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Islamic State and Southern Philippines: Tenuous links with militants

By Joseph Franco

Synopsis

The Islamic State (IS) has aroused much media attention in the Philippines, with concerns raised over pledges of allegiance (bay'at) made by leaders of two groups of Muslim militants. However, links remain normative rather than operational, given the dissonance between IS ideology and Mindanao rebels.

Commentary

RECENT PHILIPPINE media reports has given the erroneous impression that the Islamic State (IS) had arrived in force. Mayor Rodrigo Duterte from Davao City “confirmed” the recruitment of youths in the city; while former Philippine President Fidel V Ramos estimated 100 Filipinos are undergoing training with IS in Syria.

Notwithstanding their subsequent retractions and admissions that information was derived from “raw intelligence” the reports had stirred widespread discussion in forums and the media. Such discussions often feature gross oversimplifications of conflict in the Southern Philippines. National media had caricatured the belligerents in Mindanao, without looking into the greater context that fuels the persistence of conflicts. Religion and ideology act as discourses for justification rather than acting as the motivation in their use of violence. The pre-eminence of material factors instead of ideational factors in explaining conflict in the Southern Philippines has long been recognised in studies by international organisations.

The Abu Sayyaf Group and the Western Mindanao kidnapping “industry”

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) continues to engage in extortion and engaging in kidnap-for ransom activities, considered by US special operations forces as a “desperate bid”. Pundits making the claim of increased Abu Sayyaf activity pointed out the growing number of cross-border raids into Eastern Sabah.

This conclusion fails to take into consideration the long history of conflict and porous national borders. Violence in the maritime region bracketed by Mindanao, Borneo, and Sulawesi existed long before Islamist militants. Anthropological research has referred to the existence of a contiguous “Sulu Zone”

characterised by slave-raiding and warfare, which in the contemporary period morphed into a hub for the illicit small arms trade. Cultural artefacts from the area such as Tausug poetry and folklore are replete with references to a “just war” and the preference for combat. Combined with high levels of illicit firearm possession in Mindanao, what results is a potent mix of socially-constructed inclination to violence and the material capability to engage in such activity.

It is telling that the Philippine military refers to ASG bands as “community armed groups”, wherein members nimbly switch allegiance based on convenience. It is not uncommon for armed individuals whether or not formally aligned with the ASG, to provide assistance to their relatives who are formally linked to the Islamist group. ASG bands involved in kidnappings operate akin to a cottage industry. The islands off the coast of Western Mindanao host a coterie of individuals who grab the victims. “Facilitators” shunt the kidnapped to villages that provide “room and board” (a euphemism for detention), and up to the local officials who act as “negotiators”. It is a similar modus operandi used by organised kidnapping groups operating elsewhere in the Philippines.

Clan warfare and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement

On the other hand, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM) in Central Mindanao is mostly motivated by clan conflicts. It is oft-ignored that the BIFM bay’at came with a major caveat—explicitly stating they do not need financial or training support from overseas.

Like the ASG, the BIFM had been a consistent fixture of alarmist reporting emanating from Manila. Aside from disparate reports of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members seeking refuge in Central Mindanao, there is little evidence to suggest that the BIFM ever had strong links with overseas groups, much less to IS. Geography and demography would also not work in favour of foreign militants considering taking refuge in BIFM areas. Central Mindanao, unlike the other trade-centric cities of Mindanao, does not house burgeoning communities of foreigners, previously exploited by JI operatives to hide in plain sight.

In fact, the BIFM’s attacks can be correlated to the rice harvest season as shown by prior research by the International Crisis Group. What emerges is a pattern of parochial disputes (i.e. land ownership), overlain with Islamist themes. A simple misunderstanding between a pro-government militia farmer and a BIFM member may be misrepresented as a Muslim-Christian clash by Manila-based media. Clashes between Muslim families follow the same template but are spared of an “us-versus-them”, inter-sectarian rhetoric.

It is clear that the BIFM and ASG pledges are nothing more than a superficial declaration of moral support. Community recruitment remains as the mechanism of involvement in armed groups in Mindanao and is no different from choosing a vocation. Neither group has a compelling reason to link up with IS, considering the trade-off in terms of greater pressure from state security forces. Kidnapping Malaysia-based traders and Filipino civil servants makes Manila more likely to treat ASG activities as plain banditry/criminality rather than as a major national security issue. The same goes for the BIFM whenever it gets involved in clan infighting and land disputes.

Disconnect between “materialist” Mindanao and ideological IS

Minimising actual operational/organisational links with IS aligns with the role played by communities in facilitating ASG and BIFM violence. The infusion of foreign influences would only disturb the delicate balance of demographic, social, and economic factors that make ASG “community armed groups” and BIFM “clans” sustainable. Such destabilisation in turn, can disrupt the conduct of their illicit livelihood—kidnapping and extortion, relied upon by these militants and their kin.

Nonetheless, these groups still pose a tangential threat to Southeast Asia (SEA). While ideological indifference diminishes the potential for organisational convergence with jihadi groups in the region, Mindanao retains the potential of acting as a logistics hub for purchasing arms and explosives. In fact, materiel and even explosive materials intended for the Singapore JI truck bomb plot in 2001 were mostly procured from Mindanao. Without appropriate intervention, Mindanao-based militant skill sets and weapons are vulnerable to exploitation or even outright purchase. Such resources do not even have to come from the ASG and the BIFM as the presence of an insecure and conflict-wracked environment is sufficient to foster a marketplace of illicit resources.

On a positive note, the ongoing efforts to establish an autonomous Bangsamoro sub-state in Mindanao will go a long way towards undermining the material motivations of the militants in the Southern Philippines. Effective self-governance by Filipino Muslims under the Bangsamoro can also be a strong counterpoint to the erroneous and simplistic discourse of IS—that Muslims can only thrive under a caliph.

Governments proximate to the “Sulu Zone” must not rely heavily on counter-ideological solutions to address material-based problems. Doing so would result in policy dissonance and would fail to capitalise on an unrecognised vulnerability of IS-related discourse in the SEA region—the Islamic State’s disconnect with Southern Philippines-based groups.

Joseph Franco is an Associate Research Fellow with the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg