

Abu Sayyaf still holds Philippines to ransom

Key Points

- The Abu Sayyaf Group's capacity to operate has been substantially reduced by joint US/Philippine military actions, but the group is still able to launch sporadic operations.
- It appears that the ASG has once again turned to kidnappings as its main financial mainstay.
- ASG's collaboration with [Jemaah Islamiyah](#) is largely of convenience and of little tactical weight, but despite pledges by the armed forces the group is likely to survive in the near future.

The Abu Sayyaf Group's tactics have continually changed over the past decade, ranging from kidnappings to bombings. Zachary Abuza examines the history of the militant organisation and its ability to survive despite the Philippine government and security forces' counter-terrorism efforts.

On 15 January 2009, the [Abu Sayyaf Group](#) (ASG) seized three International Committee of the Red Cross volunteers - an Italian, Swiss and a Filipina - in the southern Philippine island of Jolo. Since then, the ASG has sought, and failed, to negotiate a withdrawal of Philippine troops from the vicinity in return for the release of the three captives. The militant group's commander, Albadar Parad, threatened on 1 April to behead one of the hostages if the Philippine army's withdrawal was not completed. However, the ASG did not carry out the threat, and instead released the female captive. The group is still negotiating the fate of the two remaining Europeans. This incident is the latest in the ASG's shift from a terrorist organisation to a kidnapping gang.

Abdurrajak Janjalani, a veteran of the Afghan Mujahideen, Abdurrajak Janjalani, founded the ASG in 1991, apparently with some [Al-Qaeda](#) funding through Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law, Muhammed Jamal Khalifah. According to the Philippine security forces, Khalifah moved from Quetta, [Pakistan](#), to the [Philippines](#) in 1991 and remained there until late 1994, funnelling aid to the various Moro secessionist organisations on the islands of Mindanao and Sulu.

From 1991 to 1995, the ASG, which was mainly comprised of ethnic Tausug defectors from the larger and more secular secessionist group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), began a spate of bombings, assassinations and kidnappings specifically against religious targets, including Christian churches and missionaries in Sulu province.

The group degenerated following the loss of [Al-Qaeda](#) support in 1995 - when Khalifah was prevented from returning to the [Philippines](#) after being implicated in Ramzi Yousef's Bojinka Plot to down 11 US passenger aircraft and Janjalani was killed in a shootout with police in 1998.

Operational shift

The ASG became synonymous with bold kidnapping attacks, such as the raids on the archipelagic diving resorts on the Malaysian island of Sipidan in April 2000 and the Philippine resort island of Palawan in May 2001 that together netted 50 foreigners. Between 2000 and 2001, the group kidnapped around 140 people, including schoolchildren, teachers, priests and Western tourists, and were responsible for the deaths of 16 people.

In 2003, the ASG all but ceased kidnapping and, in conjunction with members of the Indonesian-based terrorist organisation [Jemaah Islamiyah](#) (JI), resumed a campaign of terrorist attacks, including the bombing of a ferry in February 2004 that killed 116 people. Between 2004 and 2007, the few kidnappings the group did carry out resulted in executions of the hostages rather than demands for ransoms.

The tactical operational shift had as much to do with Janjalani's younger brother, Khadaffi Janjalani, who consolidated power in 2003 as the neutralisation of some of the group's senior figures who had led the kidnapping raids. Ghalib Andanag was captured and Abu Subaya was killed following the onset of US training and assistance in early 2002.

At the same time as JI members were being forced out of [Moro Islamic Liberation Front](#) (MILF) camps and territory on Mindanao due to increased international scrutiny and as part of the MILF's ongoing peace process with the government, Khadaffi Janjalani sought to return the organisation to its secessionist roots. By early 2005, several top JI leaders were operating in Jolo, protected by the ASG. An August 2006 Philippine army campaign, supported by a contingent of US Special Forces who provided training and intelligence, led to a sustained offensive against the ASG in mid-2007. In September 2006 and March 2007, Khadaffi Janjalani and another ASG leader, Abu Solaiman, were killed. The ASG again quickly degenerated.

The current ASG leadership is somewhat unclear. There are unconfirmed reports from security forces that both Isnilon Toton Hapilon, the group's 42-year-old hardline commander on Basilan, and Radullan Sahiron, a 72-year-old former MNLF commander based in Jolo, were killed in late 2008. Albadar Parad and Umbra Abu Jundail (also known as Gafur Jumdail or Dr Abu) remain the best known figures in the group's hierarchy. Philippine authorities seeking the release of the three Red Cross hostages contended that Jundail appeared to have the final say in negotiations.

However, there are many sub-commanders, including Gumbahali Jumdail, Ustadz Hatta Haipe, Tahil Sahli, Abu Sofian and Suhod Tanadjalan, and it would be mistaken to suggest that the ASG is a cohesive organisation with clear command and control.

Bali bombers

The ASG operates in small units across a long archipelago comprised of more than 400 islands and atolls, in three separate provinces, from the Zamboanga peninsula to the Indonesian and Malaysian island of Borneo. The land mass of this archipelago is roughly 5,400 km², but the maritime zone is several times that size. The islands are desperately poor, with only the most rudimentary communications and transportation networks. The topography includes dense jungle and mangroves. The ASG is able to take advantage of the Philippine army's lack of mobility, limited naval resources to patrol the archipelago and helicopters to penetrate the interior. The ASG operates much more along clan ties than on a formal hierarchical decision-making body.

The ASG membership is estimated to be between 300 and 400 at any given time. However, the group is often supported and bolstered by disaffected MNLF combatants, whose leaders negotiated a peace pact with the government in 1996, but which has come under strain in recent years. Grinding poverty and a historical tradition of piracy and rebellion to Manila's rule have supported ASG recruitment. While most ASG operatives are on Jolo Island, they have forces in Basilan and Tawi Tawi.

