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“Black Flags over Mindanao: Terrorism in Southeast Asia”
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Chairman Yoho, Ranking Member Sherman, and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to talk about the threat of extremism in the Philippines. I am a strategic policy analyst at the Counter Extremism Project, a not-for-profit, non-partisan, international policy organization that combats the growing threat from extremist ideology.

Fears of growing ISIS activity in Southeast Asia continues to increase with the siege on the city of Marawi starting on May 23 of this year. This is the latest in a series of purported ISIS-related extremist measures, connecting the Philippines to pro-ISIS activity in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Maldives [since 2014](#).

The separatist movement in Mindanao precedes ISIS and even al-Qaeda, with the formation of the Moro Liberation Front on the island of Mindanao in 1971. The Philippines has also endured anti-government violence from Communist nationalist rebels over decades. Consequently, several thousand Filipinos have been murdered in bombings, assassinations, kidnapping attempts, and executions. [Some high-profile attacks](#) in the Philippines involved the kidnapping and execution of foreigners, including Western missionaries and tourists. Official government figures report that 290 militants, 70 soldiers, and 27 civilians were killed, with an additional 246,000 displaced, between May 23 and June 27, 2017. That said, while Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has negotiated with the Communists to somewhat defang them, he has stated he will not make the same effort with Islamists in Mindanao, from where he originates.

Moreover, the ISIS brand and its propaganda has the power to unify militants across borders in Southeast Asia, further destabilizing the region. This is especially true given the regional growth of pro-ISIS support and the concurrent return of foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq to multiple states in the area.

Philippine [intelligence](#) reported that some of the ISIS-linked fighters in Marawi traveled from abroad, including from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Middle East. The presence of foreign fighters raises concerns that the Philippines is becoming an ISIS hub.

This is what makes the insurgency in Mindanao dire, and a plausible anchor for greater violence throughout the region and beyond if the influence of extremist ideology is not effectively countered today.

What the U.S. can do is limited but key for long-term resistance to ISIS-style extremism—not only in the Philippines but globally. First, we must acknowledge that we are not in a position to defend a “right” versus “wrong” Islam. Rather, we can develop consistent policies, talking points, and programming support grounded in principles of universal human rights, focusing on community behavior that violates these norms, irrespective of the motivation.

ISIS preys upon Muslims and reinterprets socio-political problems and/or individual identity issues as inherently Muslim problems, and thus provides a confident and aggressive solution grounded in its interpretation of Islam. Accordingly, a counter-extremism strategy must include supporting grassroots progressive Muslim organizations. This will only work with buy-in from our allies, like the Philippine government, itself a target of such extremism.

Consequently, the US must expand its counter-extremism strategy to push allies, like the Philippines, to embrace a two-pronged strategy: (1) Remove extremist propaganda online and on the ground, especially among student organizations and schools, and 2) replace extremist propaganda online and within the community with ideology formulated by progressive Muslim organizations. To succeed, these ideas must be implemented domestically and regionally, as well as online.

Background

[The](#) Muslims of Mindanao have for centuries sought independence—first from Spain, then from the United States, and now from secular Philippine rule. One of the earliest secessionist groups is the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

The group was established in 1971 to fight for an independent Moro (Islamic) state in Mindanao. Filipino Muslims refer to themselves as Moro, a derivation of the word ‘Moor,’ a derogatory term used by Spanish colonialists to refer to North African Muslims. The term was then adopted by the Christian majority of the Philippines to describe their Muslim neighbors in the southern islands of the country.

After years of conflict, the MNLF signed a peace agreement with the Philippine government in 1996. The agreement granted autonomy to the people living in areas under the MNLF’s control, known as the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

The most recent manifestation of the pursuit of independence is the militancy of the [Abu Sayyaf Group \(ASG\)](#), an Islamist terrorist organization seeking to establish an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines. ASG was founded by and named after Abdurajak Janjalani, who took the nom de guerre Abu Sayyaf, “Father of Swordsmen.”

