

41/2012

September 26th, 2012

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PHILIPPINES**

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ISLAMIC TERRORISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

Abstract:

In this document, on the basis of the differentiation between Islam, Islamism and Islamic terrorism, we make a review of the armed groups operating in the Southern Philippines and we also analyze their relationship with Al Qaeda and outline the future prospects of this conflict.

Keywords:

Philippines, terrorism, MNLF , MILF, Abu Sayyaf Group, Jemaah Islamiya, Rajah Solaiman Movement, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement

INTRODUCTION

The peace processes opened in the Philippines between the Government and several armed groups help us envision a near future of peace for these islands. This document will discuss the genesis and evolution of those groups composed of Muslims, who maintain open fronts especially, though not exclusively, in the South of the country.

The Muslim rebellion is confined to socio-economically marginalized areas in the South, where two thirds of the Muslims in the country live, and it aims at independence or, at least, at a broad autonomy of the region. The inhabitants of the Philippines who profess the Muslim religion constitute 5% of the total population, who is predominantly Catholic. This armed rebellion has been led mainly by two groups, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and a breakaway faction of it, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Currently, both groups have open peace processes with the Government.

In the 1990s, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and more recently the BIFM are born, fed by dissenting members of the MILF. Abu Sayyaf has relations with other terrorist groups such as the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), group related to Al-Qaeda and based in Indonesia, and with the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM), composed of Filipino Christians converted to Islam.

In order to deal with the study of the origin and characteristics of these violent Muslim groups in the Philippines, we have to differentiate between several terms which are frequently associated: Islam, which is a religion; from Islamism, which is an ideology for political purposes; and from Islamic fundamentalism, which is a religious and political movement based on the literal interpretation of the texts that are considered fundamental by Islam. This Islamic fundamentalism adds, in some cases, a jihadist violent component to the defense of this literality. The clearest example of Islamic fundamentalists is the terrorist group Al Qaeda, in which are inspired some of the groups that we are going to analyze in this document.

ISLAM IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Islamic religion arrives in the Philippines in the 14th and 15th centuries through Arab, Malay and Persian merchants. Its expansion is peaceful, since it manages to integrate with local wisdom and culture. This integration has permeated the Philippine Islamic religion with an outstanding mark of tolerance. Christianity, the current majority religion in this country, doesn't make its way until a century later, with the arrival of the Spaniards. There already existed strong Muslim communities in the southern islands, specifically in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago.

Had Islam been perfectly settled in all the Philippine Islands, Christianity would not have experienced such a simple expansion, since apostasy in the Islamic religion is punishable by death. This is why Christianity is quickly settled in the Northern Philippines, but not in the Southern regions, where Muslim communities were stronger.

When, three centuries later, the United States gets control of the Philippines, it seeks to enhance, with little success, policies that will close the gap between these practitioner populations of different religions. Thus, for centuries, the life, culture and development of the resident population in the Southern Philippines runs completely aside from that of the North. The model for Muslims to follow will be the one of Southeast Asia and Middle East Islamic countries, and that of the Christians will be the West model. There is no integration or assimilation. It is at this point where we can place the origin of the current Muslim ethno-nationalist claims.



Figure 1: Physical map of the Philippines. Source: Wikipedia/Seav

In Southeast Asia, there are more than 200 million Muslims distributed in Muslim-majority countries, it is the case of Indonesia, as well as in countries where they represent a minority, as it is the case of the Philippines. As a general rule (the exceptions will be analyzed later on), Muslims in this part of the globe are considered as the most tolerant and moderate in the world. The majority of them is Sunni and belongs to the Safi school of thought, clearly predominant in the Philippines.

This Law school was founded in the 8th century by Abu Abdallah as-Shafi'i with the intention of defining a method that would decrease the differences in interpretations. It rejects

personal opinion and it is based on four essential sources of jurisprudence: the Koran, the Sunna, the consensus (ijma) and the analogy (qiyas). It was the official school during the Abbasid Caliphate and it was extended by Arab sailors and traders. Currently, it is also predominant in Egypt, East Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand.

ISLAMISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

Islamism is an ideology based on Islam for political purposes. It is not a religion. Thus, not every follower of the Islamic religion (Muslims) shares the Islamist ideology, and those who share it do not practice it in the same way.

In the Philippines we find little development of an Islam channeled into solid political parties. In this country, the political landscape has little development and it is dominated by dozens of changing groups, according to Governments and alliances. If we analyze the most relevant parties in 2010, we will find conservative and nationalist, Christian-oriented conservative, Christian-Muslim or liberal parties, but we will not find any strictly Islamic party in the style of the Muslim Brotherhood or with a more moderate character similar to the Turkish model. This absence of a greater political role is very easy to understand if we consider that the Muslim population represents only 5% of the total population of the Philippines. With such a small percentage, they could hardly have a party which obtains enough number of votes to be taken into account.

Together with this small Islamic political representation, we find a significant development of Muslim movements of the civil society which struggle to isolate Muslims from the influence of fundamentalist Islamic groups with an essential component of violence.

ISLAMIC TERRORISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

Among the violent Islamic groups, we must distinguish between the groups that are not currently in the most important international lists of terrorist movements, and those who are. The first groups have open peace processes with the Government of the Philippines and the seconds do not have, nor want to have, channels for dialogue with the State.

In this way, within the Muslim rebellion we can distinguish several different problems due to its scope and its internationalization and, therefore, due to the opportunity to catch a glimpse of a solution in the near future. First, we find the local armed struggle with secessionist aspirations, led by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), more or less influenced by Islamist radicalism, to which we can see an end in the medium term in the form of a region with broad autonomy managed by members of the Muslim community. In another sphere, much farther from a close solution, we find terrorist groups created in the 1990s, such as Abu Sayyaf, Jemaah Islamiya or the Rajah Solaiman Movement, with ambitions that mix a local political problem of historical significance with the cooperation with the global Jihad, defended by Al Qaeda. Therefore, in these groups, new religious factors have been added over the historical ethno-cultural ones.

The Muslim separatist project, initially led by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), is a reaction to the perception of marginalized populations by the successive Spanish, American and Philippine central authorities, to the 'filipinization' policies in the South that led to the loss of their ancestors' lands, and to socio-economic discrimination that exists in the South, specially in the island of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. Although the Philippines is one of the poorest nations in Asia, in particular the eleventh poorest, the most relevant data is that of the countries with the most unequal distribution of wealth.

Figure 2: Map of the Philippines showing its distribution of wealth. 2009. The red tones characterize the poorest municipalities. Source: Philippine National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB)

The fact that the first groups, the MNLF and the MILF, have maintained their local character away from other more international ambitions is the feature that makes their demands for independence or autonomy a matter for negotiation. The Jemaah Islamiyah, for example, has a more ambitious goal: the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Southern Philippines, Singapore and Brunei. In addition, its struggle is diluted in the

great network of the international jihadist terrorism that threatens the whole world, close or far enemy, and binds this group against it.

The definition of terrorism

There is no internationally accepted definition of what is considered terrorism or terrorist group. The reason for this lack of consensus is due to particular national interests. Thus, many countries have an interest in excluding some groups that are considered national liberation movements from any definition to be presented for comments. On the other hand, other countries reject certain definitions of terrorism that would allow to consider their own actions as terrorist actions under certain circumstances.

The need to fight terrorism from international cooperation is manifested from the moment when terrorist activity takes on an international dimension. This happened at the end of the 19th century with several attacks of anarchist inspiration in various countries. Many decades later, with a considerably greater impact of terrorism, they have not overcome the differences of opinions which so far have made impossible a global convention on terrorism in the heart of the United Nations which would precisely define this crime and uniquely identify those organizations which should be pursued.

Lists of individuals and terrorist organizations

Just as there is no single definition of what is considered as terrorism, there is no single list, of widespread acceptance, of organizations which are considered as terrorist.

It must be taken into account that the inclusion or not of a group in the definition of terrorist, and therefore in a list of terrorist groups to isolate and beat, has many political constraints since it may put at risk, in some cases, the success of peace negotiations, or create divisions between the country that publishes that list and another one that supports the group concerned. It is an issue that sometimes causes controversy because of the arbitrary development and maintenance criteria of the list.

If we look at the lists of individuals and terrorist organizations that the United Nations, the European Union and the United States compile, firstly we observe that they are not very updated. In none of them appears, for example, the BIFM, of recent creation. We also find some inconsistencies that clash by their apparent arbitrariness: we find no reference to the MNLF or to its MILF division in any list, but we do find references of other groups, also divided from the first, like Abu Sayaff and Jeemah Islamiyah, which do appear in the lists of the United States and in that of the United Nations, which is assumed by the EU in its Common Position 2002/402/CFSP. The Rajah Solaiman Movement joined the list compiled by the US Treasury Department; however, it is not included in the list of terrorist groups compiled by the State Department.

As we can see in the light of this brief overview of the lists, there is still a long way to go at a theoretical and organizational level in the fight against terrorism. Since terrorism is an international threat, it is becoming pressing to give a clear definition about what is officially considered as terrorist and to include it in a single list, which is an essential background to any concerted action.

Context

The Philippine Islands were turned into a Spanish colony in the 16th century and maintain this condition until, after the Spanish War with the United States, they are ceded to the US Government in 1898. The causes of the current conflict in the Southern Philippines can be traced up to here: the lack of integration of a Muslim minority resident of the South of the country and its growing separation from a majority converted to Christianity with the arrival of the Spaniards.

We can find the tensest period in this conflict between the Catholic Central State and the Muslim minority in the South of the islands at the beginning of the seventies, where clashes between Muslim and Christian groups resulted in more than 1,500 deaths between 1970 and 1971, the majority of which were Muslims. In 1971, 70 Muslims were massacred in a mosque in North Cotabato. Three years earlier, in 1968, the so-called Jabidah massacre, in which approximately 28 young Muslims were killed during a confrontation with the police,

awoke the South. In 1972, the Government of Ferdinand Marcos declares martial law throughout the country and demands all the inhabitants of the Philippines to surrender their weapons. This imposition of martial law is added to centralism, which accumulated power in the hands of the Christians, and to the pressure of Christian immigration from the North of the country on the inhabitants of the South, which pushed the Moro discontent to a war between the insurgents, clustered in the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), under the leadership of its founder Nur Misuari, and the armed forces of the Philippines. This civil war lasted four years, carried away 120,000 lives and caused a million refugees to flee within the Philippines itself and tens of thousands more to flee to neighboring Malaysia. The Tripoli Agreements ended this war, which none of the parties was willing to repeat, but did not close the conflict.

A few years later, a group that separates from the MNLF on the grounds that it was moving away from the Orthodox interpretation of Islam will see the light. So, in 1978, Hashim Salamat, Misuari's right-hand man, forms the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The main difference between the two groups can be fully explained by its acronyms (MNLF and MILF): the new group replaces the N of National with the I of Islamic, thus defining the more secular character of the MNLF and the more Islamist character of the MILF, but sharing the goal of achieving an independent Moro State, which for the MILF must be an Islamic State.

In another area, we find terrorist groups created in the 1990s, such as the Rajah Solaiman Movement, the Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu Sayyaf, connected with Al Qaeda and thus with ambitions that share an approach to global Jihad, playing a key role in a certain aspect of the conflict, in steep decline, but more difficult to solve.

The fact that the first groups, the MNLF and the MILF, have maintained their local character by moving away, almost always, from other more international ambitions is the feature that makes their demands for independence or autonomy a matter for negotiation. The Jemaah Islamiyah, for example, has a more ambitious and difficult to reach objective, such as the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Southern Philippines, Singapore and Brunei. In addition, its struggle is diluted in the great network of the

international jihadist terrorism that threatens the whole world, close or far enemy, and binds this group against it.

In 1996, the peace agreements with the MNLF were signed, still in the revision and updating stage. They established the parameters of autonomy for the southern provinces that, since 1990, formed the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) did not accept this agreement as it seemed insufficient to it. However, in recent years' negotiations between Manila and the MILF, the aim to establish an independent Islamic State is resigned, and the creation of an autonomous region called the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity is agreed. This region is greater than the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which was finally declared unconstitutional.

Since 2009, there have been different rounds of talks that focus on the characteristics of the autonomy and where the problem lies in how the agreements with the MILF will connect with those already achieved with the MNLF, in other words, who will hold the reins in the autonomous region arising from both.

These talks are continuing even with all the impediments and attempts to stop them, like the occasional bomb attacks attributed to Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Sayyaf or the small and recently divided group of the MILF itself (as happened with the MILF when the MNLF renounced to independence) called Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement which attempt to endanger the peace process.

Terrorist organizations

Moro National Liberation Front

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led the rebellion against the central Government in Manila that began in 1973, after the imposition of martial law by President Ferdinand Marcos. Like the MILF, it is not included in the most important lists of terrorist organizations.

Nur Misuari led the early years of the MNLF. He went into exile in Saudi Arabia and after the end of Ferdinand Marcos' administration due to the revolution of 1986, he returned to the

Philippines, adopting a leading role in the peace negotiations. He justified armed struggle based on the breach of the Tripoli agreements that put an end to the civil war of the 1970s and which accepted the establishment of an autonomous region with Misuari as Governor. Misuari was the third Governor of the ARMM, from 1996 to 2002. He was deposed by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and in 2007 he was arrested, accused of terrorism. In 2008 he was replaced in the leadership of the MNLF by the politician Muslimin Sema, also known as the Peacemaker.

The armed Muslim separatist struggle of the MNLF and the MILF against the Manila Government in the Southern Philippines has been built on the belief in the existence of a village with a different culture from that of the rest of the archipelago, whose original territory was precisely Mindanao and the surrounding islands. We can say that this conflict has a political nature, since the lands of the ancestors are the cornerstone of the negotiations.

A group with more radical positions splits from the MNLF: at first the MILF, then, from this one, the Abu Sayyaf and, more recently, the BIFM. The tonic is the same one: when a group is negotiating peace, the most radical members who consider that any basic principle, such as religion or independence, is being abandoned, split from this group.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was created as a split from the MNLF in 1984 under the leadership of Misauri's right-hand man until 1979, Hashim Salamat, who died of heart failure in July 2011 after a life of exile and hiding. The reason for the split is the belief that the MNLF was taking a secular turn aside from the main goal: the struggle of Islamist character aimed at achieving the establishment of an Islamic Moro State.

Its ideology is encapsulated to the thought of its founder, Salamat, who defends Jihad as necessary, a "Jihad of soul", "Jihad of the pen", "of language"; with a Manichean vision of the world, either with Allah or against him. However, its position on the search of the Islamic State is inconsistent according to the audience it would have, and this is due to, inter alia, the demography of Mindanao, which obliges the group to have a policy for the inclusion of

non-Muslims. Thus, although its ideology has a clearly religious orientation, this organization has demonstrated its will to negotiate. It has local and political goals and therefore the lands of their ancestors, as it is the case with the MNLF, are also currently the critical point in the negotiations with the Philippine Government.

Despite the call from the Organization of the Islamic Conference to the unity of the Filipino Muslims, the division was inevitable. For Salamat, communism and Islamic struggle were not compatible, since the second one is an ideology which collided head-on with the Marxist and secular approaches of Misuari. Although both of them shared their longing for freedom from the central Government in Manila, and in particular against the Marcos dictatorship, the MILF's goal, which was also much better organized, was the installation of the Islamic law or sharia and the strengthening of the Organization at the military and economic levels, starting with the religious aspects.

