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ABU SAYAF'S NEW LEADER: YASSER IGASAN THE RELIGIOUS SCHOLAR

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THE COMMANDING General of the Philippine Army, LtGen. Romeo Tolentino announced recently that the radical Abu Sayaf Group (ASG) had chosen a new leader in the person of the militant Middle East-trained religious scholar, Ustaz Yasser Igasan. Although Tolentino discounted the capability of Igasan to lead the group, it is interesting to note that the new leader possesses the traits which security experts have long argued ASG has been lacking — a religious anchor and an ideological compass. With Igasan's emergence, the ASG seems to have finally plugged this gap as the new leader is both an Islamic scholar and a recognized ideologue.

Little is known about Igasan except that he was among the original founding members of the ASG alongside the late Ustadz Abdulrajak Janjalani. He joined the ASG after graduating in 1993 from Islamic religious studies in Darul Imam, an Islamic institution established in 1988 in the Philippines' Marawi City by Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, Osama Bin Laden's brother-in-law. He had reportedly worked for the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), which recently had its funds frozen by the Philippine Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLAC) for its alleged involvement in assisting secessionist movements in the Southern Philippines.

Military experience

The assertion that Igasan has little military experience is misleading. As a teenager, he was reported to have participated as a Mujahideen in Afghanistan against the then Soviet Union, where he met ASG founder Abdulrajak Janjalani. On their return to the Philippines, both cooperated to establish the ASG. Igasan was absent from the Philippines during the height of the ASG's struggle in the late 1990s to the early 2000s due to a stint in Syria, Libya and Saudi Arabia for further Islamic religious studies. However, this religious preparation placed him in good stead to lead the ASG as a more radicalized organization, guided by the late Janjalani's political vision of an Islamic state in the Southern Philippines. This development could well put the ASG back on the radar of Global Islamic Jihad.

The ASG determines its leaders through consensus (*shura*) involving the group's top commanders such as Radullan Sahiron, Isnilon Hapilon, Albader Pared and Doctor Abu or Abu Pula. This suggests that the commanders have already supported Igasan's appointment.

Implications of ASG's new Leadership

It will take time for Igasan to consolidate his position and implement his own vision, so it is too early to detect any changes in the strategy and tactics of the ASG. His background however does provide a potential outline for future ASG developments.

From the ideological perspective, Igasan will provide legitimacy to the organization. It is likely that there will be more militant activities of the organization in the future. Igasan's background as head of the Haraqatul Quran (Quranic Studies) of the IIRO reflects his religious knowledge. His perceived association with Syrian, Libyan and Saudi Islamists will more likely bring to the organization the sympathy and the attractiveness of the cause of global Jihad. As a consequence, the ASG will more likely engage the American forces in Jolo, Sulu or target American foreign aid workers in Southern Philippines in retaliation for what is happening in the Middle East. This return to targeting foreigners will be also in part to gain ransom, but more critically they will want to display their commitment to global Jihad. The averted roadside bomb laid against the US troops in Jolo that prompted the US ambassador to the Philippines to offer a reward for a civilian informant that led to the disarming of the bomb is an early indication of things to come. The relative peace brought about by American assistance may be challenged to ensure the ASG is seen as a credible armed secessionist organization in the Muslim communities.

Igasan's religious background will also likely draw sympathy from Ustaz Habier Malik, a cleric of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) who recently withdrew from the peace agreement which the MNLF signed with the Philippine government. A tactical alliance between them will affect the counter-terrorism efforts of the government, and will be a combat multiplier for both the ASG and the MNLF. The ASG will also be able to confront the counter-ideological work being advanced by some ulama (religious leaders) who have been issuing *fatwa* (religious edicts) challenging ASG's legitimacy as an organization. The entry of Igasan into the ASG will address a serious weakness in the late Janjalani's leadership as he did not have the ability to address these *fatwa*. Igasan's religious credentials will put him on an equal footing with the moderate Islamic scholars.

JI links?

There may be an influx of new recruits from more radical and religiously inclined individuals who are susceptible to the call of Jihad. The ASG will likely be on the run for at least the next two years, as the Philippine military will sustain its intensive operations against the group. The ASG will however try to draw the military into a protracted war or wait for the shift in the military campaign towards the renewed threat of the left-wing New People's Army (NPA) in the Christian provinces. The ASG can then re-emerge and conduct its terrorist activities. Special operations such as terrorist bombings will likely emerge as the most viable tactic of the ASG in the near future. The group's targets will remain centres of foreign and non-Muslim activity in the Philippines: tourist destinations, malls, churches, airlines and shipping lines. Regionally, the ongoing relationship with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) will continue. JI's ability to find shelter and support from an Igasan-led ASG will be strengthened given their shared ideology.

What is clear is that the ASG is now at a strategic crossroads. The most logical approach open for the Philippine government is to continue the military pressure and strengthen its community engagement programmes by stepping up poverty alleviation efforts as well as boosting the capacity of local government. This will limit the military and ideological support for the ASG irrespective of the direction taken by Igasan. One way to ensure this is to re-establish the cease-fire with the MNLF and sustain the negotiations with the other major separatist movement, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). This will show that the government is willing and able to deliver on political and social issues to reduce the appeal of violence, since the legitimate grievances of the southern Philippines population are being addressed peacefully.

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