

## U.S. Security Assistance to the Philippines: A Success Story Against Terrorism

By Peter Chalk

THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES currently constitutes a main focus of U.S. concern regarding terrorism and trans-border militant threats, with American diplomats darkly referring to the region as the “new Afghanistan.” The wider Mindanao area has not only been connected to numerous high-profile terrorist attacks that have taken place since 9/11—both within and beyond the Philippines—but it has also been identified as an increasingly important hub for leading members of the so-called pro-bombing faction of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Although several extremist entities exist in the southern Philippines, it is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG, or “Bearer of the Sword”) that Washington generally considers to represent the principal terrorist threat to its own strategic and security interests. Accordingly, the thrust of foreign military security assistance to Manila has been directed toward vitiating the operational tempo of the ASG—an effort that, at this point, has met with some relatively significant results.

### The Abu Sayyaf Group

The ASG was founded on Basilan Island in 1991 under the leadership of Ustadz Abdurajak Janjalini, a former member of the Filipino Muslim Brigade that fought Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Originally known as al-Harakat al-Islamiyah, the group has stated its goals as the eradication of all Christian influence in the southern Philippines and the creation of an Islamic State of Mindanao (MIS) whose “nature, meaning, emblem and objective are basic to peace.”<sup>1</sup>

1 These objectives were first set forth in an undated ASG proclamation, the “Surah I-al Fatiha,” that professed to refute the false lies and insults hurled at the Islamic religion by Christians and to liberate Mindanao from the clutches of oppression, tyranny and injustice as experienced under the Catholic-dominated Philippine government and military. Despite these pronouncements, the ASG has never articulated a clear strategic plan for how it would actually establish a pure Islamic state in the southern Philippines or, indeed, prepare local Muslims for home rule. “Abu Sayyaf Group Profile,” unpublished

Although Janjalini originally created his movement as one predicated on the localized imperative of establishing an MIS, he quickly tied this objective to the regional and global supremacy of Islam through armed struggle. Toward that end, the ASG paralleled its anti-Christian agenda in Mindanao with an effort to establish logistical and operational links with external terrorist groups.<sup>2</sup> Concrete evidence of these transnational ambitions first emerged in 1995 when five ASG cells were directly implicated in *Oplan Bonjinka*—a multi-pronged plot aimed at assassinating the Pope and U.S. President Bill Clinton, bombing Washington’s embassies in Manila and Bangkok and sabotaging U.S. commercial airliners flying trans-Pacific routes from American West Coast cities. The plan was hatched by Ramzi Yousef, the convicted mastermind of the 1993 attack against the World Trade Center in New York, and was only foiled when volatile explosive compounds ignited a fire in the apartment he was renting in Manila.<sup>3</sup>

The fervor of the ASG’s Islamic agenda—both domestic and international—began to atrophy in the wake of the discovery of *Bonjinka*, a process that gathered pace rapidly three years later when Janjalini was killed in a shootout with Philippine police on Basilan Island. At the time, this latter event proved to be a defining moment in the ASG’s evolutionary history, triggering a leadership crisis that was followed by the loss of ideological direction and a subsequent process of factionalization that effectively saw the group degenerate into a loosely configured but highly ruthless Kidnap-for-Extortion (KFR) syndicate.<sup>4</sup>

document supplied to the author by the International Political Violence Terrorism Research Center (IPVTRC), Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies (IDSS), Singapore, January 12, 2006.

2 Personal interviews, police and military intelligence officials, Manila, March 2005.

3 For more on *Oplan Bonjinka*, see “Asia’s Own Osama,” *Time*, April 1, 2002; Anthony Spaeth, “Rumbles in the Jungle,” *Time*, March 4, 2002; “Disparate Pieces of Puzzle Fit Together,” *Washington Post*, September 23, 2001; “Muslim Militants Threaten Ramos Vision of Summit Glory,” *The Australian*, January 13, 1996; and “The Man Who Wasn’t There,” *Time*, February 20, 1995.

