



**Statement Before the**

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific**

***“Black Flags over Mindanao:  
ISIS in the Philippines”***

A Testimony by:

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## Background

### *The History of Terrorism in Southeast Asia*

Counterterrorism officials and security experts worldwide are paying close attention to high-intensity conflict occurring in the city of Marawi, located on the Philippines' island of Mindanao. Much like the building violence of the late 1990s and early, post-9/11 era, Southeast Asia is once again a gathering front for jihadi-salafi groups and their local, associated movements. During that earlier time, al Qaeda's influence and brand—sharpened by successful strikes on American embassies in East Africa (1998) and in New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia (2001), worked its way into Southeast Asia, offering funding, expertise, and the power of partnership. Today, the threat is from a formerly Iraq-based al Qaeda affiliate now known as ISIS, ISIL, Daesh, or the Islamic State.

A region commonly referred to as “The Second Front” never erupted into the consistent, full-blown terrorist battlefield that many feared following September 11--despite several high-profile attacks in Southeast Asia. Al Qaeda's associated movements -- Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines -- did continue bombings and assassinations. But these occurred sporadically, and over time the groups splintered (e.g., Noordin Top Mohammed left JI in 2006 to launch Tanzim Qaedat al Jihad) and were partially degraded by steadily improving government counterterrorism and law enforcement operations, often supported by Australia and the United States.

Jemaah Islamiyah conducted a brutal bombing in Bali, Indonesia on October 12, 2002—the attack that most often resonates in the minds of Americans when considering violence in Southeast Asia. That assault, widely condemned by the citizens of the world's largest Muslim nation, killed 88 Australians, 38 Indonesians, and 76 additional people from 20 other nations. The Bali attack was carried out by JI operatives trained along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and was funded by al Qaeda. JI was also responsible for attacks in Jakarta on the Marriott Hotel in 2003 and again at the Marriott and Ritz-Carlton in 2009.

Attacks by Indonesian Muslim extremists against Christians, Buddhists and Sufi Muslims has also occurred for many years. And decades before the Bali and Jakarta attacks, separatist movements in Aceh and Papua clashed with Indonesian Government armed forces and police. Indeed, political, separatist, ethnic and religious violence involving a wide spectrum of motivations and targets have been a familiar feature in Indonesia, a sprawling nation of 260 million people and more than 16,000 islands.

Malaysia also figures prominently in any discussion of terrorism and militant activity in Southeast Asia. Two September 11 hijackers used the Kuala Lumpur airport to test flight security measures and to surveil U.S.-flagged airlines. The soon-to-be hijackers, Nawaf Al-Hazmi and Khalid Al-Mihdhar -- along with two compatriots -- were hosted by members of Jemaah Islamiyah.

Today, Malaysia continues to be a popular route for terrorist financial flows, despite the nation's concerted counterterrorism efforts and partnerships with its neighbors and the United States.

Malaysian fighters – along with their Indonesian brethren – are also part of a stand-alone, Southeast Asian brigade or *Katibah* in the ISIS organization.

Returning to the September 11 attacks, the plot had its origins in Khaled Sheik Mohammed's "planes operation" -- targeting a dozen aircraft departing Asia for the United States. This included attack planning and bomb-making operations at a Manila, Philippines apartment occupied by Mohammed's nephew, Kuwaiti terrorist Ramzi Yousef -- mastermind of the 1993 bombing of New York City's World Trade Center.

In the Philippines, the history of resistance by Moros in Mindanao goes back centuries---to rebellions against the Japanese, Spanish, and with America's own forces at the turn of the 19th century when the U.S. military fought a 14-year battle with the Moro people. But more recently, the Philippines -- a Catholic-majority nation of 100 million citizens and 7,000 islands -- with a large Muslim minority in the south -- has endured years of both communist and ethno-nationalist insurgency—often met with vicious Philippine government reprisals that have worsened the situation.

Groups such as the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front have fought separatist battles centered on long-running complaints of economic, political, and cultural marginalization. A colleague and I traveled to Mindanao in 2008 where we interviewed, among others, a senior MILF commander at one of the group's camps. Some members of MILF left to join ASG, while the core of MILF and the Philippine Government have engaged in on-again off-again talks on local rule.

