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Bearers of the Sword Radical Islam, Philippines Insurgency, and Regional Stability

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Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, U.S. President George W. Bush and his national security leadership articulated objectives for a wide-ranging war against terrorism. Six months later, these objectives remain focused on destroying international terrorist centers, dismantling terrorist networks around the world, and punishing states that support terrorist activities. The *Al-Qaeda* terrorist organization--sponsors of the 11 September attacks and earlier terrorist assaults on U.S. people, property, and interests--remains a high priority. As *Al-Qaeda*'s principal bases and leadership cadres in Afghanistan were destroyed and its Taliban supporters routed, U.S. planners shifted resources and focus to other *Al-Qaeda* cells and associates operating in dozens of countries around the world. The U.S. national leadership emphasized that these groupings--and other terrorist organizations as well--constituted legitimate targets in the global war on terrorism.

Among those targets receiving early attention from the U.S. leadership was a small, violent Islamic group that--despite origins in the 1979-1989 Soviet-Afghan War--operates in the jungles, hills, towns, and coastal waters of the southern Philippines.¹ This group is *Abu Sayyaf*, meaning Bearer of the Sword in Arabic, that has become noted for its ambushes of government forces, kidnappings, piracy, and the not infrequent beheading of captives. As this is written, *Abu Sayyaf* elements remain engaged in sporadic clashes with the Philippines Armed Forces and continue to perpetrate a mixture of political terrorism and banditry throughout the area. Its purported links to *Al-Qaeda* and its asserted devotion to a radical, perverted form of Islam, identifies the *Abu Sayyaf* group (ASG) as a vector of local terrorism that also has broader regional and international implications. Of particular concern is the prospect of further radicalizing other Muslim insurgent and pro-independence groups in the Philippines, and serving as a catalyst for analogous developments in Indonesia, Malaysia, and elsewhere. This article addresses the origin and activities of *Abu Sayyaf*, the operational environment in which it carries out its activities, and its influence on the Philippines and the region. Before examining *Abu Sayyaf* specifically, it is instructive to review briefly the historic continuity of Muslim insurgency in the Philippines, the U.S. experience in what was 100 years ago a new operational environment, and the current context in which *Abu Sayyaf* has sought to advance its goals.

Moros, Insurgency, and the Operational Environment

Twenty-first Century Islamic insurgency in the Philippines is in many respects the continuation of a struggle begun in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Islam arrived in the southern Philippines in the 14th century--spread aggressively from the Indonesian archipelago by seafaring Muslim traders and teachers--and by the 16th century had spread throughout the islands of the Sulu Archipelago, into Mindanao, and was pushing farther north. These Islamic communities--constituting the southern Philippines--were based on their own developing concepts of authority, social relationships, and sovereignty.²

They collided violently with Spanish explorers seeking to establish lucrative colonies in the area based on supposed rich resources, trade routes, and a population converted to Catholicism. The Spanish termed the Muslim peoples they found there Moros--or Moors, reflecting their old Muslim enemies in Europe and North Africa.³ While Islam was pushed southward and constrained by Spain, an armed and effective Moro resistance began immediately. It continued until the 1898 defeat of the Spanish by the United States in the Spanish American War. The Moros emerged in 1899 with religious and cultural identities intact, and at the very end enthusiastically wiped out isolated Spanish garrisons before U.S. forces arrived to take over.

U.S. Military Meets the Moros

The Philippines were ceded to the United States under the 1898 Treaty of Paris, sparking resistance immediately in the predominately Christian north and later in the Sunni Muslim south. The 1899-1902 Philippines Insurrection in the north was successfully put down and declared officially ended on 4 July 1902.⁴ President Theodore Roosevelt noted in the declaration of termination, however, that "peace has been established in all parts of the archipelago *except in the country inhabited by the Moro tribes, to which this proclamation does not apply.*"⁵ Full-fledged conflict in the south had broken out just two months earlier in May, following a series of incidents, rising tensions, and Moro resistance to the incorporation of Muslim lands into the Philippines state under American control. As Moros saw it, "Catholic Spain had been driven by the spirit of the Inquisition, America was inspired by the unholy doctrines of 'Manifest Destiny' to bring the 'blessings' of western civilization to these 'barbarians' in Southeast Asia. But the Moro 'barbarians', much to the Americans' surprise, were not easily subdued."⁶

The latter judgement was clearly an understatement, as the U.S. Army and Navy found themselves engaged with an enemy who quickly earned a place as one of the bravest, most dedicated, and resourceful adversaries yet encountered. It also highlighted for the U.S. military the impact of Islamic religious fervor mobilized in pursuit of what many Moros still consider their wholly earned and justified right to independence.