4 A number of these kidnappings proved to be highly profitable. Abductions of several Western tourists in the first half of 2000, for instance, are believed to have net-

The criminal disaggregation of the ASG, however, proved to be only short lived. Beginning in 2003, concerted attempts were made to re-energize the group as an integrated and credible Islamic force. The bulk of these efforts were coordinated under the combined auspices of Khadaffi Janjalini (the younger brother of Abdurajak) and Jainal Antel Sali (also known as Abu

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Solaiman, a self-proclaimed ASG spokesman), both of whom sought to return the group to its militant jihadist origins following the arrests and killings of several leading bandit commanders. Notably, these included Ghalib Andang (also known as “Komander Robot”) and Aldam Tilao (also known as Abu Sabaya), two domineering personalities who had orchestrated many of the earlier KFR operations claimed in the group’s name.<sup>5</sup> Although now dead, the influence of Khadaffi and Solaiman<sup>6</sup> has been significant in reorienting the tactical and strategic direction of the ASG. The group now routinely refers to itself by its original nomenclature—al-Harakat al-Islamiyah—and, under the direction of Commander Radullan

ted ASG an estimated \$20 million in ransom payments. See “No More Ransoms,” *Economist*, June 2, 2001; Seth Maydans, “Libyan Aid Helps to Free Hostages Held in the Philippines,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2001; and Deidre Sheehan, “Buying Trouble,” *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 7, 2000.

5 Andang was killed while trying to escape from jail in March 2005; Tilao was shot in an offshore gun battle in Mindanao in June 2001. The latter was behind the sensational abduction of 20 hostages from the resort island of Palawan in May 2001, including Americans Martin and Gracia Burnham. For an interesting account of this episode and the events leading up to Tilao’s eventual death, see Mark Bowden, “Jihadists in Paradise,” *The Atlantic* (March 2007).

6 Khadaffi died after sustaining serious injuries during a firefight with the Armed Forces of the Philippines on September 4, 2006. Solaiman was killed by a Special Forces unit on January 16, 2007. Zachary Abuza, “On the Defensive: Rebels Lose Ground in the Southern Philippines,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* (April 2007).

Sahiron (who, in the absence of a nominated *amir*, now acts as the *de facto* leader of the organization),<sup>7</sup> has enshrined the concept of a wider Islamic state in Mindanao as the basis of its ideological agenda.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the group has steadily scaled back its lucrative KFR activities in favor of a more directed focus on hitting high-profile civilian and Western targets in major metropolitan areas. Some of the more notable attacks and plots attributed to the organization in recent years include:

- The 2004 firebombing of Philippine *SuperFerry 14* (which resulted in 116 deaths and remains the most destructive act of maritime terrorism to date).
- A series of coordinated explosions that took place in Davao City, General Santos City and Manila in February 2005 (the so-called "Valentine's Day" bombings).
- Preempted strikes on several venues popular with foreign tourists and businessmen in Makati City that had been planned for March 2005.
- The bombing of a crowded supermarket on the southern island of Jolo in March 2006.
- Three simultaneous attacks on the sites hosting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and East Asian regional summits in January 2007.<sup>9</sup>

7 At the time of writing, the ASG had not announced a nominated *amir* to succeed Khaddafi Janjalini largely because an accepted consensus candidate who retained both theological and military credibility had not been identified. Sahiron (also known as Commander Putol) is the closest that the group has to such an individual. He is old (in his 70s), however, and suffers from acute diabetes. The other potential *amir*, Isnilon Hapilon (also known as Salahuddin), is from the Yakan tribe, which is not acceptable to the Tausugs. Personal interviews, AFP officials, Zamboanga, January 2008.