ASG is known for kidnapping innocents, including Westerners, for ransom and beheading captives if their demands are not met. ASG’s brutal decapitations date back

to 2001, predating the notorious beheadings by al-Qaeda and ISIS. ASG's relationship with al-Qaeda brought extra attention to the Philippines as a battleground in the U.S.-led Global War on Terror. In the summer of 2014, ASG leaders pledged allegiance to ISIS and its leader, [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), drawing the focus back to ASG's presence in the southern Philippines and its potential threat to other areas of Southeast Asia.

ASG and the closely aligned Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) pledged allegiance to ISIS, according to videos uploaded to YouTube on July 23, 2014. A January 2016 video released by ISIS suggested that the group's leadership in Syria had confirmed ASG factional head Isnilon Hapilon as the leader of ISIS in Southeast Asia. Several other Filipino extremist groups throughout Mindanao have also pledged allegiance to ISIS, including the Maute Group and Ansar Khalifah Philippines (AKP).

President Duterte stated on November 28, 2016 that Philippine intelligence services had confirmed that ISIS had connected with the Maute Group. The group, also known as the Islamic State in Lanao, was responsible for several terrorist incidents in Mindanao in 2016.

On the same day, Philippine police discovered a bomb near the U.S. embassy in a trash bin, believed to be planted by Maute militants. Four members were arrested the same day and found to be carrying video clips of themselves pledging allegiance to ISIS. According to media reports, the Maute group is also responsible for December 28, 2016 explosions on a town celebration in Leyte, an island in the middle of the country. Two bombs were reportedly detonated using a mobile phone, injuring 23 revelers.

Generally, Philippine military and police forces have struggled in dealing with extremist groups. The struggles stem from a lack of capacity, poor coordination, and geographical obstacles. However, the government has made efforts to restructure and strengthen its counterterrorism measures in cooperation with the United States and its regional neighbors. Through military and economic initiatives, the Philippines has increased its capability to constrain violent activity and reduce financial and material resources available to extremist groups like the NPA (New People's Army), ASG, and Jemaah Islamiyah.

During President Duterte's first month in office, in July 2016, he took action to establish peaceful relations with the Communists. President Duterte made promises to release political prisoners and issued offers for positions in his administration to those willing to join peace talks. On August 25, 2016, Duterte declared a ceasefire with the Communist Party of the Philippines and NPA, and ordered the Philippine military and police forces to abide by the declaration. The first round of formal peace talks between the Communists and the Duterte administration were held in Oslo, Norway on August 22-28, 2016.

On May 23, 2017, Philippine soldiers launched an operation in Marawi in search of pro-ISIS ASG leader Isnilon Hapilon. According to the Philippine army, government troops

acted following reports that Hapilon was in Marawi to potentially unite with the Maute Group, which is based in the city. Soldiers and Maute militants continued to clash two weeks later as rebels seized control over large parts of Marawi. Local media reported that the Maute militants burned the Marawi jail and Dansalan College and attacked the Amai Pakpak Hospital. President Duterte subsequently declared martial law on the entire island of Mindanao, where Marawi is located.

In response, the Philippine military launched an offensive on May 25 against the ISIS-linked militants in Marawi. Maute and Hapilon's ASG fighters reportedly kidnapped at least 200 people, including children. According to Philippine intelligence, as many as 40 of the 400-500 ISIS-linked fighters in Marawi traveled from abroad. The foreign fighters reportedly included Indonesians and Malaysians as well as at least one national each of Saudi Arabia, Chechnya, Yemen, India, Morocco, and Turkey. The siege is ongoing and the government has ruled out negotiations with the militants. Hapilon has reportedly fled the city.

The escalation of violence on Mindanao since June has raised concerns internationally about the stability of not only the Philippines but Southeast Asia, where ISIS sympathizers from the Maldives to Singapore to Indonesia have been arrested, successfully traveled to Syria, or committed terrorist acts at home for years now. Some experts note ISIS's extreme rhetoric is being normalized by the proliferation of foreign-funded, puritanical interpretations of Islam spreading throughout the region, including to the Philippines' neighbor Malaysia. Prior to the current siege, President Duterte had promised to crack down on extremist groups operating in the country, but stated that he would honor existing peace processes with the MNLF and MILF. Duterte has explicitly refused to negotiate with the more violent ASG, and on August 1, 2016 effectively shut the door on peace talks with the terror group, stating, "I will not deal with persons with extreme brutality. There is no... reason for me to sit down and talk with criminals."