Moros were poorly armed in comparison with U.S. soldiers, whose basic weapon was the .30 Krag-Jorgensen rifle (M1892 and M1896 models with 5-shot magazine), backed up by Gatling and Hotchkiss guns, and several models of light cannon. Moros possessed a variety of older weapons including muzzle-loaders and some primitive brass cannon. It was the Moros' skill and surprising effectiveness in using edged weapons that generated the greatest respect and fear, however. U.S. troops came to recognize and understand the capabilities of the *barung* with its foot-and-a-half leaf-shaped blade; the three-and-a-half foot *kampilan* long sword, traditional fighting weapon of the Maguindanao and Maranao Moros; and the sword most identified with the Moros, the *kris*, a superb weapon of varying length which often had the distinctive wavy-edged blade that became famous at the time.⁷

Moros were extremely effective at jungle, forest, and swamp ambushes and also fought well from their forts, called *cottas* (or *kutas*). Moro attacks on moving columns or sleeping encampments were sudden, often involving bloody hand-to-hand fighting, as *kris*- and spear-wielding Moros closed quickly with better-armed Americans and used their edged weapons and spears to great effect. As one specialist from the period noted, "American troops had not participated in such fighting since Revolutionary War days."⁸ Traditional problems associated with counter-insurgency operations made their early appearance. For example, distinguishing Moro male combatants from females--who sometimes were combatants as well--was an enduring problem since women were attired in much the same way as male fighters. In an effort to reduce non-combatant casualties, U.S. Army orders forbade firing on groups of Filipinos which contained women. This order prompted one derisive soldier rhyme a la Kipling that captured the way

some troops saw the dilemma:

If a lady wearin' britches is a-hidin' in the ditches,
An' she itches fer me ears as souvenirs,
Must I arsk, afore I twists 'er, "Air you miss or air you mister?"
How shall a bashful man decide the dears?⁹

Another phenomenon noted by many U.S. military and other official observers was the extraordinary vitality of many Moro fighters and their capacity to continue coming even after being shot multiple times. While attributable in large measure to the character of a brave and determined warrior people, there was another dimension rooted in the Moros practice of Islam that in various forms has resonance today in the "suicide-attacks" or "constructive self-destruction" around the world undertaken by Muslim fighters in varying interpretations of Qur'anic imperatives to oppose infidels.¹⁰

Juramentado and jihad

Americans quickly came to be more familiar with this dimension, which the Spanish earlier had learned well--Spanish soldiers and officials called it *juramentado*, roughly translated into "oath-taking". This practice--based on Sulu Moro interpretations of *jihad*--consisted of elaborate dedication and purification rites conducted with family and religious authorities. Those who went through this dedication swore to kill as many Christians as possible before dying, the reward being ascent into Paradise. *juramentados* could attack in groups or individually, and the sudden assaults of those "running *jurmamentado*" became a constant concern.

From the Muslim view, this description was far from adequate. Rather, as contemporary Moro Islamic insurgent spokesmen describe it, Moro

...mujahideen took it as a personal duty to Allah to continue to fight to the death, even if a Muslim leader surrendered. It became common for a lone Muslim mujahid to attack American soldiers and camps, killing many of them before losing his life. The Spanish and Americans disparagingly called this act *juramentado* or *amok*; Muslims refer to this as *sabil* or *prang sabil*, from the Arabic *jihad fi sabilillah*.¹¹

In any case, accounts abounded of seemingly peaceful Moros suddenly drawing *kris* or and killing multiple American soldiers or civilians before being killed themselves. The replacement of the .38 caliber Army revolver with the harder hitting .45 caliber automatic was in part a consequence of the difficulty in stopping *juramentados*. Other practices--reportedly yielding short-term results but likely generating longer-term negative consequences--were implemented by U.S. military officials unable to find other effective countermeasures. One such approach was said to have carried out by Colonel Alexander Rodgers, Governor of Jolo:

All Moros who ran *juramentado* were killed and laid out in the market place with slaughtered pigs placed above them. The Mohammedan abhors all contact with pork and the resulting contact of the dead *juramentado* with the pig neutralized the beneficial effects of the rite itself. Colonel Rodgers became known to the Moros as "The Pig," and *juramentados* took themselves hurriedly to other districts.¹²

To 21st Century Filipino commentators, the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon immediately suggested *juramentado*. One observer noted that "the decision of the [11 September] hijackers to kill as many people as possible and have themselves killed in the process

is reminiscent of the Muslim *juramentados* in Zamboanga and Jolo in the southern Philippines during the American colonization of the islands in the early 1900s."¹³

Continuing Moro Armed Resistance in the 20th Century

Moro engagements with U.S. forces continued periodically from the first pitched battle in 1902 until the official end of military rule in 1913. The interruption of World War I, an inter-war period that saw increased local northern Filipino jurisdiction over Moro affairs, and the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in World War II shaped and frustrated Moro aspirations for independence. The Moros fiercely resisted Japanese occupiers, but in the postwar granting of Philippines independence on 4 July 1946, found themselves incorporated into the Republic of the Philippines. Over the next decades, continued Moro resistance to this integration was fueled by the Government-sponsored migration of Christian Filipinos to traditional Muslim lands in the south, and what Philippines Muslims saw as the "massive" transfer of land titles from Moro peoples. Current Moro resistance spokesmen draw a parallel with this influx of Filipinos from the north and the "policies enacted by 'Israel' against the Palestinian people."¹⁴ Threats to the Moros' Muslim identity from the government and the Christian north were emphasized.

What Moros assert was their marginalization by the government in other forms--local investment, education, health care, access to the justice system, and other complaints were added to traditional aspirations for independence. Violence by Christian gangs in collusion with local constabularies and especially the "Jabidah Massacre" on 18 March 1968 played catalytic roles in growing Moro militancy during the Ferdinand Marcos presidency. At least 28 (and likely more) Moro recruits were killed on the Island of Corregidor by the Philippines Army. These recruits--in the Jabidah Special Forces--were undergoing training in unconventional warfare with the alleged aim of seizing the disputed Malaysian state of Sabah (on the island of Borneo), under a plan code-named Operation Merdeka. The Moro recruits were allegedly shot for refusing to obey orders and to keep them from revealing details the operation.¹⁵

One direct result of this event was the clandestine formation in late 1969 of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), formed by Moro students studying at universities in the Philippines, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Middle East, and dedicated to creating an independent Muslim nation in the south Philippines.¹⁶ The MNLF gained foreign support from Qaddafi in Libya and from the governor in Sabah, Malaysia, who facilitated the supply of arms and other aid arriving from Libya, as well as training for Moro youths. Bolstered by foreign arms and supplies, by the mid-1970s the MNLF had perhaps 30,000 men under arms and had been engaging Philippines Army units and police in the Sulu Archipelago and Mindanao. Initial successes began to fade by late 1975, however, when a change of leadership in Sabah state limiting resupply and the impact of effective government amnesty programs. Nevertheless, a ceasefire in 1976 and the establishment of a "provisional" autonomous (but not independent) Muslim zone in the south Philippines seemed to signify real gains for the MNLF. Subsequent backing from Iran--in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution--bolstered MNLF's international support as well.¹⁷

In 1979, a short-lived rival group designated the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization (BMLO) was formed under the leadership of expatriate Moros based in Saudi Arabia. Also In 1977, a leadership split in the MNLF resulted in a breakaway organization, that by 1983 adopted the name of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).¹⁸ The MILF, though smaller than its predecessor, also had substantial numbers of armed combatants.¹⁹ For a time, these three Muslim organizations sought primacy as representatives for the Moro people, punctuated by low-level clashes, cease-fires, and discussions, between their

members and the Philippine Government.²⁰ This complexity was accompanied by another development far removed geographically--the beginning of the Soviet-Afghan War in December 1979 that would eventually generate another, more radical Muslim insurgent group in the Philippines--*Abu Sayyaf*.²¹

***Abu Sayyaf* : From Afghanistan to the War on Terrorism**

While accounts of the formation of *Abu Sayyaf* Group (ASG) vary in detail and interpretation, it is roughly agreed that the Moro founder and first leader, Abdurajik Abubakar Janjalani, was studying in the Middle East when he fell under the influence of the Wahabi theology espoused by Professor Abdul Rasul [Abu] Sayyaf. The Afghan (and ethnic Pashtun) professor was a follower of the puritanical Saudi Islamic sect--named for its 18th Century founder Muhammad ibn-Abd-al-Wahab--that branded other Muslim sects as heretical.²² After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Professor *Abu Sayyaf*--said to be a kind of swashbuckling charismatic figure--formed a mujahideen group in 1986 that operated near Kabul against Soviet forces. Designated the Islamic Union (*Ittehad-e-Islami*), the group was heavily financed by radical Saudi Arabian Wahabi backers and aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. It became an important part of the centralized effort begun by the Jordanian Palestinian Abdullah Azam about 1984, to bring in foreign Muslim fighters and support. Financial and other support was often filtered through Muslim charities.

The group was reported to have trained some 20,000 foreign mujahideen fighters. Many of them trained at a camp near Peshawar, Pakistan, that prepared fighters from the Middle East, North Africa and the Philippines. Janjalani himself arrived in Afghanistan in 1986 and reportedly joined Sayyaf's Islamic Union. He probably received his training at a Sayyaf camp and appears to have stayed in Afghanistan as a mujahideen until the end of the war. Like thousands of non-Afghan Muslims--including Egyptians, Saudis, Algerians, Chechens, Uzbeks, Kuwaitis, Uighurs from Xinjiang in China, and others--Janjalani was determined to help drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan. With that goal achieved in February 1989, most foreign mujahideen veterans scattered to Muslim countries around the world. As is well documented, many of them became part of insurgent and armed opposition groups waging *jihād* against regimes seen as heretical or too influenced by the West.²³ Support networks and ties established in Afghanistan endured and developed, coming to play roles in attacks on US lives, property, and interests around the world over the next decade.

At some point between 1989 and 1990, Janjalani appears to have left Afghanistan and returned to his Basilan Island home in the Philippines, just across the narrow strait from the Mindanao capital Zamboanga.²⁴ He and many other Afghan Moros returned from the Afghan *jihād* with a view to duplicating the success of Afghanistan--in this case, establishing an independent and assertively Muslim state in the southern Philippines. Some returning Moro mujahideen joined the MNLF and others the MILF.²⁵ Janjalani, however, was a believer in a so-called "pure" form of Islam on the Wahabi model. In his Basilan hometown of Tabuk, it was said that there was an "old world" atmosphere in which the women wore black and the men either gray or white.²⁶ He set about with a few followers to establish a new insurgent group that he dubbed *Abu Sayyaf*, evidently to be resonant of his Afghan mentor. He was joined in this endeavor by dissident elements of the MNLF led by a man with similar views, a religious teacher named Wahab Akbar.²⁷ From a group with an initial membership of about 20 and the goal of establishing a "pure" Islamic state in Mindanao, *Abu Sayyaf* grew to at least several hundred members and made its presence felt in Basilan, the Sulu Archipelago, and some parts of Mindanao.²⁸

Abu Sayyaf impressed itself on the public consciousness by the brutality of its bombings, murders,

assaults and ambushes, as well the robberies, extortion, and kidnappings that--as noted earlier--have become its trademark. As this is written, one sizable ASG element--pursued by the Philippines Armed Forces and backed by U.S. material aid and possibly advisors--still holds two missionaries from the Kansas City area and a Filipino nurse.²⁹ The ASG also draws on the strong Moro maritime heritage, operating as successful pirates in Philippines coastal waters and sometimes further from home. Filipino commentators have drawn parallels between the legendary Sulu pirate Jikiri of the early 20th Century, and *Abu Sayyaf*. After years of successful depredations ostensibly carried out in behalf of Moro rights, Jikiri was killed in a hand-to-hand battle with a US officer on the island of Patian.³⁰ Today, commercial shipping enterprises fear that *Abu Sayyaf* specifically among other groups will turn their attentions increasingly to the soft targets presented by maritime carriers.³¹

The Army and police have scored successes against ASG, including killing its founder, Abdurajik Abubakar Janjalani, in a December 1998 gun battle, and capturing or killing other leaders and members. The ASG is now headed by Khaddafy Janjalani, younger brother of the founder and named for the Libyan leader who has supported Moro causes.

The reported ties between Osama bin-Laden and ASG date to Afghanistan in the 1980s, where bin-Laden--like Janjalani--was closely linked to Professor Sayyaf's Islamic Union and fought with their forces.³² In the post-Afghan War days, bin-Laden's *Al-Qaeda* organization reportedly funneled money and other support to the ASG, though the precise nature of this aid is not known publicly. As early as the mid-1990s, Osama bin-Laden's brother-in-law--a Saudi financier named Muhammad Jamal Khalifa--was alleged to be one of the principal vectors of funding to the ASG and perhaps other Philippines Muslim insurgent groups as well. Through an Islamic Charity in the Philippines, this Saudi financier has been linked by some sources to a key individual--Ramzi Yusuf--involved in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York.³³ Other funding sources linked to *Al-Qaeda* are alleged as well.³⁴ Additionally, allegations of mid-1990s plans by Philippines-based radical Islamic groups to blow up 11 U.S. commercial airlines over the Pacific; assassinate Pope John Paul II, bomb U.S. and Israeli embassies; and assassinate President Clinton all marked the area as a vector for international terrorism. More recently, the January 2002 arrest of *Jemaah Islamiyah* militants in Singapore and the Philippines with ties to *Al-Qaeda*, underscored the existence of continuing direct links with international terrorism and regional ties. The group was planning attacks on US and Western embassies in the region as well as the US military.³⁵

Substantial training and other ties to Afghanistan evidently endured in the years since the end of the 1979-89 war. In July 2001, a Filipino senator and former Philippines Armed Forces chief indicated that 50 Moro fighters were currently being trained in Afghanistan. While it was far from clear to which of the three Moro groups the 50 guerrillas belonged, the revelation underscored the robust dimensions of terrorist linkages and interaction.³⁶ As the unraveling of the Taliban regime accelerated in mid-November 2001 under the impact of U.S. and Northern Alliance attacks, Moros were reported to be fighting near Kabul with Taliban and *Al-Qaeda* fighters.³⁷ They are evidently sprinkled among the thousands of *Al-Qaeda* prisoners and dead left in the wake of the successful U.S. and allied operations, even as the US-supported Philippines Army fought occasional engagements and sought to close with the ASG elements and rescue hostages on Basilan Island.³⁸

Islamic Insurgency and the Region

As 2001 came to an end, concerns about the ASG were joined by the prospect of renewed militancy from the MNLF and MILF in their pursuit of Moro Independence. Additionally, the prospect for a broadening of unrest and uncertainty to other states in the region seemed more likely. In late October

2001, Moro National Liberation Front founder Nur Misuari--his leadership challenged by other MNLF representatives and his position as governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao denounced by the Manila Government--quickly indicated his intentions to take up arms. According to the government, he met with *Abu Sayyaf* representatives and with the MILF in the hope of gaining active allies and orchestrating a general uprising. Some 200 Misuari followers shelled an Army post on Mindanao with mortars on 19 November, took many dozens of hostages in Zamboanga City, and in resulting clashes with the Army, lost some 52 fighters. Some of these were reported to be former Moro rebels who had been integrated into the Army but mutinied over government treatment of former governor Misuari.³⁹ Many more MNLF fighters were arrested and large arms and explosives caches seized.