Since early 2005, US forces have asserted that there are a handful of JI operatives with the ASG, including two of the most wanted members, Umar Patek and Dulmatin - two-senior bomb-makers who have been implicated in the October 2002 Bali bombings that killed 202 people. The JI members were unhappy with the MILF's peace overtures toward the government as it put pressure on them to leave [MILF](#) territory. JI members also sought links with the ASG due to the group's presence across the Sulu archipelago, the conduit in and out of [Indonesia](#).

Yet the presence of Umar Patek and Dulmatin (whose real name is Joko Pitoyo) seems to have given the ASG little tactical offensive advantage. Bombings in Zamboanga occur only several times a year, such as the 29 May 2008 attack near an air force base that killed three people and wounded 18, and the 24 November 2008 roadside improvised explosive device (IED) in Jolo that wounded four army personnel. While small bombings across Mindanao are commonplace, JI and the ASG have not perpetrated a major attack in Manila since January 2007. Meanwhile, in February 2008, Philippine authorities arrested an Indonesian JI operative, along with two suspected members of the ASG near Davao City.

Clearly the relationship between JI and the ASG is a marriage of convenience and is reflective of the fact that the [MILF](#) is unwilling to allow sanctuary and training for JI members as it did from the latter half of the 1990s to 2004. The ASG is dispersed and is therefore unable to give JI a safe haven to regroup and train new operatives. While Philippine authorities have revealed the role of a Singaporean JI member, known as Muawiyah or Manobo, in talks to free the three Red Cross volunteers, kidnapping has never been JI's modus operandi and it probably reflects the ASG's shortage of resources.

Back to basics

Short on leadership and money, the ASG reverted to kidnapping. In the first six months of 2008, around 20 people were kidnapped, 17 of whom were released after ransoms were paid, or in the case of the abduction of two Philippine marines, ASG prisoners were released by the Philippine government. The kidnappings culminated with the high-profile abduction of a television journalist and her film crew in June 2008.

The rate of kidnappings increased in the second half of 2008. There were at least 33 kidnappings and several botched or aborted attempts that led to the deaths of their targets. Only 14 of the 33 were released after ransoms were paid and two more were freed by Philippine security forces. Around three others were abducted by the [MILF](#).

The rate of kidnappings is clearly on an upward trajectory. In the first three months of 2009, 18 people have already been abducted, including nine teachers, while several others died during the ASG attacks. Eight people were abducted on Basilan in April 2009.

Since mid-2008, the ASG has targeted aid workers. In June 2008, four employees of a rural electrical co-operative were abducted. In September, a convoy of aid vehicles was attacked in Basilan and two female aid workers were held for more than a month. In January 2009, the three Red Cross volunteers were taken on Jolo.

In almost all the kidnappings, ransoms were paid by family members. In a November 2008 report to the president, army and police officials reported that nearly PHP60 million (USD1.3 million) had been paid in ransom for 33 kidnap victims in the south of the country since January 2008. The ASG demanded around PHP50 million (USD1 million) in ransoms to secure the release of the three Red Cross workers; the president has refused outright.

As a tactical pressure, the ASG has beheaded individuals in the past. In 2001, it beheaded a US citizen; in 2006, a Filipino; and in April 2007, it beheaded six road workers employed by a USAID-funded project. In July 2007, it beheaded 10 Philippine marines in Basilan.

Marijuana plantations

In another sign of degeneration, there have been a series of raids on marijuana plantations in Jolo, thought to be either controlled by or taxed by the ASG. Three raids between May and November 2008, captured 5 hectares of plants worth PHP7 million (USD147,000). While the ASG has always been linked to marijuana cultivation in Jolo, Philippine authorities have not come across such large plantations on the island.

In 2008, the erosion of the ASG's capabilities continued. The group's top commander in Tawi Tawi, Wahab Opa, was killed, while two others, Isnilon Toton Hapilon and Radullan Sahiron, were purportedly killed, and nearly 15 mid-level commanders were captured. But the intensity and scope of Philippine security operations was down in 2008. In its annual report, released in January 2008, the Philippine army asserted that 100 ASG members had been "neutralised in 2007" and estimated that it had killed around 400 fighters in Jolo, 50 in Basilan and 50 in the Zamboanga peninsula.

In April 2008, General Alexander Yano, the army's chief of staff, asserted: "Intelligence reports disclosed that the [Abu Sayyaf Group](#) is experiencing leadership and funding problems that barred them from launching more major attacks. The ASG is losing its appeal and

influence. Even within their ranks, followers are no longer convinced of the groups' aspirations." He ordered the redeployment of all army units from Mindanao, leaving a smaller marine force to contend with the ASG. However, hobbled by institutional corruption, shortages in equipment, in particular fast coastal patrol craft and helicopters, Philippine army operations are limited.

Still, the ability of the ASG to survive and fill its depleted ranks is rooted in other failings of the Philippine military and government. A more cynical analysis suggests that the Philippine army has little incentive to finish off the ASG, for fear of jeopardising their massive US military assistance programme, which in 2006 to 2007 was USD156.1 million of training, arms sales and equipment transfers. In 2008, direct military assistance was USD30 million.

Finally, there are serious grievances among the [Philippines'](#) fractious Muslim population. A draft peace accord between the government and the [MILF](#) reached in November 2007 fell apart, resulting in a resumption of hostilities. Moreover, many MNLF combatants also remain unhappy with the government's continued failure to fully implement the 1996 autonomy agreement. In short, many ethnic Moros view Manila's intentions with serious scepticism and mistrust, which can help keep the ASG alive.