ISIS's Ability to Co-opt Grievances and Unite Extremists Under Its Brand

ISIS is the most successful brand of Islamist extremism globally because it has identified a formula to connect its fundamentalist principles to proactive action by its adherents, and has consistently spread its propaganda over the Internet and via social media platforms numerous languages—without much interference from tech companies or challenges from the online presence of counter-arguments from progressive Islamic organizations.

ISIS ideology targets Muslims in person or online as individuals or as a society. It does not matter if they are practicing or not practicing—the individual must simply identify on some level as Muslim, even if only by birth.

Second, ISIS preys on existing grievances and co-opts them, offering a singular solution in the rhetoric of faith, requiring the individual or community to embrace its extremist interpretation of Islam. Examples include the oft-cited "identity issues" of lone wolves in

the West; separatist movements like that in Chechnya in the 1990s; general societal grievances like endemic corruption; and economic marginalization in other nations, including in the Philippines.

French terrorism analyst Olivier Roy calls this process of reinterpreting “root causes” as the “Islamisation of radicalism.” According to Roy, “[T]hose influenced by generational revolt or opposition to dominant societal paradigms are now more likely to generate narratives from their understanding of Islam,” rather than doctrines like Marxist ideology or ethno-nationalism, which previously attracted Filipinos with grievances against their government. Consequently, ISIS offers a grand solution based on the singular identity marker of faith, without requiring an adherent to understand the faith itself.

ISIS’s ideology empowers the individual or society to act on its own behalf to implement the solution—a future state of validation, stability and certainty that the purported root causes have denied the individual or community.

One should not conclude that by conceding the presence of root causes, Islamist ideology does not need to be addressed. This is because the rhetoric of ISIS remains one of the primary drivers designed to transform grievances into violence committed by Muslims.

Professor Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore notes that in some of the wealthiest countries in the world, Muslim minorities, like the Malay, are economically disadvantaged. “But, the number of those who actually turn to violence within this group is low.” Thus, “economics alone cannot explain the strong support of ISIS” in the region.

Moreover, there is no singular profile of extremists. While some come from poor backgrounds, the majority come from the middle and upper classes. Dr. Osman adds that while,

“issues of ethnic conflict and corruption are certainly contributing factors, they cannot be identified as the main sources of discontent. There are larger issues affecting Muslims around the world that can better explain ISIS support in Southeast Asia. There is a need for Muslims to reassess the position of Islam on certain issues in order to deal with the fringe minorities who have interpreted the religion in a certain way. In this regard, the Salafi jihadist-type is one that we need to understand.”

By “Salafi,” Dr. Osman does not necessarily mean individuals who self-identify as such. Rather, they are those Muslims that accept the “norms that are defined by Salafi thinking.” This includes finding non-fundamentalist practices of Islam, including that of Islam’s minority sects, as deviant; advocating for anti-blasphemy laws; limiting the role of religious minorities and women in the public sphere; and self-segregating in order to maintain the purity of their community standards.

Dr. Osman warns that the “salafization” of Muslims in Malaysia, for example, has damaged the coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims present for centuries in the region “That attitude is problematic,” Dr. Osman says, “because once one starts dehumanizing Shiite Muslims by saying they are deviant, infidels, or hypocrites, it makes it easier for people to be influenced by the ideas of ISIS,” which advocates the murder of Muslim religious minorities, non-Muslims, and homosexuals.

Pro-ISIS Support in SE Asia

The issue of extremism in the Philippines must be viewed as part of the problem of increased radicalization of Muslims throughout Southeast Asia. ISIS’s propaganda in the region increases the risk of more indiscriminate acts of terrorism, as well as the targeting of foreigners, religious minorities, and U.S. interests. The Bali bombing, for example, was committed by the Indonesian militant group Jemaah Islamiyah, with the help of al-Qaeda, in retaliation for the U.S.-led Global War on Terror.

There are indications in recent years of increasing support for implementing fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic law— as well as growing support for ISIS— among some Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. For example, the monarchy of Brunei instituted sharia law in 2013. [Brunei](#) is nestled on a small corner of a much larger Malaysian island. Cross-border influence is very possible.