8 Personal interviews, police and military officials and security analysts, Manila, January 2008.

9 Anthony Davis, "Philippines Fears New Wave of Attacks by Abu Sayyaf Group," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (May 2005); Abuza, "On the Defensive: Rebels Lose Ground in Southern Philippines"; "4 More Suspects in V-Day Bombings Nabbed," ABS-CBN News, February 23, 2005; "Car Bombing Plot Foiled, Says AFP," *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 30, 2005; Tarra Quismundo and Donna Pazzibugan, "Bomb Found Outside Makati Bldg," *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 28, 2005; Jim Gomez, "Extremist Groups in Philippines Are Forming

Arguably more importantly, the ASG has sought to consolidate ties with the pro-bombing faction of JI—which currently represents the most significant and dangerous jihadist entity in Southeast Asia—acting as the main vehicle for furthering its operational and logistical activities in Mindanao. Intelligence sources in the Philippines confirm that militants associated with the bloc continue to pass through areas under ASG control and that at least three of the most wanted men in Southeast Asia are now based in Patikul under the group's protection: Joko Pitono (also known as Dulmatin), Umar Patek and Marwan (also known as Manobo).<sup>10</sup>

#### The U.S. Dimension

The United States clearly views the ASG as posing a direct threat to a highly important ally in Southeast Asia. The present Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo administration constitutes one of the most ardent supporters of President George W. Bush's global war on terrorism that in addition to complementing regional American politico-strategic policies also remains crucial to legitimating U.S. basing options in the wider Asia-Pacific. Moreover, the Philippines is part and parcel of a highly dynamic East Asian economic hub that offers vibrant export markets, long-term energy supplies (especially in the form of oil and liquefied natural gas) and crucial sea lines of communication for maritime trade. The emergence of a concerted jihadist beachhead in Mindanao would not only negatively impact the general stability of the Philippines and its neighbors, but it would place under pressure existing bilateral and multilateral relations that are emerging as a key component of Washington's post-9/11 national and international security strategy. These considerations have caused Washington to place a

Alliances," Associated Press, March 12, 2005; "Captured Indonesian Suspect: ASG Plans to Bomb Crowded Places in Central Manila," FBIS, March 24, 2005; "Bomb Rocks Philippines Ahead of Summits," *USA Today*, January 11, 2007; "Blast Hits Southern Philippines," BBC News, March 27, 2006.

10 Personal interviews, AFP officials, Manila and Zamboanga, January 2008. These three individuals are considered especially dangerous in terms of IED construction given their respective proficiencies: Marwan and military ordinance; Patek and chemicals; and Dulmatin and electronics.

premium on supporting Manila with a robust program of international defense and security assistance. Instituted through the Joint United States Military Assistance Group-Philippines (JUSMAG-P), the essential thrust of this backing is to enhance American-Filipino military interoperability in order to deny and defeat the terrorist threat emanating from the ASG.<sup>11</sup>

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is now the largest benefactor of the Pentagon's Foreign Military Financing (FMF) budget,<sup>12</sup> which grew from zero between 1994 and 1998 to \$9 million in 2004, \$11 million in 2005, \$12 million in 2006 and \$13 million in 2007.<sup>13</sup> The bulk of this money has been used to promote defense reform and underwrite the logistics for ongoing counter-terrorism efforts in the southern Philippines through 10 priority programs: Multi Year Defense Planning System; Intelligence, Operations and Training; Logistics; Professional Development; Professional Management; Capability Upgrade Program; Budget and Management; Defense Acquisition System; Strategic Communication; and Information Management.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to FMF, Manila continues to be one of the principal recipients of Department of Defense (DoD) International Military Education and Training (IMET) support. The main purpose of this assistance is to sponsor serving officers of the AFP to undertake Professional Military Education (PME) in the United States. The hope is that

11 Joint United States Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG) and United States Defense Representative (USDR) Philippines briefing, Manila, January 15, 2008.

12 FMF essentially consists of a trust fund that is set up in recipient countries and which is administered by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Money is deposited into the trust and used to purchase American defense articles and services as provided through the U.S. Foreign Military Sales system. Funds mostly pay for hardware and technical training, although a certain amount is also employed to promote defense reform in recipient countries.

13 Personal interview, U.S. State Department (USSD) officials, Washington, D.C., December 2007. See also Malcolm Cook and Kit Collier, *Mindanao: A Gamble Worth Taking* (Sydney: Lowy Institute Paper 14, 2007), p. 44.

