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The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria: A Direct Threat to the Philippines?*

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Introduction

This is the second installment of the two-part series on the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its security implications for the Philippines. With a comprehensive analysis of the capabilities of ISIS, the first installment concluded that while ISIS was able to capture huge swathes of territory, its operations are likely to be confined in certain areas in the Middle East and North Africa. Due to its ideology and its relatively successful operations, ISIS has attracted supporters from groups in various countries, including the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Philippines.

Using the Dynamic Terrorist Threat Model¹ outlined in the first article, this second part policy brief discusses two objectives: (1) the potential security challenges posed by ISIS; and (2) some policy considerations in Philippine counter-terrorism efforts vis-à-vis the ascendance of ISIS as an international terrorist threat.

ISIS Presence in the Philippines?

As ISIS captures world attention, certain groups in the Philippines—a country which is at the forefront of combating terrorism in Southeast Asia—have begun positioning themselves to be part of the so-called caliphate through a similar medium being

utilized by the international terror group—social media. The BIFF, a breakaway group of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), has already pledged allegiance to ISIS and to its leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi. Following ISIS' methods, BIFF has also made its presence felt in the realm of social media to spread propaganda and attract recruits.

On 23 July 2014, Isnilon Hapilon, an ASG leader, and his associates uploaded a video on YouTube in which they made a similar pledge. Opening with the ISIS flag, the video shows a poster released by the US Government showing Hapilon as a wanted terrorist in the region, followed by the picture of the ASG founding member Khadaffy Janjalani, and then another photo of Hapilon and his men who were all carrying guns. After making the pledge, which lasted for about six minutes, the ISIS flag is once again featured towards the end of the video.

Although not as sophisticated as that of ISIS videos, the ASG video has sent a message to the public—notwithstanding the death of an ASG leader, the group remains alive and, by aligning with ISIS, may perpetrate attacks in line with ISIS' goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate. It is interesting to note that people in the first video used both Arabic and Filipino languages in an apparent effort to address audience both in the Middle East and the Philippines. Moreover, these groups made “Bay-ah” or oath of allegiance which, in the Muslim tradition, is made in order to recognize the establishment of a new Islamic caliphate.²

Aside from these pledges of allegiance to ISIS, some incumbent and former Philippine

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government officials claimed that the members of the so-called caliphate are already in the Philippines and are recruiting people to join their ranks. In a televised interview in August 2014, former President Fidel V. Ramos claimed that, based on intelligence sources, there are about 100 Filipinos who have managed to travel to Iraq and undergo training with ISIS. The same may return to the Philippines as jihadists.³ The claims made by the former Commander-in-Chief was concurred with by two local chief executives in Mindanao: Basilan Mayor Joel Maturan of Ungkaya Bukan and Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte.

The foregoing reports of alleged ISIS presence in the country were brought to light after Philippine authorities had arrested Robert Edward Cerantonio, also known as Musa Cerantonio, in July 2014.⁴ An Australian national who converted to Islam, Cerantonio has been one of the most active online supporters of ISIS, persuading fellow Muslims to join the fighters of the terror group. Deported to Australia for his revoked passport, Cerantonio was, however, not believed to have recruited Filipinos to join ISIS.

Although these reports on alleged ISIS activities in the Philippines have stirred debate on whether the international terrorist group already has some presence in the country, the Philippine government, in particular the Armed Force of the Philippines (AFP), has categorically denied that members of the so-called caliphate have actually penetrated the country's borders. The statements of the AFP were confirmed by Jean-Paul Laborde, Executive Director of the UN Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate, who said: "*There is no evidence that they [ISIS members] are in the Philippines.*"⁵ Thus, for now, ISIS poses no direct threat to the Philippines.

As mentioned earlier, groups like the ASG and BIFF have pledged their allegiance to ISIS. It is interesting to note, however, that the ISIS leadership has not issued any statement acknowledging those pledges. When Islamic militants in Libya, Egypt, and Nigeria vowed their allegiance to ISIS, the officials of the self-proclaimed caliphate immediately acknowledged their pledges.⁶ Moreover, ISIS declared the areas occupied by the said North African militants will henceforth become part of the caliphate. Such response from ISIS was noticeably absent with regard

to the groups in the Philippines that have already pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. This, therefore, suggests that the said groups in the Philippines can be hardly be considered as actual ISIS members and strategic partners in Southeast Asia but rather as distant sympathizers who are merely riding on the ISIS bandwagon.

The pledges made by ASG and BIFF, as well as the apparent inaction of ISIS on such pledges, have the following implications: First, the Philippines, or any portion thereof, is not part of what ISIS envisions as its territory. Although ISIS has called on all Muslims—including those in the Philippines—to join its ranks, the attention of the caliphate is fixated on the Middle East and North Africa where it is currently under siege by the US-led coalition. Thus, incorporating a group from a region not covered by its grand strategy may have serious ramifications on the part of ISIS, such as overstressing assistance for weapons and money. Second, as bandwagoners, ASG and BIFF may have vowed support for ISIS not so much as to advance the ideology being espoused by the group as it is to ride on the growing support for ISIS in search of assistance in the shipment of weaponry, financial resources, and technical social media skills. A case in point is ASG, which is believed to be a long-time affiliate of al-Qaeda. But when ISIS gained international notoriety, ASG quickly shifted its allegiance to the self-proclaimed caliphate.

Indeed, ISIS has no operations in the Philippines, and thus, poses no direct threat to the country. Following the Dynamic Terrorist Threat Model, however, the recent developments suggest that ISIS may pose an indirect threat to the Philippines through the ideological and publicity tools of the international terror group. Specifically, terrorist elements operating in the Philippines may imbibe ISIS ideology and emulate its strategy of perpetrating actual terrorist attacks, as well as propagate fear and recruit members through social media. While it is true that these terrorists had already used social media even before ISIS gained prominence, the efficient and sophisticated use thereof by ISIS may provide a useful model, which local terror groups may emulate.

Amid the heightened international attention on ISIS, the ASG abducted two German nationals in

April 2014, and threatened to behead them if the PHP 250 million ransom was not paid. More importantly, ASG demanded that Germany withdraw its support from the US-led coalition fighting ISIS. In an attempt to magnify its threat, the rogue group disseminated pictures through social media, one of which shows an ASG member holding a huge machete pointed at the German hostage. Another picture showed a hostage whose hands were tied, standing in front of an ISIS flag. Although the hostages were subsequently released, the episode has amplified the indirect threat posed by ISIS; terrorist groups such as ASG—whether formally allied with ISIS or otherwise—strive to emulate the online success of the latter to complement their respective terrorist operations.

Another way that ISIS may pose an indirect threat to the Philippines is by harming or threatening to harm Filipino nationals who are based in or proximate to ISIS operational space. Indeed, this was the case for American, British, and Japanese nationals. Although there is no ISIS presence in their respective countries, they are still under the threat of abduction and beheadings being posed by ISIS. It was also reported by the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) that, as of March 2015, a total of seven Filipinos had been abducted by armed groups in Libya.⁷ Although some have claimed that the abductors are members of ISIS, the DFA has yet to verify the organizational membership of the abductors, if any, since there are numerous armed groups operating in Libya.

Some Policy Considerations

The foregoing discussion suggests that while ISIS may pose a grave threat to Filipinos who are in or near ISIS' operational space, the international terrorist group currently poses no direct threat to the Philippines. Nonetheless, the Philippines must be very vigilant in its counter-terrorism efforts. In this regard, the following policy inputs may be considered:

First, enhance efforts in relation to the monitoring and assessment of the security environment encompassing ISIS' operational space and its adjacent areas in order to: (1) protect Filipinos therein and the Philippine homeland; and (2) prevent the entry of ISIS fighters to the

Philippines. In order to operationalize such a policy input, the following courses of action may be taken. First, harmonize the intelligence efforts—in accordance with Human Security Act of 2007 and under the Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) through the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA)—of various government agencies. Second, explore the possibility of sharing intelligence information with international entities and coalition fighting ISIS, specifically those countries near the ISIS operational space.

With respect to the protection of Filipinos overseas, the first course of action suggests that if ISIS threatens or makes moves to expand its territorial gains, Philippine embassies or consulates should immediately coordinate with authorities in the Philippines in order for the latter to initiate appropriate measures, in accordance with established protocols and mechanisms, specifically the Overseas Preparedness and Response Team (OPRT) as mandated by the National Crisis Management Core Manual (NCMCM). Indeed, such efforts must be bolstered in order to prevent any Filipino national from being held hostage, or worse, brutally murdered by any terrorist group. This for Filipinos outside the country to avoid the fate of the Jordanian pilot, 21 Egyptian Christians, Japanese, and other Western nationals who were all violently killed by ISIS.

Complementing the first course of action, the second possible strategic approach entails the creation of a database which lists all known and suspected ISIS fighters in order to curtail the spread of ISIS. Notably, a similar recommendation was made by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as part of its non-sanction recommendations—specifically to utilize the “INTERPOL transnational fighters database as a sharing tool.”⁸ As in the case of Cerantonio, the porous international borders can be exploited by ISIS members or sympathizers in order to perpetrate acts of terror in or recruit members from the Philippines. Indeed, as noted above, ISIS membership is not merely composed of people from Syria and Iraq, but also of people of various nationalities. Thus, concerned Philippine government agencies must continuously monitor people coming in and out of the Philippines, especially those who are from ISIS operational space and nearby zones.

Second, closely related to the first policy consideration, is to reinforce calls to repatriate Filipinos from ISIS' operational space and nearby areas. The DFA should maintain its Alert Level 4, which calls for mandatory repatriation, in such areas, specifically Iraq, Syria, and Libya. In this regard, Philippine diplomats must sustain efforts to call on Filipinos to maintain contact with the closest embassy or consulate in order to facilitate their repatriation. Moreover, such measures can be strengthened by forging closer relations with the Filipino community and employers of Filipinos. In addition, Filipino diplomats must maintain close working relationship with concerned foreign governments to ensure the safety and secure the evacuation of Filipino nationals. For their part, Filipino nationals must take precautionary actions in order to avoid being victimized by ISIS and other lawless armed groups, such as determining the locations and contact information of local law enforcement agencies.

Third, counter ISIS and ISIS-inspired ideology, propaganda, and recruitment activities through the same publicity tool being utilized by the terror groups—social media. Indeed, a social media counter-terrorism campaign will expose the hidden falsehood of its ideology that ISIS and its supporters are claiming to fight for. Moreover, this approach may also prevent radicalization of isolated individuals who are usually the perpetrators of the so-called “lone wolf” terrorists. This course of action has already been adopted by the United States in the form of a special unit called Center for Strategic Counter-Terrorism Communications (CSCC) under the Department of State (DOS). In Twitter, Facebook, You Tube, and other social media outlets, CSCC created accounts called “Think Again, Turn Away” wherein it regularly posts links to articles, pictures, videos, and messages that refute the arguments or narratives being propagated by ISIS. As noted in the first installment of this two-part series, ISIS was able to spread much of its propaganda and recruitment materials online, not only because of its official media arm but also of the efforts of its supporters. Hence, in order to counter the social media campaign being waged by terrorists groups in the Philippines, government agencies, private citizens, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should join efforts in denouncing the propaganda that such terrorists are spreading. Similar

efforts were made in Nigeria and Australia in the aftermath of terrorist attacks within their territories.

Conclusion

In summary, this two-part series of policy briefs argued that while ISIS constitutes an existential danger in the Middle East and North Africa, the terror group poses no direct threat to the Philippine homeland. Rather, ISIS presents an indirect threat to the Philippines through its ideology and publicity tools. Indeed, terrorism is not only about inflicting bodily injury against people. It is also underpinned by a desire to promote a particular ideology and a politico-religious narrative against the backdrop of generally accepted historical narrative. In other words, terrorism, as well as the efforts to counter it, is likewise a struggle for hearts and minds. As this paper shows, the fight against ISIS, and its sympathizers, requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach.

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Endnotes

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