Likewise, only in 2015 was a [retailer](#) in Malaysia selling pro-ISIS merchandise finally shuttered, despite local law enforcement knowing that the store sold ISIS flags, as well as T-shirts marked with statements like “Mujahideen cyberspace” and images of Kalashnikovs. The merchandise was produced in Indonesia.

In December 2015, the BBC published photos of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) members [protesting](#) in front of American Mining Company Freeport in central Jakarta, Indonesia. HT has chapters in more than 40 countries, including Malaysia and Indonesia. The group advocates an end state similar to ISIS—regime change in favor of a caliphate. Rather than supporting indiscriminate violence to realize its vision, HT hopes to convert key figures in society—like the military—so that a coup can bring about a peaceful change in government. HT events in Indonesia regularly attract more than 5,000 men, women and children. Consistent with Roy’s argument articulating the Islamization of radicalism, HT’s propaganda protesting the American mining company argues that allowing Western firms to extract Indonesian minerals is un-Islamic.

ISIS propaganda and networking between Southeast Asian militants serving in Syria and those still in the region have created a nascent but powerful network supporting extremism from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.

This was best illustrated [on](#) January 14, 2016 when pro-ISIS militants attacked a Starbucks café in Jakarta, killing 4. The pro-ISIS militant responsible for the attack, Bahrun Naim, is believed to be connected to ISIS propagandist Abu Jandal in Syria and

pro-ISIS ideologue Aman Abdulrahman, currently behind bars in a maximum-security prison in Java, Indonesia.

Abu Jandal is one of many Twitter propagandists monitored by the Counter Extremism Project. We have repeatedly urged Twitter to take down his account. Abu Jandal uses Twitter to advocate for ISIS and promote other extremist accounts. Via Twitter, he has condoned violence against civilians, including the victims of Paris's January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks.

Aman Abdulrahman is believed to be responsible for the extensive translation of pro-ISIS propaganda from Arabic to Indonesian. His materials are available on a website called al-Mustaliq.com. He is also the ideologue behind at least nine other local Islamist groups.

Recommendations

1. Remove Extremist Propaganda Online

The first step is to assist regional governments in their effort to remove extremist propaganda from the Internet and social media platforms. First, Southeast Asian governments must formulate policies and work with the private sector to take down extremist propaganda online. Indonesia is of particular importance, given it hosts about 70 percent of the pro-ISIS websites in the region.

Technology enables extremist messaging that fuels radicalization, recruitment, and incitement to violence. There are more than 3,000 pro-ISIS websites in Southeast Asia, and 70 percent of these websites are hosted on servers in Indonesia. These websites feature translations of ISIS ideology as well as YouTube channels, Twitter, and other platforms exploited by extremists. On June 23, 2016, ISIS released its first [video](#) in the Philippines.

The aforementioned Dr. Osman has also stated that Internet and social media propaganda remain the primary means to ISIS recruitment. One key factor for this reason is that ISIS propaganda is in multiple languages, including Bahasa Indonesia, which Dr. Osman [notes](#) “is similar to the Malay language. Anyone who speaks Malay would also understand Bahasa, while the Bahasa majority—more than 90 percent of Muslims in Southeast Asia—would also know Bahasa.”

Separately, so-called peaceful Islamist events host religious televangelists like Zakir Naik, who teaches a supremacist interpretation of Islam historically alien to Southeast Asia. His YouTube channels span multiple languages and have millions of subscribers. There are numerous videos on YouTube of Naik preaching to Filipino congregants. His extremist rhetoric resulted in an arrest [warrant](#) in his home country of India in 2016. In May 2017 Naik became a [citizen](#) of Saudi Arabia and continues to preach globally.

ISIS propaganda is further strengthened by grassroots activism of ideologically like-minded groups that claim to be non-violent, which spread a mindset that jihadi recruiters

can exploit to encourage militancy. Analysts, Houriya Ahmed and Hannah Stuart from the Centre for Social Cohesion stated in a detailed [report](#) about Hizb ut-Tahrir that while it purported to be a non-violent political organization, numerous members became “radicalised by HT’s sectarian ideology, and former members have since participated in terrorism.”