While the Philippines Army continued into December to try and pacify Misuari's fighters, Misuari himself fled to Sabah, Malaysia, where it was feared he would use territory and camps there as a base for launching operations against the Manila Government. He was detained by Malaysian authorities on 24 November--albeit in fairly opulent conditions--and subsequently was "cleared" of terrorist charges by the Kuala Lumpur Government. He was, nevertheless, deported to the Philippines, where he is imprisoned. Fears that Misuari's armed followers--such as the loyal and elite "Mutallah force" from his days as governor--might try to free him, has heightened military and police attention and intelligence gathering efforts. Misuari supporters also are believed to be planning terrorist strikes in the Philippines as they watch the unfolding extradition/deportation proceedings.⁴⁰

The MILF, for its part--whose meeting with Misuari took place in Bangkok Thailand in October--asserts that it is pleased to see rising tensions with the Philippines Government, having opposed earlier peace efforts. At the same time, the ASG pursues its own enigmatic criminal and radical Islamic agendas. In short, the interaction of Moro resistance groups is complex, as is the impact all of this has on other states in the region.⁴¹

At a minimum, the perceived Malaysian backing for Moro independence aspirations remains a source of tension between Manila and Kuala Lumpur, but there are more serious impacts as well. The Philippines Moro insurgent movements have increased the levels of arms smuggling and alien smuggling in Malaysia and Indonesia. The January 2002 arrest of *Al-Qaeda*-linked militants in Malaysia with ties to the Philippines and Indonesia indicate that full extent of radical Islamic networks is not yet apparent.⁴² In addition, the successes of *Abu Sayyaf* in raising money through kidnapping and extortion is believed to have sparked analogous efforts by pirates and other groups in regional waters.⁴³ The potential of radicalizing Malaysian Muslims (and institutionalizing anti-U.S. and anti-Western opposition and hostility) remains a potential, but one to date limited to the rhetorical and demonstrations against U.S. strikes on Afghanistan.⁴⁴

Indonesia--as the fourth largest state in the world and the largest Muslim country--is particularly concerned about radical Islam and terrorism. Some 85% of Indonesia's 210 million-population are Muslim (about 5% being Christian and some 1% Buddhist and Hindu). While the East Timor experience is said to have re-energized the Philippines Moros in their secessionists efforts, it is recognized that inspiration flows both ways.⁴⁵ The presence of *Al-Qaeda* cells in Indonesia was suspected and discussed well before the *Al-Qaeda* attacks of 11 September against the United States. Attacks against U.S. interests there sparked State Department warnings and increased Embassy security.⁴⁶ More recently, Indonesian intelligence chief, Lieutenant-General Hendropriyono, charged that *Al-Qaeda* camps--and those of other foreign terrorist groups--existed on Indonesia's Sulawesi Island. While the general said that camps had remained largely inactive since their establishment, he indicated that a combination of *Al-Qaeda* representatives, other foreigners, and local militants were fueling Muslim-Christian conflict

there.⁴⁷ A number of groups in Indonesia have extremist agendas. These include the Islamic Defenders' Front and the militant *Laskar jihad*, led by a former mujahideen veteran of the 1979-89 Soviet Afghan War who has sent many local youths off to wage war against Christians in the Moluccas and the aforementioned Central Sulawesi province.⁴⁸ *Laskar jihad* reportedly has nearly a dozen commanders with Afghan war experience. While they deny *Al-Qaeda* ties, their radical activities and continuing involvement in the Sulawesi problems suggests otherwise. Overall, however, membership in such radical Islamic groups is still relatively small. The extent to which these groups will be able to mobilize new members to undertake regional versions of *jihad* in today's environment is the issue that concerns regional governments and the U.S.⁴⁹ The recent revelations about *Al-Qaeda*-linked militants arrested in Singapore--well-known for its strict law enforcement and other controls--was a particularly unpleasant discovery. It has suggested to specialists and media commentators alike, that the potential for *Al-Qaeda* and other radical Islamic groups gaining footholds amidst the disarray of Indonesia is a most serious consideration.⁵⁰

Conclusions

From the late 13th century to the age of the Internet, Moro goals, identity, and coherence as a people have remained largely intact. Now constituting about 5% of the Filipino population, the goals of independence--or at least greater autonomy and a more equitable share of opportunity and national resources-- remain powerful imperatives to act. As one sympathetic Filipino commentator put it recently, the continuing Moro armed struggle is "founded on an historical perception that Manila's Imperial Government is out on a systematic pattern for the extirpation of Islam in the Philippines."⁵¹ Whatever the merits of this perception, enduring economic marginalization and decades of Government policies judged hostile by many south Philippines Muslims have fueled an active insurgency.

Philippines Government military efforts to deal with guerrillas have at the same time led to charges of human rights abuses and unwarranted "militarization."⁵² As 2002 begins, the Philippines Army asserts that it must substantially increase the size of its forces by some 40 battalions to deal with the overall threat of southern Muslim guerrillas and the communist insurgents operating mainly in areas further north. Together, these Muslim and communist guerrillas are estimated to total about 25,000 fighters.⁵³ At the same time, Muslim insurgents are seeking new recruits, funding, and allies--a cycle with the prospect of increased confrontation in the Philippines and possibly a catalyst for broader armed conflict in the region.

The major new factor in the Philippines--and the region--is the introduction of a far more radical form of Islam backed by international adherents. While *Abu Sayyaf* itself may now be both a criminal enterprise and an ideologically motivated insurgent group, the message of Islamic extremism in populations seeing little prospect for material improvement could be especially seductive. Traditional Moro independence groups, militants, and armed insurgents may become radicalized. Regional commentators (including those in Indonesia) continue to echo the fear that "radicals might eventually attract the economically dispossessed."⁵⁴ Indeed, by late January 2002 there were increasing reports of ties among *Abu Sayyaf*, the MNLF, and the MILF. The well-regarded Manila Times cited Philippines military intelligence reports that MNLF and MILF insurgents had "linked up with *Abu Sayyaf* rebels in Basilan." Should this report prove correct and indicate an enduring relationship, it would mean far more serious problems for Philippines military operations in the area and southern Philippines overall.⁵⁵

United States policy in the Philippines recognizes two requirements--to support the Philippines Government's military effort to deal with the immediate threat of terrorism, and to meet the longer-term problem of endemic poverty and marginalization that feeds instability. U.S. military assistance has thus

far been confined to materiel support and the deployment of Special Forces trainers and other advisors for a months long "counter-terrorism training exercise" on Basilan Island, though the possibility of more active U.S. participation has been raised in government-to-government discussions. The likelihood of strong opposition to a more assertive US combat role may limit options in this regard.⁵⁶ Presidents Arroyo and Bush both agreed that "sustainable peace" would depend on how well economic and social problems could be addressed, and the U.S. has pledged to double economic aid for key southern Philippines areas. This assistance will support the integration of former combatants into the economy in an effort to create an "environment that is attractive for investment, job creation and economic progress and providing improved public services."⁵⁷ The impact of these longer-term programs--and the scope and scale of military activity--will depend on the dangerous months ahead, when leaders and populations in the Philippines and the region determine which paths to take.

ENDNOTES

¹. In November 2001, Filipino, Australian, and U.S. media all reported the dispatch of U.S. counter-terrorism specialists and Special Forces to the Philippines to offer assistance with the *Abu Sayyaf* problem. U.S. President George W. Bush specifically noted his plans to cooperate with Philippines's President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in "getting rid of" *Abu Sayyaf*. By January 2002, US Special Forces were in the process of deploying to the Philippines to perform training roles. Vocal Filipino opposition to having these troops perform combat role, appeared to constitute a strong constraint to a broader US role against armed terrorists on the ground. See "Philippines: Washington Ready to Increase Military Assistance to Manila," Defense News, 12 November 2001; Bush statements broadcast on Quezon City GMA 7 Television, 21 November 2001, as translated in FBIS SEP20011121000096; and James Hookway, "U.S. Faces Complex Ethic Conflicts Fighting Terrorism in the Philippines," Wall Street Journal, 21 January 2002.

². Present-day insurgents--as, for example, represented by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)--encapsulate the early history of Islam and conflict in the Philippines with emphasis on a settled Islamic presence that predates Spanish colonization efforts by centuries:

The struggle of the Malay Bangsamoro people began almost 500 years ago, when Spain invaded the three independent Muslim principalities - the Sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao, and the Confederated Sultanates of Ranao - which governed mainland Mindanao and the islands of Basilan, Sulu and Palawan. Mindanao and these islands today constitute what is known as the 'southern Philippines.' Islam had been here for some 200 years before the Spanish arrived. ...Meanwhile, the Christianized native Malays of Luzon and Visayas accepted Spanish colonial rule and helped the invaders with the same zeal shown by the Crusaders when they invaded Muslim Palestine. The Spaniards treated these Christians as 'allies' and 'friends', while the Bangsamoro Muslims were enemies who had to be exterminated.

(See Robert Maulana Alonto, "Four centuries of *jihad* underpinning the Bangsamoro Muslims' struggle for freedom" on the MILF Internet site <http://www.luwaran.com/alonto.htm>)

³. Converts to Islam were the same racial lineage as those residing in the Christian north.

⁴. Madge Kho, "100 Years of Moro Resistance: A Chronology of Historical Events," received via Internet at http://www.phil-am-war.org/moro_chrono.htm. See also Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War, 1899-1902*, University Press of Kansas, 2000.

⁵. Ibid.

⁶. Alonto, "Four centuries of *jihad*..."

⁷. Naval officers for their part developed a similar appreciation for the sea-going Moros who engaged in "piracy" and raids of various types. As one veteran of the time put it, United States navy officers "who happened to be cruising in the China Sea knew the difference between a Macao lorch and a Canton junk, and in the Sulu Sea never mistook a Moro proa for a Visayan Banca." See David Potter, *Sailing the Sulu Sea: Belles and Bandits in the Philippines* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1940), p. 13.

⁸. Vic Hurley, *The Swish of the kris*, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1936), p. 223. This fine old book is also available on-line at

<http://www.bakbakan.com/swishkb.html>.

9. From the anonymous poem "If a Lady's Wearin' Pantaloon."

10. These interpretations are far from universally accepted by Muslim populations and are in many cases condemned as a perversion of Islamic *jihad*. In addition, the practice is at least superficially similar to the many suicide attacks of Hindu Tamils waging a continuing insurgency against the Sri Lankan Government. These "Black Tamils," with cyanide capsules tied around their necks or with bombs around their waists, continue to demonstrate their willingness to die in behalf of the Tamil independence cause in a continuing Sri Lankan civil war. See Daya Wijesekera, "The Cult of Suicide and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 1996).

11. Alonto, "Four centuries of *jihad*..."

12. Hurley, *The Swish of the kris*, p. 223.

13. Tony Dedal, "Juramentado and Americans," *eManila News*, 22 September 2001, received via Internet.

14. MILF Internet site, "History," at <http://www.luwaran.com/pages/history5.htm>

15. *Ibid.*

16. Lela Noble, "The Philippines: Muslims Fight for an Independent State," *Southeast Asia Chronicle*, No. 75, October 1980, pp. 12-17.

17. These arrangements were set out in the December 1976 Tripoli Agreement conducted under the auspices of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

18. "Misuari and Salamat: 33 Years After Jabidah," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 18 March 2001, received via Internet.

19. While not the focus of this article, it should be noted that Communist insurgencies--largely in the northern Philippines--have been an important security issue for the Philippine Government. These ranged from the communist Hukbalahaps ("Huks") in the late 1940s and 1950s to the New People's Army, the military wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Of note, in the mid-1950s the government allegedly undertook a program to resettle landless Huks on territory in Mindanao and elsewhere in the southern Philippines. This reportedly exacerbated the already-intense tensions and land disputes affecting directly affecting Moro populations.

20. The BMLO eventually dissolved, with organizational successors having little influence as armed opposition.

21. Noble, "The Philippines"; and Christos Iacovou, "From MNLF to *Abu Sayyaf*: The Radicalization of Islam in the Philippines," *Institute of Defense Analysis* (Greece), December 1998, received via Internet.

22. Wahabis are Sunni Muslims (as are Moros). In Saudi Arabia, other Muslim orders (e.g., the Shia'a minority) are the object of "officially sanctioned political and economic discrimination." See U.S. Department of State, *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Saudi Arabia*, Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Washington, DC, September 9, 1999. Received via Internet, http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/irf/irf_rpt/1999/irf_saudiara99.html

23. Of the many detailed works now addressing this process, one concise mid-1990s overview--underscoring how much was known of the process years ago--can be found in "Arab Veterans of Afghanistan War Lead New Islamic Holy War," *Compass*, 28 October 1994, received via Internet Federation of American Scientists archive) http://www.fas.org/irp/news/1994/afghan_war_vetrans.html

24. Of note, the Islamic Union founded by Professor Abdul Rasul *Abu Sayyaf* retained its identity. It is, as this is written, fighting against the Taliban as part of the "Northern Alliance" and United Front. Sayyaf reportedly has long-standing antagonisms with prominent Northern alliance leaders including the now well-known General Abdul Rasheed Dostum. Susan Olasky, "Thirty Muslim leaders worth knowing about," *World Magazine* (on the Web), 27 October 2001, received via Internet. The group is accused of "ordering the massacres of hundreds of ethnic Hazaras" by some human rights commentators (See, for example, <http://www.eurasianet.org>

25. Ann Bernadette S. Corvera, "Is there a link between bin Laden and the *Abu Sayyaf*?" *Philippines Star*, 25 November 2001. Indeed, some accounts--notably by Philippines Senate President Aquilino Pimentel Jr.--have said that Moros were "initially

recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency as mujahideens to fight the U.S. proxy war in Afghanistan in the '80s." Pimentel indicated further that they "were trained by AFP [Philippines Armed Forces] officers in Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Basilan and other remote areas in Mindanao" and funded by the U.S. covert operations sources. See Edmundo Santuario III, "*Abu Sayyaf* The CIA's Monster Gone Berserk," Just Peace, received via Internet.

26. Fe B. Zamora, "Al Harakatul al Islamiya: The Beginnings of *Abu Sayyaf*," Philippines Inquirer, received via Internet at <http://www.inq7.net>

27. Ibid. Wahab Akbar is now the governor of Basilan Island. This former MNLF member insists he has broken his reported former ties with the ASG. Noting ASG ferocity, he also has sought to defend the creation of private militias and armed vigilante groups to defend citizens. The frequency with individuals switch sides--and frequent charges of police and military complicity with rebel groups--has in the view of the governor and others made dependence on private security a more desirable option than trust in the official security apparatus. Maria Resser, "Basilan: The 'Wild West' of the Philippines," CNN News, 8 July 2001, received via Internet.

28. The organization was said to be designated Al Harakatul al Islamiya, but became known as *Abu Sayyaf*.

29. These hostages are missionaries Gracia and Martin Burnham from Wichita, Kansas, and Filipino nurse Ediborah Yap. They are the last of more than 60 people seized for ransom in the spring of 2001 from a resort on Palawan island resort and a hospital on Basilan Island. Many were released and some executed over the course of a months-long pursuit by the Philippines army. "Unit Set to Face Hostage Takers: Trained Filipinos Aim to Free Kansans," The New York Times, 16 December 2001. See also, Johanna McGeary, "Can *Al-Qaeda* Find a New Nest?" Time, 24 December 2001, p. 55.

30. Peter Jaymul V. Uckung, "From Jikiri to *Abu Sayyaf*," Philippines Inquirer, 9 June 2001, received via Internet at <http://www.inq7.net>.

31. Countryman & McDaniel, "New Pirate Targets Feared," The Cargo Letter, 20 November 2000, received via Internet at <http://www.cargolaw.com>. For recent regional efforts to combat piracy among other forms of crime see Johna Villaviray, "Anti-terror parley skirts Nur problem," Manila Times, 29 December 2001; and "Japan Coast Guard to Send Patrol Boat to SE Asian Waters to Prevent Terrorism," Sankei Shimbun, 25 October 2001, as translated in FBIS JPP20011026000014.

