however, accomplished their operational goals of international publicity and notoriety, namely through their direct challenge to state authority.

This challenge has been characterized by increasingly sophisticated and lethal acts of organized violence.

Additionally, despite its small size and the state’s increasing resolve to eradicate it, the ASG has survived and even flourished.

The numerous successes the ASG has enjoyed as a result of its terror campaigns have served its operational objectives of publicizing the Moro struggle, which has had the added benefit of increasing foreign aid by other Islamic terror organizations, as well as helping to recruit new fighters for the continued insurgency efforts.

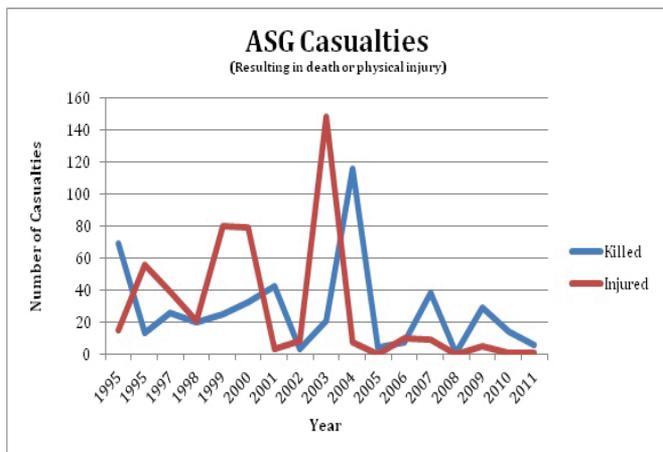
ASG Signature of Violence

While the Abu Sayyaf Group has perpetrated a number of high profile attacks to include everything from assassinations, bombings, mass executions, beheadings as well as kidnappings, the single most recognizable and publicized aspect of the group’s exploits has come in the form of “extreme ruthlessness and wanton disregard for life, especially those of Christians”²⁸.

The ASG routinely beheads its victims, most of which were kidnapped and held for months or even years before either being ransomed or killed. The affinity for kidnap and ransom has not always been the modus operandi of the ASG, but rather an adaptation and specific signature and funding strategy of Ghalib Andang, also known as the Commander Robot, following Abubakar Janjalani’s death in 1998²⁹.

The very first attack for which the ASG received and/or claimed credit for was the 1991 bombing of the M/V Doulos, a Christian missionary ship docked in Zamboanga. The attack was reportedly carried out as retaliation for anti-Islamic statements made by the missionaries.

The initial terror campaign that was carried out by the ASG from 1991 to 1995 can only be described as



sensational: mass killings, bombings, beheadings and kidnapping became the all too familiar calling card of the ASG. It is important to note that the ASG had entered the world stage as a full-fledged Islamic terrorist group since its inception.

The ASG, however, has shown that it is not immune to change. While the early years were characterized by a series of increasingly bold and symbolic publicity driven attacks, the period between 1995-2001 can be accurately described as a period of banditry³⁰. Instead of orchestrating elaborate mass casualty attacks, the ASG instead focused its efforts on monetary gain by way of kidnapping and ransom activities.

This shift was made possible largely as a result of the death of ASG founder and ideological ayatollah, Abubakar Janjalani, in 1998. His successor, Ghalib Adang (Commander Robot), would subsequently engage in a kidnapping spree from which millions of dollars of ransom was reportedly paid out.

During this time, Adang organized elaborate kidnapping plots in Malaysian Sipandan, as well as the Los Palmas Resort on the Philippine island of Palawan³¹. Between 1991 and 2000, the ASG had claimed credit for 378 terrorist attacks, as a result of which 288 people died. During the same time period, the ASG committed 640 kidnappings, involving 2,076 victims³².



Khadaffy Janjani

The group would undergo a dramatic tactical re-alignment when Khadaffy Janjalani, Abubakar's younger brother and eventual successor, came to power following Ghalib Adang's death in 2004. This signature shift would re-orient the ASG back towards its ideological roots as a genuine Islamist terrorist organization as opposed to its interim period where it focused on terror for profit as its primary means of expression.

The most dramatic example of this agenda shift was the bombing of the Superferry 14 in February of 2004, which killed 116 people and injured more than 300. Following the ferry bombing, the ASG coordinated three simultaneous bombings in the Northern Philippine cities of Makati, Davao and General Santos on the night before Valentines Day in 2005, killing 10 people and injuring 136³³.

The re-emergence of ultra violent high profile attacks by the ASG further support the claim that the new leadership of ASG by Khadaffy Janjalani is closer in line to his older brother's original vision of how the ASG should operate and what its future signature will consist of. While the Abu Sayyaf Group continues to participate in kidnappings, it should be noted that the vast majority of incidents are decidedly geared towards mass casualty violence.

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About the Author

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Garrett enlisted in the United States Navy in 2004 and spent the next 7 years working in naval aviation as an F-18 aircraft maintainer. He earned a B.S. in Professional Aeronautics with a minor and undergraduate certificate in Security and Intelligence at Embry Riddle Aeronautical University. Having just returned from his most recent tour of active duty service in Japan, Garrett has joined the ASP team as an intern focusing on American national security strategy. This position complements the master’s degree he is pursuing at The George Washington University in Security and Safety Leadership with a concentration in Strategic Security.

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