14 Personal interview, AFP officials, Manila, January 2008; Philippine Defense Reform briefing, Manila, January 15, 2008.

by attending these courses, participants will not only gain a thorough grounding in macro areas such as rules of engagement, human rights awareness, international military law and legal aspects of peacekeeping operations (that will then be disseminated back to their home units and institutions), but will also build solid cooperative relationships with their American counterparts.<sup>15</sup> In 2007, \$2.75 million was allocated to the Philippines in IMET funds; covering the PME costs for 146 students, this made it one of the largest programs of its kind currently run by Washington anywhere in the world.<sup>16</sup>

On a more directed combat level, several hundred U.S. personnel deployed as part of JUSMAG-P's Joint Special Operations Taskforce Philippines (JSOT-P) are providing comprehensive counter-terrorism training to all relevant AFP elements involved in the fight against the ASG.<sup>17</sup> Principally aimed at Special Forces, Scout Ranger and Marine Corps battalions as well as several army reconnaissance companies, modules mainly focus on operations intelligence fusion, unit interoperability, logistics and aspects of engineering, equipment and maintenance. Although U.S. troops are barred from actually engaging in active hostile actions (which is prohibited under the Philippines' constitution), they do participate in annual counter-terrorism exercises with the AFP to test and audit imparted techniques, procedures and practices. Known as *Balikatan* (literally "shoulder-to-shoulder"), these drills have been ongoing since 2002. The latest round

15 Former Secretary of State Colin Powell once remarked that, dollar for dollar, IMET was one of the most effective security assistance programs run by the U.S. government.

16 Personal interviews, USSD officials, Washington, D.C., 2007 and Manila, January 2008. Worldwide, roughly 125 countries receive IMET funding. In Southeast Asia, the main established programs are with the Philippines and Indonesia; smaller arrangements have been concluded with Cambodia, East Timor, Laos, Malaysia and Thailand (although at the time of writing all military assistance to Bangkok had been frozen as a result of the September 2006 military coup that ousted the civilian administration of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra).

17 JSOTF-P training missions are currently being headquartered out of Camp Aguinaldo in Manila, Camp Navarro in Zamboanga and Camp Bautista in Jolo. JUSMAG and USDR briefing, Manila, January 15, 2008.

is scheduled for February-March 2008 and will be devoted exclusively to civil military operations in Basilan, Tawi-Tawi and Sulu.<sup>18</sup>

Besides the DoD (which remains the principal source of security backing to Manila), at least two other federal government bureaucracies are currently working to boost counter-terrorism efforts in the Philippines. The first is the U.S. State Department, which provides an average of between \$1 and \$1.5 million every year in International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) support.<sup>19</sup> Most of these monies are being used to enhance the forensic capabilities of the national police and help build a more comprehensive legal framework for charging and prosecuting those implicated in terrorist crimes (a Resident Legal Adviser Program is active to further buttress this latter endeavor). The State Department has also earmarked \$5 million in 1207 funds<sup>20</sup> to promote domain awareness and capacity building in the maritime realm as part of a wider effort to augment security in the Malaysia-Philippines-Indonesia (MALPHINDO) tri-border region.<sup>21</sup>

18 Personal interviews, AFP officials, Zamboanga and Manila, January 2008. *Balikatan* O8 will exercise eight medical civil action programs (MEDCAPS) and four engineering civic action programs (ENCAPS); MEDCAPS will involve 15 AFP personnel/project, ENCAPS 20 AFP personnel/project.

19 It should be noted that the USSD also works with the Department of Justice in supporting an International Criminal Investigative Training Program in the Philippines. This is a relatively minor effort that consists mostly of sponsoring courses for selected PNP personnel to attend courses on crime scene investigation, community policing and instructor development. Director General Oscar Calderon, *Philippine National Police: One-Year Report* (Manila, Camp Crame: Philippine National Police, 2007), p. 19.

20 Although 1207 funds are DoD sourced, the program uses defense dollars to perform a USSD function, with State acting as the ultimate arbiter of how these monies are distributed and employed.