2. Identify and Support Community Efforts to Prevent Radicalization and Counter the Hateful and Violent Ideology of Extremism

It is commonly understood that local community leaders, rather than government, are possessed with the credibility necessary to persuade young people not to fall victim to radicalization.

This requires supporting grass-roots counter-extremism programming that focuses on educating the public on the values underlining pluralism, tolerance, and community-building across race, ethnicity, sect, and gender.

In the Philippines, the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy (“the Center”) is one such organization that deserves government and international support. The Center is working with civil society organizations (CSOs) to organize a CSO-led ASEAN Conference on Peace and the Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE), set for September 22-23, 2017. Through the conference, a network of CSOs and NGOs will collaborate on PVE initiatives to develop national action plans for their respective jurisdictions, as well as finalize a template for a regional action plan on PVE.

The Center has also been working with the Muslim religious sector, particularly female religious scholars and madrassa teachers, developing their capacities and competencies and strengthening their roles as advocates for peace and human rights. For this purpose, the Center has developed an Aleemat module on human rights within a sharia framework, and a Peace Education manual (which reflects the culture and traditions of Muslim Filipinos).

“We feel that working with women and youth is key to building the community’s resiliency against the influence of extremist groups”, Salma Rasul, a program manager at the Center, stated in an email to me last week.

Regionally, recognition of grass-roots activity is also growing. The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore formed a network called the Young Southeast Asian Muslim Forum to engage Muslims at the grass-roots level. The forum brings Muslim youth from seven countries together to engage in workshops. It is important to note, as Dr. Osman [explains](#), that “[T]he workshops weren’t called counter-radicalization workshops”, but workshops focusing on the “positive portrayal of Islam because, obviously, much of the negative portrayal is related to terrorism. We need more of this type of small-scale work and to think about more operating at the grassroots level.”

It is critical to legitimize discourse within Muslim communities and protect liberal grass-roots voices. The U.S. can encourage ally governments in Southeast Asia to recognize liberal grass-roots organizations as sources of strength to counter extremism, and protect their right to speak and engage with the public.

In Indonesia and Malaysia, Salafi-inspired organizations have larger grassroots networks that provide services, unlike the more mainstream organizations that are limited in size and reach. Despite this gap in resources, more moderate groups are trying to establish themselves and engage with the public. Unfortunately, criticism from the more orthodox organizations results in pushback from the government directly or by other organizations with the tacit consent of the government at times.

Yet, counter-narrative programming still grows. In Indonesia, Yenny Wahid, the daughter of former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, founded a research center in Jakarta focusing on religion and pluralism called the Wahid Institute. The organization's motto is "Seeding Plural and Peaceful Islam." "We're not just coming up with a counter narrative, we are coming up with a counter identity, and that's what all this is about," said Ms. Wahid. "We believe we're good Muslims but to be a good Muslim we don't have to accept the recipes that are handed out by some radicals from the Middle East."

[Sisters in Islam \(SIS\)](#) is a Malaysian organization focused on promoting universal human rights, including advocacy for women through an Islamic lens. SIS has challenged the legality of child marriage, polygamy, and hudood laws (sharia laws governing adultery and other personal matters). SIS drafts original Islamic legal theory and jurisprudence as well, including the defense of free speech, protections for apostates against prosecution, and other human rights issues.

Conclusion

Regional governments should consider the fundamentalist messaging of Islamist groups, including Hizb ut-Tahrir and televangelists like Zakir Naik, in the same category as ISIS propaganda. All three encourage a separatist identity among otherwise-pluralistic Southeast Asian communities. This is an alien interpretation of Islam in the region that can easily be fought off through a stronger spotlight on moderate Muslim organizations. Otherwise, even the non-violent Islamist messaging feeds radicalized youth straight towards jihadist recruiters.

Unchallenged, extremism will continue to spread and be a destabilizing and stigmatizing force for every country where extremist propaganda is allowed to proliferate. The first victims are always peaceful Muslim citizens. The Philippine government and other regional governments have an opportunity to respond properly to the growing extremist threat by addressing important identity issues and providing alternatives to the extremist messages churned out daily by ISIS and other Islamist groups. Otherwise, the threat to other countries, including the United States, will only grow over time.