32. Mary Anne Weaver, "Blowback," Atlantic Monthly, May 1996, the Digital Edition received via Internet at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/96may/blowback.htm>

33. Ibid.

34. See, for example, Fausto Biloslavo interview with Abu Luqman, "Attacks on Tourists Across the World, Il Giomale, 7 May 2000, as translated in FBIS EUP20000508000174; and Corvera, "Is there a link?"

35. "Suspected Muslim extremist with al-Qaida link arrested", Lawrence Journal World, 22 January 2002; and "Asian nations widen terrorism inquiry," Kansas City Star, 13 January 2002.

36. "*Abu Sayyaf* fighters receive training in Afghanistan," AFP, 6 July 2001, as presented on the Afghan News Network website, <http://myafghan.com>

37. "Foreigners fought Afghan rebels hand to hand near Kabul," Kansas City Star, 18 November 2001.

38. Joel R. San Juan, "New Basilan clashes leave 13 Abu dead," Manila Times, 8 December 2001.

39. Marian Trinidad, "Misuari loyalists shell Army post; 52 killed," Manila Times, 20 November 2001.

40. Johnna Villaviray, "Reports: Nur loyalists hatching terror attacks in Minda Dec. 30," Manila Times, 19 December 2001; and "Nur men can try to spring him-AFP," Manila Times, 10 January 2002.

41. In December, the very influential Indonesian-based Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) announced it would support Misuari's successor in Mindanao, though Misuari retains international support from Saudi Arabia and elements in Malaysia as well. Johnna Villaviray and Mirasol Ng-Gadil, "Misuari fate hangs in OIC balance," Manila Times, 6 December 2001; and Dorian Zumel Sicat, Johnna Villaviray, and Marian Trinidad, "RP 'allies' still play major role in conflict," Manila Times, 21 November 2001.

[42](#). "Asian nations widen terrorism inquiry."

[43](#). "At least 15 kidnapped as pirates attack again near Sipadan, Sabah off Borneo," Cyber Diver News Network, 18 June 2001, received via Internet.

[44](#). Dini Djalal and John McBeth, "All Talk, No Action," Far Eastern Economic Review, 25 October 2001, received via Internet.

[45](#). Joseph Brady, "Timor Fires Mindanao's Freedom Fight," Sydney Morning Herald, 30 October 1999.

[46](#). Don Greenlees, "Bin Laden moves in on Indonesia," The Australian, 4 September 2001.

[47](#). Jay Solomon, "Al-Qaeda ha camps in Indonesia'," Wall Street Journal, 14 December 2001, as cited in Financial Review, 2 January 2002, received via Internet.

[48](#). As 2001 ended, Jakarta was worried about a series of bomb attacks on Christian churches in Central Sulawesi, where Muslim-Christian clashes have killed some 1,000 people over the last three years and efforts to promote an enduring peace are underway.

[49](#). "Java's angry young Muslims," Economist, 18 October 2001, received via Internet; and Djalal and McBeth, "All Talk."

[50](#). Raymond Bonner and Jane Perlez, "Al Qaeda Seeks Niche In Indonesia, Officials Fear," New York Times, 23 January 2002.

[51](#). Eric F. Mallonga, "The widening rift," Manila Times, 3 September 2001, received via Internet.

[52](#). Jessica Reyes-Cantos, "Philippines: Battered but Not Beaten," Instituto del Tercer Mundo: Social Watch, 2001, received via Internet <http://www.socwatch.org.uy>

[53](#). Some Philippines legislators--including the Senate President--are less than convinced, however "Philippines--Manila Must Double Military Strength to Fight Rebellions," Agence France-Presse, 3 December 2001, received via Periscope On-Line, <http://periscope.org>

[54](#). Djalal and McBeth, "All Talk."

[55](#). Dorian Zumel Sicat, MILF, MNLF, *Abu Sayyaf* link up in Basilan, Manila Times, 26 January 2002.

[56](#). "U.S. Special Forces in Philippines," Associated Press, 18 February 2002, received via Internet.

[57](#). "US pledges massive military, economic aid to Philippines," Asia Times Online, 23 November 2001, received via Internet. In November 2001, Filipino, Australian, and U.S. media all reported the dispatch of U.S. counter-terrorism specialists and Special Forces to the Philippines to offer assistance with the *Abu Sayyaf* problem. U.S. President George W. Bush specifically noted his plans to cooperate with Philippines's President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in "getting rid of" *Abu Sayyaf*. By January 2002, US Special Forces were in the process of deploying to the Philippines to perform training roles. Vocal Filipino opposition to having these troops perform combat role, appeared to constitute a strong constraint to a broader US role against armed terrorists on the ground. See "Philippines: Washington Ready to Increase Military Assistance to manila," Defense News, 12 November 2001; Bush statements broadcast on Quezon City GMA 7 Television, 21 November 2001, as translated in FBIS SEP20011121000096; "U.S. Special Forces in Philippines," Associated Press, 18 February 2002, received via Internet; James Hookway, "U.S. Faces Complex Ethic Conflicts Fighting Terrorism in the Philippines," Wall Street Journal, 21 January 2002.