21 Personal interviews, DoD and USSD officials, Washington, D.C., December 2007 and Australian and Philippine Navy officials, Manila, January 2008. Most of the effort in terms of promoting Philippine maritime capacity building is focusing on Coast Watch South (CWS)—an interagency project patterned after the off-shore monitoring and surveillance system that is employed in Australia. The Philippine version will involve setting up surveillance and interdiction stations across Mindanao to cover the whole gambit of maritime threats

Second is USAID, which is the main agency responsible for distributing and overseeing development assistance to the Philippines. Many of its programs are undertaken in direct conjunction with the Defense Department and focus on using "soft power" to alleviate poverty and unemployment, both of which are regarded as powerful drivers—if not root causes—for militant extremism in Mindanao. The main thrust of these endeavors, which are instituted through the Growth and Equity in Mindanao (GEM) program, has been to foster small-scale community infrastructure projects that are liable to have an immediate impact on civilians' day-to-day lives such as the construction of manual water pumps, sanitation systems and market access roads and the promotion of local fish farms and collective business cooperatives.<sup>22</sup> In 2006, JUSMAG-P started channeling these development efforts through U.S. military forces stationed in the south, which has ensured that GEM initiatives are now systematically coordinated with U.S. security troops and implemented in areas that can be quarantined from attack and sabotage by militant entities.<sup>23</sup>

#### Assessment of U.S. Defense and Security Assistance

The U.S. defense and security assistance program has paid dividends in a number of respects. Operationally, there is little doubt that the AFP has benefited from FMF funding and JSOT-P training. This

in zones around the country's so-called "southern back door." These stations will be tied into a central command post—to be known as the Maritime Information and Coordination Center (MICC)—that will provide fusion for intelligence collection, analysis and dissemination. The MICC will be staffed by interagency personnel and headed by the AFP (which will provide the initial seed money for underwriting the start-up costs for CWS). The current development plan for the system is split between an initial Implementation Phase (lasting 0-3 years), an Integration Phase (lasting 2-6 years) and a Full Mission Capable Phase (lasting 5-9 years). An Executive Order for implementing the first phase has already been drafted and should be ready for presidential signature before the end of the first quarter in 2008.

22 Personal interviews, DoD officials, Washington, D.C., December 2007. See also Cook and Collier, *Mindanao: A Gamble Worth Taking*, p. 44.

23 Glenda Gloria, "War Without End: The Military is Treading on Dangerous Ground with its Counterinsurgency Experiments," *Newsbreak*, December 2007-February 2008, p. 38.

is perhaps best reflected by the military's successes against the ASG in Mindanao. The group is currently estimated to have around 380 fighters, most of whom are scattered in small pockets across Jolo Island in Sulu Province. This is a substantial reduction from the 1,270 cadres that were thought to have made up the organization at the height of its strength in 2000.<sup>24</sup> Several high-value ASG targets—defined as leading/mid-level commanders overseeing at least six cadres—have also been neutralized. Apart from the aforementioned Khadaffi Janjalini and Abu Solaiman, these have included Jundam Jamalul (also known as “Black Killer”), Borhan Mundus, Abdullah Abas, Jamal Taib, Abdul Yebnon, Binang Sali (also known as Sali), Muskin Ahaddin (also known as Hussein), Ibrahim (also known as Muksin), Gufran (also known as Abu Samur) and Abdul Sakandal (also known as “Boy Negro”).<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, there are signs that defense reform within the AFP is being institutionalized and taking on the type of self-sustaining character that is necessary for achieving long-term, systematic change. The government is now committing approximately five billion pesos (\$125 million) over five years of its own funds to further the process of internal security capability building and in 2005 drafted its first formal plan for guiding future defense asset prioritization and procurement.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, significant steps are being taken to root out corruption and inculcate an ethos of military professionalism