The greatest threats in the Philippines today comes from the gratuitously violent Abu Sayyaf Group and its Mindanao partners, the Maute Group. Previously linked to al Qaeda, ASG and associated groups (including the Rajah Solaiman Movement) bombed ferries, murdered civilians, attacked the Philippine Armed Forces and police—and have also kidnapped and beheaded foreign tourists and Christian missionaries since the group was founded in 1991.

Sidney Jones, the world's foremost expert on Southeast Asian militant groups, calls the Maute Group "the smartest, best educated, most sophisticated members" across the Philippines' many pro-ISIS groups.<sup>1</sup> These two prominent, ISIS-affiliated groups joined forces to punish the Philippine military over the past several weeks, fielding foreign fighters and prompting today's hearing.

Though not in the same category as JI, ASG, or the Maute brothers, it is important to note other actors in conflict elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Separatists among southern Thailand's Muslim, Malay communities have clashed with the police and armed forces of that Buddhist-majority nation. Though ethno-nationalist in character, the conflict is also seen as religious in nature on the part of some local and foreign actors. During field work on the violence in southern Thailand in 2008, my colleague and I passed through one dilapidated city referred to as "Little Mogadishu" on account of the poverty, violence and radicalization prevalent in the community. It was a tense and volatile area.

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<sup>1</sup> (Reuters, "The Maute Brothers: Southeast Asia's Islamist "time bomb." Neil Jerome Morales, June 11, 2017. <http://in.reuters.com/article/philippines-militants-maute-idINKBN19306Y>).

Separately and more recently, Thailand has experienced high levels of political instability. As this internal political chaos and violence played out, several Uighur militants from China's restive Xinjiang Province transited Thailand on their way to other parts of Southeast Asia, as well as to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq. Uighur militants have very recently fought and died alongside the East Indonesian Mujahedeen, a militant group active in Sulawesi region and part of the ISIS-linked Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). JAD is the umbrella organization for several Southeast Asian violent extremist groups linked to ISIS.

In June, 2014, several Uighur militants were also arrested in Manila, Philippines. They traveled on fake Turkish passports and met with Abu Sayyaf Group members. The Uighurs made their way to Indonesia and the Philippines via Thailand and Malaysia--highlighting concerns with militant networks throughout Southeast Asia.

Many conditions and features in Southeast Asia enable terrorism and insurgency: socio-economic strain, sectarian friction, small groups of influential religious conservatives, radical ideologies, large archipelagoes and porous borders, preexisting insurgencies, jihadi veterans, permissive immigration rules, and flexible and informal funding networks. And unlike the 1990s and the early 2000s, social media is now everywhere, allowing for easy communications, recruitment, and financial transactions.

Certain mitigating factors and developments account for the lull in terrorist activity from 2009 to 2016. This included steadily improving law enforcement and counterterrorism (CT) capacities across the region (Indonesia in particular); U.S. military advisory operations with the Philippines; judicial and forensic training through Australia; and, importantly, a large, widely tolerant Muslim community that rejected the Bali attacks and many other terrorist operations.

Sunni states of the Arabian Gulf have long made their presence felt in Southeast Asia. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia supports very conservative preachers and madrassas with both funding and materials. Saudi Arabia has constructed more than 150 mosques in Indonesia, a university in Jakarta, and sponsored teachers at scores of schools in the country. A branch of the Saudi Arabia-based al-Haramain Foundation was shuttered in Indonesia in 2004 for having links with JI.

Saudi Arabia directs funding to two institutions in Indonesia. The first is the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab (Institute of Islamic and Arabic Studies or LIPIA). Established by the Saudis and associated with Riyadh's Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, LIPIA is staffed by instructors from the Kingdom. The Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (the Indonesian Society for the Propagation of Islam) was created in 1967, helping to erect hospitals, distribute Korans, and provide scholarships to students in Indonesia. These organizations position Saudi Arabia to exert influence on religious, social, and cultural matters.

This foregoing history of recent terrorist activity, local conditions, and outside or regional influences in Southeast Asia is limited—there are many more attacks, foiled plots, actors, and contextual issues that could be covered. Though the region has not experienced the constant, high-level terrorism and insurgency of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia---

Southeast Asia has seen sharp spikes in terrorist activity along with slightly lower level violence involving a wide variety of militant groups, civilians, and local security services.

### **The Threat at Hand: Black Flags over Mindanao**

#### *The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon*

In the 1990s and through the early 2000s, some of Southeast Asia's top fighters and leaders trained and fought overseas. They returned with battlefield skills, funding, friendships with fighters across the globe, and the credibility to recruit new members, raise funds, and lead violent extremist organizations.

This list includes JI's Dulmatin, a key figure in the 2002 Bali bombing who was trained by al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Also active in Afghanistan during the "anti-Soviet Jihad" was future JI commander, the Singaporean-born and Malaysia-raised Nasir Abbas (whom I interviewed in 2008). Abbas operated across Indonesia and managed a camp in the Philippines until his eventual arrest by Indonesian authorities in 2003.

But it was not until the emergence of ISIS in 2013 and the group's dramatic string of victories and Caliphate declaration in June, 2014, that vast numbers of aspiring jihadists begin traveling to Syria and Iraq to take up arms against the Assad regime and its allies, along with innocent civilians and other rebels designated as enemies by ISIS leadership. Since 2012, the U.S National Counterterrorism Center estimates that more than 40,000 fighters from 120 countries joined (primarily) ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

With a skyrocketing profile and multifaceted appeal, other terrorist groups around the world either changed their allegiance from al Qaeda to ISIS or split off from groups that refused to drop their commitment to AQ's Ayman al-Zawahiri. ISIS was ascendant while AQ had a lackluster leader -- and the ISIS caliphate was rising in a region where several states had collapsed. It was a sea change across the global, jihadi-salafi movement. People young and old, male and female, signed up in droves.

#### *Foreign Fighters to and from Southeast Asia*

Various government and non-government sources estimate that between 800 and 1,000 Southeast Asians have journeyed to fight in Syria and Iraq. This number represents only a small part of the estimated 40,000 total foreign fighters, but it is more than sufficient to wreak havoc on the region as some of them return—equipped, trained, and empowered.

There is an all-Southeast Asian (primarily Indonesian and Malaysian) brigade called the Katibah Nusantara -- led by an Indonesian, Bahrun Naim. Naim is credited with conceiving and directing a January, 2016 terrorist attack in Jakarta while still in Syria, killing eight.

Katibah Nusantara's battlefield exploits and remotely directed operation in Jakarta demonstrate the strength and reach of ISIS and its Southeast Asian members, likely inspiring others to join or

support the group. Katibah leader Naim has even encouraged local residents in Indonesia to use the 2015 Paris attacks as a guide for operations in their own country<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, the success and higher profile of Katibah Nusantara could potentially influence ISIS perspectives on Southeast Asia. As ISIS continues to lose territory and revenue in Syria and Iraq, it may look about for areas where it can shift its leadership and activities.

Another issue to consider is that of regional fighters who are unable to make their way to the Middle East, and instead look for local battles to join. Among the fighters that have participated in the Marawi attack are Indonesians and Malaysians—which still count as foreign fighters while engaged in operations in the Philippines. There is no reason such fighters should be overlooked or discounted because they traveled a shorter distance to the battlefield.

### *Abu Sayyaf Group and the Maute Group*

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is a Philippine jihadist organization founded in 1991 by Abdurajak Janjalani as a splinter from the larger Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). ASG's primary goal is to create an Islamic State in Mindanao in the southern Philippines. Janjalani's strong personal ties to Osama Bin Laden led it to declare allegiance to al Qaeda. But that ended in 2014 when the Abu Sayyaf Group officially pledged allegiance to ISIS.

Isnilon Hapilon, one of the leaders of ASG, was confirmed by ISIS as the Emir of all of Southeast Asia in 2016 (though without receiving an official ISIS wilayat or province, designation). ASG now solely operates under Hapilon as a wing of ISIS in the region. The remainder of fighters in ASG who did not switch alliance to the Islamic State no longer operate as the ASG.

The Maute Group (self-identified as *Daulah Islamiyah*, or Islamic State) includes several members of a large family in Mindanao, and is led by brothers Abdullah and Omarkhayam Maute. Their parents are currently in the custody of the Philippine Government. Abdullah was educated in Jordan while Omarkhayam attended Al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt. By marriage, the Maute Group is linked to conservative clerics in Indonesia. The group is fighting for an independent Muslim state in Mindanao, and have pledged allegiance to ISIS leader al-Baghdadi, adopting the group's black flag.

Though Hapilon does hold the title of Emir, his ASG faction was forced out of Basilan Island and into the Maute brothers' territory. Major friction between the two groups is not yet evident—and could remain that way as long as there is a pitched battle against the Philippine Armed Forces.

### *The Marawi Battle*

Now in its 7<sup>th</sup> week, the battle in Marawi has become the focal point of ISIS activity in Southeast Asia as two of its most prominent affiliates hold out against the Philippine Armed Forces. The fighting was sparked on May 23 when Philippine Government forces attempted to capture ASG

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<sup>2</sup> Sidney Jones, Director of the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict

leader, Isnilon Hapilon. More than 500 militant fighters joined the battle, suffering high numbers of casualties while also inflicting considerable losses on Philippine Government forces and police. As of early July, more than 300 militants and nearly 100 military and police were killed in house to house, street by street warfare.

But it is the list of nationalities among the militants' body count that is raising alarms in counterterrorism/counter-insurgency communities: among the roughly 80 foreign fighters thought to have been in the battle, the dead included fighters from Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Chechnya, Yemen, Indonesia, Malaysia. For years, experts and government officials have feared and warned of the return of highly motivated, experienced salafi jihadi fighters. Marawi is the starkest example to date of their potential impact.

CSIS Southeast Asia expert Geoff Hartman sees the siege in Marawi as “a major step forward in coordination between this nascent coalition of ISIS-linked fighters in the southern Philippines.”<sup>3</sup> Hartman goes on to point out that what we are witnessing in Marawi are the consequences of a failure of the Philippine Government negotiations with Moro insurgents and the growing ISIS presence on across the region. Those two phenomena have converged in Marawi with devastating results—and ones that may be repeated across this large and restive region.

### *Implications*

With no short-term solution to the battle nor the larger, underlying conditions in Mindanao in sight, where might this crisis be in the coming weeks and months? As the ASG-Maute coalition holds on in Marawi, it will inevitably attract more foreign and local fighters, financial support, and media attention. ISIS could come to see this as its primary, extra-regional destination as its fortunes continue to tumble in the Middle East and North Africa.

None of that is good for the security of the Philippine nation, especially local civilians (Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and others) in desperate need of economic development and responsive government.

Southeast Asian nations stand as good partners of the United States. America has an abiding interest in seeing their citizens thrive and in reducing distracting and dangerous developments. Singapore, a prize for any militant group given the city-state's fierce, anti-terrorism posture and its close relationship with the United States, has already been the subject of numerous plots, one planning a rocket attack on the massive Marina Bay Sands Hotel.

Some of the other concerns regarding the ISIS-affiliated, ASG-Maute Group alliance and the use of experienced foreign fighters in battle include:

- A new battlefield that is more accessible to regional extremists
- A foothold for ISIS where it can recruit across a large Muslim region

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<sup>3</sup> Geoff Hartman, “Marawi Battle Highlights the Perils of a Stalled Peace Process in the Philippines.” CSIS Commentary, June 29, 2017. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/marawi-battle-highlights-perils-stalled-peace-process-philippines>

- Battlefield expertise, networks, funding, and street credibility being brought to bear on an already unstable region and poorly governed territory
- The potential to establish a new caliphate resulting in violent extremist groups contesting government control of territory
- Violent overreaction from a rash Duterte Administration in the Philippines
- An uncertain and still volatile U.S. / Philippines relationship

## **Conclusion**

The violence in Marawi is a stark warning of a convergence of several troublesome factors, including an expanding, insurgent-minded ISIS, radical ideologies, poor (and violent) governance, highly stressed communities, returning and regional foreign fighters, accessible funding, criminal activity, and adept use of social media.

The next few weeks and months will be a severe test for the Philippines, other Southeast Asian nations, and partners such as Australia and the United States. As ISIS' hold on territory erodes further, it will look to surprise successes like the battle in Marawi as part of a combined exit/expansion strategy. There is little time to waste in degrading those efforts.

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## **Sources**

*CSIS project field visits and interviews in Southeast Asia; Congressional Research Service, Rappler, Reuters, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (Sidney Jones), NBC News, BBC, Brookings Institution, Time, West Point Combatting Terrorism Center, Geoff Hartman (CSIS), Rajaratnam School of International Studies (Singapore), Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore Straits Times, East Asia Forum, South China Morning Post, CSIS Transnational Threats team, Center for Security Studies (Zurich).*