Abu Sayyaf

Abu Sayyaf (ASG) is a militant Islam group operating mainly in the southern Philippine islands of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. Abdurajik Abubaker Janjalani founded Abu Sayyaf in 1991 on the premise of creating an independent Muslim province in the country. Abu Sayyaf is the smallest militant group in the Philippines but they are considered to be the most violent. They are well known for their kidnappings for ransom but they also engage in bombings, assassinations, and extortion. They have ties and are supported by larger militant groups al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiya. However as Abu Sayyaf has lost its original founders and an Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) has been formed as well as agreements to form Bangsamoro; I am arguing that Abu Sayyaf has steered away from their original ideology and that they are now more of a financial and violent group than a group with legitimate goals of independence.

The Philippines main religion is Christianity and it covers around 90% of their total population. As little as 5% of the country's population are Muslim (Sunni majority, Shiite minority)(1). The Muslim population mainly lives in parts of Mindanao, Palawan, and the Moro region in the southern Philippines. Since they are the overwhelming minority as far as religion goes they feel like they have been oppressed and treated as second-class citizens for many years. Muslims have proven to be nine times poorer than the average Christian and these statistics are
thought to be because of their religious differences (7). Rommel Banlaoi talks about
the origins of the militant Islam groups in *Maritime Terrorism in Southeast Asia* as
being “Muslim radical groups in the Philippines, is deeply rooted in indigenous
sociocultural, political, economic, and historical factors that can be traced to the
fourteenth century.” (3). These religious differences and feelings of oppression have
led to the formation of extremist militant groups in the southern Philippines fighting
their jihad for autonomy from the Christian Philippines.

The Jabidah massacre, which took place in 1968, is believed to have been the
tipping point for the beginnings of the various Moro (indigenous Muslim's in the
Philippines) liberation groups. The Armed Forces of the Philippines are believed to
have killed a large number of Moro Muslim recruits who had bailed on their training
to destabilize Sabah (Island in Philippines). After this incident Muslims were unable
to trust the Filipino government and began to organize groups to stand up and fight
back.

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was the first of the political
Islamic groups to establish themselves and they did so in 1969. The MNLF formed
under the presupposition of creating an autonomous Muslim state. They carried out
these goals through armed-conflict and the deaths of thousands of people on both
sides. The continual persistence and presence of the MNLF led to an agreement in
1976 labeled the MNLF-GRPH Tripoli. This agreement created a semi-autonomous
region in Mindanao. As the process was being settled a breakthrough occurred in
1989 when a law was signed with the president of the Philippines and the leader of
the MNLF that ended in the establishment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim
Mindanao (ARMM). This gave the Muslim majority areas of the Philippines self-rule and created a potential for peace between the Muslims and Christians.

However from the MNLF a new group formed in 1981 called the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). As it may seem that an autonomous region would unify Muslim’s across the Philippines, it further divided them, “this agreement further fragmented the MNLF, because some factions within the group preferred independence over autonomy” (3).

The new MILF proceeded with their goals of independence by carrying out acts of violence that led to thousands of people’s deaths. Through gun battle with the Philippine armed forces and bombs and assassinations they continued fighting for independence. The MILF had continual peace talks with the Philippine government for roughly fifteen years but they had never come to a complete cease-fire or reached a final agreement. Finally a deal was signed in 2012 to, “pave the way to enduring peace between the two parties by officially envisaging an autonomous region in Mindanao” (11). Both the MILF and the president of the Philippines are excited about this agreement and they are looking forward to a cease-fire between the two sides and the complete establishment of Bangsamoro in 2016, the new region that belongs to them.

Although the government of the Philippines has created peace agreements with the MNLF and the MILF they are yet to do so with Abu Sayyaf. Abu Sayyaf, which translates as, “Bearer of the Sword” or “Father of the Swordsman”, is a splinter group from the MNLF that was founded by Abdurajik Abubaker Janjalani in 1991.
Abdurajik Abubaker Janjalani was a Muslim scholar, particularly of Wahhabi theology from the Philippines. He developed a deep interest for the concept of “fighting and dying for the cause of Islam” (3). He believed that the Muslims of the Philippines had been casualties to injustice and he encouraged them to “fight and die for Islam” (3).

He fought as a Mujahedeen in the Soviet Afghan war in the 1980’s. At that time he made connections with Osama Bin-Laden and Ramsi Yousef along with other mujahedeen’s that connected him with al-Qaeda that later served as a financial and intellectual backbone for the ASG. Osama Bin Laden has been said to have visited Abu Sayyaf and help fund them, especially in their early stages of development. While Ramsi Yousef, who is considered to be one of the top-terrorists for al-Qaeda had very close ties with the ASG and spent significant time with them. He provided them with bomb making training.

Upon returning from the war Abdurajik splintered from the MNLF because he did not approve of the Tripoli peace agreements that they reached with the Philippine government and the solution of the ARMM. He gathered other radical members from the MNLF and MILF who wanted to continue to fight for an independent Islamic state.

Janjalani founded the ASG in the context of a global and regional Islamic resurgence (3). With goals of establishing an independent Islamic state in Mindanao and the Sulu islands. In the book Indonesia’s Transformation and the Stability of Southeast Asia, they describe Abu Sayyaf’s statement as, “espousing violent religious intolerance, advocating the deliberate targeting of all southern Filipino Catholics.”
Their integrated effort is aimed at asserting the global dominance of Islam through armed struggle"(13). Originally they targeted non-believers, specifically Christian churches, missionaries, and other non-Muslims, although they soon were targeting everyone.

The Filipino police killed Janjalani in 1998 in a gun battle. Janjalani being the founder, scholar, and leader of the group was a huge loss to the ASG and his death changed the direction of the ASG. After his death the group lost much of its ideological direction towards an independent state and they began kidnapping and murdering at a heavily increased rate.

ASG is the most recent and smallest militant Islam group to form in the Philippines and they are considered to be the most violent. The other militant Islam groups in the Philippines condemn the degree of their violence. The documentary *The Bearers of the Sword* comment on their extremism stating that, “Even Bin-Laden thinks they are extreme” (7).

They are well known for their kidnappings for ransom, extortion and bombings. On several occasions they have gone to beach resorts and kidnapped a variety of people ranging from vacationers to locals for what seems to solely be for financial reasons and to establish themselves as a serious group. They have travelled outside of the Philippines into Malaysia in order to carry out kidnappings with no specific target in mind, just whomever they could collect. However ASG has been criticized by many Muslim scholar’s that are adamant to say that kidnapping is “un-Islamic “ and that “that the activities of the Abu Sayyaf are not what jihad, or holy war, is calling for”(2)
Kidnapping through ransom has been the major source of their funding. They are said to have collected as much as $25 million dollars in ransom over a couple of years. Muammar Gaddafi the former president of Libya played a huge role in negotiations with the ASG in the past as he offered $1 million for each released hostage (westerners) as well as $25 million in developmental aid in exchange for the hostages (6). This is just a single example of the sums of money they are receiving through ransom. It is an example of how the ASG funds their activities.

Abu Sayyaf has also committed what has been labeled as the “deadliest militant maritime attack” in 2004 when they bombed a ferry that killed up to 116 people. An ASG member made a comment to the Philippine government after this attack voicing, “Still Doubtful about our capabilities? We will bring the war that you impose on us to your lands and seas, homes, and streets. We will multiply the pain and suffering that you have inflicted on our people”(3). This demonstrates the bitterness that the ASG has towards the Christian Philippines and the feelings of “suffering” that they feel they undergone in their history.

Although ASG has stated that they are fighting for the jihad and for an independent Islamic state it seems through interactions with them that they have been considered shallow and not well versed in their faith. A couple that was kidnapped while staying in a resort in the Philippines who were missionaries experienced this first hand. They came to the conclusion after engaging with ASG members in religious talks, as stated in *The Atlantic:*
“We found these jihadists to be shallow, even adolescent, in their faith. Unfamiliar with the Koran, the outlaws had only a sketchy notion of Islam, which they saw as a set of behavioral rules, to be violated when it suited them. Kidnapping, murder, and theft were justified by their special status as “holy warriors.” One by one they sexually appropriated several of the women captives, claiming them as “wives.”

People are tired of living in a state of fear as the ASG, the only militant group not to make agreements with the Philippine government, continually puts them in. They have continually victimized innocent people using religion as a cover for violence. This has irritated Muslims across the world as they are making a reputation for Muslims worldwide. Nur Misuari, former leader of the MNLF and governor of the ARMM, has shown disgust with the ASG calling what they are doing as “intolerable” and “unacceptable”. He announced that, “We are trying to tell the whole world that we are fighting for a civilized, legitimate cause and here you are shaming and demonizing us. We cannot tolerate you forever” (2). This powerful statement from a former rebel group leader shows how ASG has abandoned their original ideology and they have converted more into a bandit group or terrorist group than a group fighting a religious battle.

New recruits of the ASG are not necessarily joining for religious purposes. They are doing so because of their interests in guns and money. With the money that Abu Sayyaf receives through their ransom they have all kinds of appeal to youngsters searching for something to do, especially those living in poverty-stricken neighborhoods. This is exemplified in the 2010 statistics that 79% of the members were 30 years or older (5). Families in these neighborhoods have even gone as far as
volunteering their sons to join the ASG in exchange for a monthly supply of rice and financial support to the family of around $200” (5) This is an example that these groups have turned into a source of income for children growing up in poverty.

Another common reason for joining the ASG for young kids has been as a tool for rebellion. One former member of the ASG shares with us his experience stating that he joined the group to rebel against his parent and to show that he was a man (1).

Overall Abu Sayyaf has continually committed acts of violence for what appears to be without any religious messages. They have kidnapped whoever they could lay their hands on as well as carried out bombings that have appeared to be used solely as fear tactics. Even extremists find Abu Sayyaf’s violence to be over the top. After the death of the founder of the ASG Abdurajik Abubaker Janjalani the group became severely violent and appeared to have lost their sense of direction. ASG has become a haven for youth to earn money and become be part of a group with a lot of power. For some kids it is their only opportunity to survive while for others it is a symbol of power. These reasons for joining the group are not religious but financial and the attraction to violence. Abu Sayyaf has become a militant group without a legitimate cause. The other militant Islam groups in the Philippines have arrived at peace settlements with the Philippine government are evidence of the willingness of the government to make settlements with militant groups, but the ASG have refused to do so. As these independent regions have been formed/are being formed Abu Sayyaf has remained out of peace talk in order to carry out their violent agenda.
Works Cited


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