It has the rural support, and although it puts an emphasis on the Islamic character of its struggle, its goals do not differ much from its group of origin, the MNLF. Although in some cases the objectives are mixed with radical religious ambitions, they have been and keep being local, as it is the case with the MNLF, and therefore they remain substantially safe from the ideology of global Jihad and, as a result, from Al Qaeda (although it seems that there was contact between Salamat and Bin Laden in the late 1990s). In this conflict, the leitmotiv of the fight is the nearest enemy and not the global Jihad, regardless of whether there are notable influences or radicals that have gone through the omnipresent Afghanistan.

Abu Sayyaf

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is born in the 1990s, composed of dissatisfied members of the MILF. Abu Sayyaf has relations with other terrorist groups like the Jemaah Islamiya and the Rajah Solaiman Movement.

Abu Sayyaf is responsible for the harshest bomb attacks, kidnappings and beheadings that have occurred in the Philippines, behaving for extended periods of time as mere criminals who collected rewards rather than as terrorists. The creation of Abu Sayyaf represents the

radicalization of the Filipino Muslim separatist movement.

The Abu Sayyaf Group is born under the leadership of Abdujarak Janjalani, veteran of the Afghanistan war, with clear links from its beginnings with Al Qaeda. Under its mandate, the group had the aim of establishing an independent Islamic State, the same objective that the MNLF and the MILF already had, but imbued with a different ideology and operational method. In this future State advocated by Abu Sayyaf, any non-Muslim should be eliminated, so the specific goal of its attacks will be the Christian inhabitants of the Southern Philippines. The death of Abdurajak Janjalani in a clash with the police in 1998 leaves the group disoriented and divided: his brother Khadafi Janjalani takes command of the group in Basilan until his death in 2006 and Galib Andang takes command in Jolo until his arrest.

This division and disorientation appeared when the fundamentalist and international character with which Abdurajak Janjalani brought together the group was missing. Since that date, the group focuses more on getting money by way of abduction, so the Islamist target fades away into the background. To this must be added the arrest of Hamad Ustadz Idris, one of the founding members of the group, on 29 July 2012.

Some documents have been found in the hands of Abu Sayyaf. These documents corroborate its ideological affinity with that of other Islamic fundamentalist groups that use violence in their "Holy" struggle against modernity, secularism and, in general, everything that can be associated with the West. These documents are related to the work of the Palestinian extremist Azzam, who is in turn heavily influenced by the works of the Egyptian poet Qutb. Abu Sayyaf's access to these works can be explained by the relationship of this group with Al Qaeda thanks to the stay of Janjalani in Afghanistan in the 1980s and his contact with Bin Laden, heavily influenced too by the work of Qutb.

The fact that Abu Sayyaf still keeps Qutb and Azzam works as references without appearing to have contact with the latest ideologues can be considered a clear demonstration of the situation of international marginalization that this terrorist group is facing.

Abu Sayyaf was fed since its inception, and continues to do so today, by disaffected members of other Filipino armed groups. However, the group, which was founded with 10

members, all of them ex-combatants from the war in Afghanistan, has never been very large since it only accepted members of a particular ethno-linguistic group (mainly Tausug, a dominant group of the Sulu archipelago). But Abu Sayyaf is weakening, so now it recruits members from other places, and even children.

In recent years Abu Sayyaf, just as Jemaah Islamiyah, has approached the Rajah Solaiman Movement to recruit members for its own ranks. These are ancient Christians from Manila and northern Luzon who are converted to Islam. The fact that these terrorist groups, Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah, are recruiting followers in the north of the country greatly opens their radius of influence.

The Rajah Solaiman Movement

This radical Islamic group was founded in 2001 by Ahmed Santos, after converting to Islam, in the North of the island of Luzon with a group of 20 members. The Rajah Solaiman Movement defends the "reconversion" of the Philippines to Islam, thus returning to the situation prior to the conquest by the Spaniards and, therefore, to the introduction of Christianity. It takes the name of a Muslim monarch of the 16th century, the last one before the arrival of the Spaniards.

Santos was arrested in October 2005 and Sheikh Omar Lavilla succeeded him as the leader. Sheikh Omar Lavilla's birth name is Reuben Lavilla. He was arrested in 2008. Lavilla called his members "urban Mujahidieens". Khalil Pareja, whose birth name was Dino Amor Rosalejos Pareja, assumed the leadership of the group until his arrest in August 2009. The identity of its current leader is unknown, as well as if there is someone who holds such leadership.

The number of members that this Movement has is estimated to be around 30. According to the Philippine authorities, these members, Christians converted to Salafism, have been trained by Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah. Although the Rajah Solaiman Movement is the smallest terrorist group that operates in the Philippines, it poses a serious threat to safety since some of its members have been trained as suicide victims: they are Christians without an accent of the South nor Muslim ethnic characteristics and, therefore, it is easy for them to infiltrate and operate in regions which are out of the Muslim reach.

This group, along with Abu Sayyaf, is responsible for the attack on a ferry in 2004 that killed 116 people, and they are also responsible for the attacks of the 2005 Valentine's Day that ended up with the life of another 16 people.

Jemaah Islamiya

Jemaah Islamiya (JI) is a terrorist network established in several countries of Southeast Asia. It was formed in the early 1990s by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir with the aim of establishing an Islamic State that covers the South of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei and the Southern Philippines. Although it is an independent organization, it is considered to be the arm of Al Qaeda in Southeast Asia. It is very influenced by the ideology and methodology of Osama bin Laden.

Its members, trained in camps in Afghanistan, Indonesia itself and the Southern Philippines, began to carry out terrorist actions in 1999. They are responsible for attacks against Western interests in Indonesia and the Philippines between 2000 and 2005 and, more recently, for attacks by the so-called "lone wolves". The group is now weakened because of the arrest or death of its members.

In February 2012 began the trial of Umar Patek in Indonesia. He is one of the most important leaders of this group due to his involvement in the Bali bombing. After these attacks, he fled to the Philippines and Pakistan. A decade later he was arrested in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad, where a few months later the US commands killed Bin Laden. The detention of Umar Patek in Pakistan, in the same city in which Bin Laden was arrested, reveals the mobility that this leader has demonstrated, as well as his links with Al Qaeda and the security or cooperation gaps of Pakistan, where, besides, some of the terrorists who have been responsible for these attacks have passed.

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement

As a result of the recent peace negotiations between the Philippine President Benigno Noynoy Aquino III and the representatives of the MILF, there has been a struggle between the fighters of this group and a breakaway faction. This faction calls itself Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM), and led by Ameril Umbra Kato, it stands against

negotiations with the Government. On 11 August 2011 at least 14 people died in clashes between the MILF and the BIFM and thousands of peasants have moved to avoid the fights. After the confrontations, Kato was wounded and weak, so his right hand, Mohammad Ali Tambako, who had studied Islamic theology in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, took the leadership of the group.

AL QAEDA IN THE PHILIPPINES

The important Muslim population rate, socio-economically marginalized, in the Southern Philippines and its maritime borders, which are difficult to control, as well as in Indonesia, have proved to be sanctuaries for terrorist cells. It has been like this for decades, and that remains the case today, as the annual report on terrorism released by the US State Department in 2011 denounces.

After the independence of United States, the population of the Southern Philippines experienced a series of policies carried out by the successive Governments of Manila which, far from improving their living conditions, were based on tort and marginalization. Although we have observed that the Muslims of Southeast Asia are in general among the most moderate and tolerant of the Muslim world, this impoverished population has approached in some cases the Jihadist Islamic fundamentalism, becoming the perfect breeding ground for the development of criminal and terrorist activities.

The various grievances to Muslim populations from different countries reinforce the "solidarity" link and the internationalist character of Islam (in other words, the so-called Ummah, or community of believers). The Iranian Revolution, the war in Afghanistan against the Soviets, the Palestinian cause and the Kashmir conflict, among others, provoke a strong reaction of commitment and brotherhood among Muslims from which Al Qaeda has benefited. Their relations with the Philippine armed groups are, in many cases, of mutual assistance, financing in exchange for shelter and training, as well as inspiration of an anti-Western sentiment that invites individuals and groups to undertake terrorist acts. However, it seems that no group has had organic or functional dependence on Al Qaeda and that, despite sharing in some cases common objectives regarding the holy war against the West, the aspirations of these groups operating in the Philippines are local or regional.

MNLF and MILF

These groups have benefited, as might be expected in a transnational ideology, from ideological and material support from outside, especially from Libya and Malaysia. They also seem to have links with Al Qaeda. The contact between Salamat and Bin Laden might have been established in the late 1990s when the objective of international Jihad of Al Qaeda was not clearly defined yet, but subsequently there is evidence of a deliberate willingness of the MILF's leaders to move away from Al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf, especially after the 11-S.

Abu Sayyaf

Abu Sayyaf was founded with the help of other radical groups in Asia and the Middle East, including Al Qaeda.

Abu Sayyaf combines the search for a local objective for the liberation of the lands which they consider to be theirs, with the jihadist Islam clearly represented by Al Qaeda and among whose characteristics we can mention the use of violence, the defense of the Koran and the Sunna as the only sources of knowledge of the Islam, a profound anti-Westernism, especially referred to the US, the defense of martyrdom, the development of Jihad against the ungodly Governments, the vision of the members of other religions as legitimate objectives, etc. Abu Sayyaf is currently working with Jemaah Islamiyah, also associated with Al Qaeda, but it is generally quite disconnected from groups and international flows and it is focused on continuing with its fund-collection policy by means of kidnapping.

Rajah Solaiman Movement

During its inception, it seems that the Rajah Solaiman Movement had contact with Al Qaeda. After his arrest, Santos confessed that the Movement helped in training and sheltered those responsible for the attacks of the 11-S. According to the Philippine authorities and the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council concerning Al Qaeda and its partners, the members of the Rajah Solaiman Movement have in turn been trained and helped financially by Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah, regarding Al Qaeda.

Jemaah Islamiya

The 1980s war in Afghanistan resulted in the development of a relationship between members of the Jemaah Islamiyah and what will become the central core of Al Qaeda, including Bin Laden. It was when Mukhlas and Imam Samudra (subsequently executed in 2008) were arrested after the 2002 Bali bombing that this connection between Jemaah Islamiyah and Al Qaeda is verified. In these statements they also claim to believe that such attacks in Bali, the deadliest in the history of Indonesia with 202 people killed, were also carried out by Al Qaeda.

The two organizations have shared troops and training camps in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Mindanao and, as we have already seen, they have also accomplished operations together.

One of its leaders, Hambali, caught in 2003 and currently imprisoned in Guantanamo, is believed to be the member of the Jemaah Islamiyah who has had a closer relationship with Al Qaeda. However, although there has been much discussion regarding the dependence of the Jemaah Islamiyah on Al Qaeda, it seems clear that the group has kept both the organization and operation independent.

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement

It is still too early to find a connection between Al Qaeda and the BIFM, but it would not be surprising that Al Qaeda, as on other occasions, tries to take advantage of a group of radicals willing to embrace its cause.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The armed conflict in the Southern Philippines has been open for more than 50 years, which makes it the longest and most persistent Southeast Asian separatist conflict, but also the one that envisages a closer solution.

Recent statements by the leader of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, Ibrahim Murad, threatening to resume the armed struggle due to the limited progress in the peace process which he described as "endless", suggest that the peace talks are hanging by a thread. However, the international implications, the Government of Benigno Aquino's will to negotiate and the ability to adapt shown by the MILF itself, help glimpse a near end to the secessionist conflict in the Southern Philippines.

Regarding the groups characterized as terrorists, we can say that, although they are still important threats to the security of the Philippines, they are in big decline and international isolation. The annual report on terrorism published by the US State Department on 31 July 2012 refers to a certain terrorist inactivity that is due to the strong counter-terrorism policy pursued by the Philippine Government with the support of the US Army. In general, the acts committed in 2011 were focused on those criminal activities aimed at generating income, such as kidnapping or extortion.

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