through a so-called “honorable warrior” initiative. This innovative program, which is run by the AFP's J7, singles out members of the armed forces deployed to Mindanao who have served with distinction and who have been active in promoting action against human rights abuses, graft, embezzlement and other questionable practices. The scheme has been particularly instrumental in eliciting the support of the public in general counter-terrorism efforts by visibly demonstrating that the security forces are respectful of human rights and fully committed to safeguarding the interests of the local population.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, on a law enforcement front, the police now have at their disposal a nascent but growing computer-based system for storing and cross-referencing forensic information, which should help to substantially boost the evidentiary basis and credibility of Philippine National Police (PNP) cases brought to trial.<sup>28</sup> A new anti-terrorism law—officially known as the Human Security Act (HAS)—was also passed in January 2007, which has been hailed as an important development in further equipping the state with the necessary legal tools to address violent political extremism. The legislation not only provides a statutory basis for defining and proscribing terrorist acts, but it also underwrites a range of extrajudicial surveillance and arrest powers for the police.<sup>29</sup> It is true that the PNP has been somewhat reluctant to fully embrace the HSA due to clauses that sanction extremely severe penalties in the event that the act is judged to have been employed inappropriately.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, active steps are being undertaken to modify the prohibitive provisions of the HSA, and sources in Manila are confident that a revised and more “balanced” version will be ready for signature before the end of 2008.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that one of the main factors accounting for the success of U.S. security aid in the Philippines is the regularity by which military reform and modernization is brought up in bilateral official relations—a frequency that clearly reflects the perceived importance the country has to U.S. counter-terrorism efforts in Southeast Asia. Equally as significant, however, is the fact that Manila has heard the message, accepted that it needs help and has taken ownership of the problem by endorsing the provision of comprehensive support and assistance packages.<sup>32</sup> In a region that continues to jealously guard the dual principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs,<sup>33</sup> this represents a major and willing departure from the norm, the salience of which should not be underestimated.

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24 AFP J2 briefing given to author, Manila, January 2008. See also Barbara Dacanay, “Joint Effort Clips Insurgents' Wings,” *Gulf News*, January 8, 2008.

25 Personal interviews, AFP officials and security analysts, Manila, January 2008. The high rate of captures arguably also reflects the success of the U.S.-funded Rewards for Justice Program, which provides financial incentives to encourage the public to voluntarily work with the authorities and supply them with information that is relevant to the movement and whereabouts of extremist high-value targets.

26 Personal interviews, USSD officials, Washington, D.C., December 2007 and AFP officials, Manila, January 2008. It should be noted that Manila conceives defense reform as necessary to address the whole gambit of internal security threats that it currently confronts and not merely the challenge emanating from the ASG. Indeed, the government presently counts the New People's Army communist insurgency, not Islamist terrorism, as its number one priority.

27 Personal interview, U.S. Special Forces liaison officer, Manila, November 2005.

28 Conviction rates are notoriously low in the Philippines, largely because the police have tended to base their cases on unsubstantiated (and, hence, legally unreliable) eyewitness accounts and confessions rather than solid physical evidence.

29 The HSA provides the government with an explicit authority to imprison all persons who commit an act punishable under the provisions of the Revised Penal Code if the purpose is explicitly designed to sow and create “a condition of widespread and extraordinary fear and panic among the populace in order to coerce the government to give into an unlawful demand.” Congress of the Philippines, *An Act to Secure the State and Protect Our People from Terrorism* (Republic Act No. 9372), Thirteenth Congress, Third Special Session, February 19, 2007.

30 Personal interviews, PNP and Western officials,

Manila, January 2008. Penalties for unauthorized, malicious or inappropriate use of the HSA include both imprisonment (to a maximum of 12 years) and financial compensation. In the latter case, any individual who is charged with a terrorist offense and then acquitted has the right to demand 500,000 pesos (\$125) for each day that he/she was held—the cost of which is personally borne by the arresting officer.

31 Personal interview, National Security Council officials, Manila, January 2008.

32 Personal interviews, DoD and USSD officials, Washington, D.C., December 2007.

33 Sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs are the two main procedural norms that govern policy and decision-making in both ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum.