

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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RUSSIA DEPENDS 'PROTECTORATE' IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC AS REBELS ADVANCE

Jacob Zenn

France has historically been the major Western power guaranteeing political stability in the Francophone countries of northwest and central Africa. However, Turkey has increasingly matched French influence in North Africa, while the United States, to an extent, has done the same in Niger and perhaps Rwanda ([France24](#), December 24, 2020). While Russia provides weapons to various Francophone countries, it has also become the protector of the Central African Republic (CAR). Prior to this, France had been the most influential foreign power in CAR and neighboring countries, including, for example, Chad, where Paris has consistently "propped up" its three decades-long President Idriss Déby ([rfi.fr](#), March 20, 2019).

In 2013, France secured Bangui, CAR's capital, during the country's civil war and prevented Seleka rebels from taking the city ([France24](#), September 12, 2013). After

2013, however, Russia began "exchanging arms and cash for access to oil, minerals, strategic bases and rare earths" from CAR. Moscow is also training the country's armed forces and providing the security detail for CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. This indicated Russia was assuming France's traditional role as the security guarantor of the country ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), May 15, 2018). France accordingly criticized Moscow's role in CAR as unproductive, while the Kremlin increasingly became seen as Touadéra's backer ([dw.com](#), November 16, 2018).

In the weeks ahead of CAR's most recent crisis in December 2020, Russia also sent two weapons shipments, including tanks, to Bangui to help CAR's army maneuver throughout the country's expansive territory. In addition, there were soft power exchanges, such as music concerts, where Russian soldiers gave candy to children ([rosbalt.ru](#), October 24, 2020). The recent crisis, however, began in the run-up to December 27 elections when the Unity for Peace in Central Africa (UPC) militia seized Bambari, the country's fourth-largest city, and threatened Bangui. Suspicions were rampant that former pres-

ident François Bozizé was behind the rebels ([France24](#), December).

Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) responded by dispatching 300 military instructors to CAR at "to train [CAR] military personnel" upon the government's request ([rbc.ru](#), December 22, 2020). Russian military contractors were also seen around Bangui ([vk.com](#), December 23, 2020). Ultimately France deployed warplanes to CAR and Rwanda sent several hundred troops into the country, but more than any other external power, it was the Russian forces who protected Touadéra and deterred the rebels from continuing toward Bangui ([France24](#), December 23, 2020). Moscow, therefore, can currently be considered CAR's security guarantor, or least Touadéra's, and its support has prevented the militias from approaching Bangui, despite their attempts as recently as January 13 to launch offensives toward the capital ([lequotidien.com](#), January 9; [Al Jazeera](#), January 13). Russia, in turn, can be expected to continue receiving beneficial mining contracts ([repubblica.it](#), December 27, 2020).

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ISLAMIC STATE SINAI PROVINCE TARGETS EGYPT-ISRAEL GAS PIPELINE

Jacob Zenn

Since February 2018, Egypt has waged an intense counter-insurgency against Islamic State (IS) Sinai Province ([Arab News](#), December 25, 2020). Despite this, Sinai Province has claimed more attacks than any other IS external province except for Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). Sinai Province attacks have included firing mortars at Egyptian military posts and ambushing Egyptian troops, executing "collaborators," and massacring Christians and Sufis.

However, one of the more geopolitically significant types of attack has been Sinai Province's targeting of the gas pipeline that extends from the province into Israel. Three have occurred this year, including on February 3, November 19, and, most recently, on December 26 near Sabika in North Sinai. This is west of al-Arish and around 30 miles from Rafah in the Gaza Strip. When IS claimed the latest pipeline attack, the group unsurprisingly stated Sinai Province's motive was to disrupt the pipeline because it is connected to Israel. The attack was not particularly effective because it did not disrupt gas supply, civilians' housing, or the nearby industrial park ([Egypttoday.com](#), December 24, 2020).

The impact of the explosion was nevertheless large enough that smoke was seen 30 miles away ([alaraby.co.uk](#), December 25, 2020). Various Egyptians have since posted to social media their video recordings of the explosion from a distance ([Youtube.com](#), December 24, 2020). Although little proof in terms of photos or videos was provided to substantiate Sinai Province's involvement, the IS claim is likely true given the lack of other possible perpetrators and Sinai Province's record of targeting the gas pipeline ([TimesofIsrael.com](#), December 25).

Also notable about the gas pipeline attack claim was that it came during a week in which Sinai Province claimed no other attacks, which is rare. Thus, the high-profile attack, if not successful given its failure to disrupt gas supply, compensated for the downturn in Sinai Province's operational tempo. The attack will not, however, affect Israel's forward momentum in developing and ex-

panding ties with Turkey and Arab and other Mediterranean nations in the oil and gas sector ([jns.org](#), December 6, 2020). Meanwhile, Sinai Province's release of a long propaganda video in early 2021 demonstrates its fighters maintain sophisticated weapons and tactics and are able to resist Egypt's own most sophisticated counter-terrorism operations whether or not it presents a threat to gas flow between Sinai and Israel ([Twitter.com/@evacool](#), January 9).

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

American 'Boojahideen': The Boogaloo Bois' Blueprint for Extreme Libertarianism and Response to the Biden Administration

Angela Ramirez

The Boogaloo Bois is a recently formed decentralized armed movement comprised of loosely knit cells scattered throughout the United States. Boogaloo participants have also been involved in several attacks and plots, including the attempted kidnapping of Michigan's governor, an attempt to sell weapons to Hamas, and a deadly attack on a federal security officer in northern California. The movement is centered on participants' belief that the U.S. government has become excessively tyrannical. Participants, therefore, have concluded that a second civil war is unfortunate, but inevitable, in order to obtain "true liberty." The movement refers to this idealized second civil war as "the Boogaloo" ([Spotify \[Buck Johnson\]](#), July 2020). Occasionally, the word "Boogaloo" is exchanged for slang terms, however, such as "the big luau," the "Bungalow," or the "Big Igloo."

Boogaloo, Internet Culture, and Black Lives Matter

Boogaloo cells contain a mix of civilians and former military personnel. These participants call themselves "boojahideen," a linguistic spin-off of "mujahideen" ([Liberty Actual](#), Boojahideen Shop). They have also been forced to utilize secondary online public forums like Reddit, Gab, and Parler because mainstream platforms like Facebook and Twitter have prohibited their content. ([Reddit \[RealRhettEBoogie\]](#); [Parler \[Boojahideen Outfitters\]](#)). Despite this deplatforming, they are still able to circulate their ideology and connect with boojahideen in different regions of the United States.

This internet culture plays a key role in amplifying Boogaloo's ideology. Many Boogaloo participants accordingly first connect with one another online ([Sofrep.com](#), December 24, 2020). Similarly, a fundamental component of Boogaloo internet culture is utilizing memes, which became a method of propagandizing Boogaloo perspectives of civil war. One Boogaloo flag even has "meme-based insurgency" inscribed on it ([On-](#)

[lyfeds.com](#), January 2021). Boogaloo propaganda also enables a more violent ideology to become palatable and communicable to both existing boojahideen and the general public.

The Boogaloo movement is not, however, racialist. Instead, Boogaloo cells congregate around a libertarian political ideology that deviates from traditional "right" and "left" positions. Boogaloo cells across the United States have participated in and supported leftist-led Black Lives Matter rallies since the death of George Floyd ([Youtube/Black Lives Matter757](#), August 10, 2020). Boogaloo participants believe Black Lives Matters is "Disneyfied" and its supporters consist of some "Marxists" and "white Karens" who are not supported by Boogaloo, but Boogaloo participants hope to win them to Boogaloo ideology and have "Blacks and whites walk arm-in-arm against the feds" ([Spotify \[Buck Johnson\]](#), July 2020).

In some instances, Boogaloo cells have provided security for protesters during Black Lives Matter events. ([Twitter/ryanteeter98](#), August 27, 2020) In addition, a Boogaloo participant, Ivan Hunter, was arrested for contributing to the burning down of a Minneapolis police precinct after George Floyd's death and screaming "Justice for George Floyd" ([startribune.com](#), October 24, 2020). Hunter was also "affiliated" with Steve Carillo, another Boogaloo participant who killed a California federal protective security officer after George Floyd's death ([justice.gov](#), October 23, 2020). However, Boogaloo is also a vociferous proponent of the typically right-leaning view that Americans are entitled to an entirely unrestrained second amendment right to bear arms, open carry, and form well-regulated militias.

FBI Prevention of Boogaloo Attacks

Boojahideen insist they are not radicals, seek a peaceful revolution, and kick out any white supremacists on the "margins of society" if they try to participate ([Spotify \[Buck Johnson\]](#), July 2020). However, multiple Boogaloo participants are facing serious charges following both attempted and executed attacks on law enforcement and public officials. The FBI has played a crucial role in deterring these boojahideen plots often through the use of inside informants and undercover officers' infiltration of Boogaloo cells.

In September 2020, boojahideen Benjamin Teeter Michael Solomon, who were in the communication with Ivan Hunter, were charged with attempting to provide material weapons support to Hamas ([justice.gov](#), Sep-

tember 4, 2020). Believing Hamas was a mutual enemy of the United States, these two boojahideen considered themselves to be in alignment with Hamas. They, therefore, offered to manufacture unmarked firearms and firearm accessories for Hamas.

Unbeknownst to Teeter and Harrison, they were, in fact, attempting to deal arms to one of the FBI's undercover informants. Following an initial meeting with the informant, these boojahideen later delivered five firearm suppressors and a "drop in auto sear" firearm converter to the undercover FBI agent who they believed to be a senior Hamas official. At that time, they even offered to provide automatic weapons to Hamas and work as Hamas mercenaries in the future. Their actions, however, resulted in prompt charges from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force ([justice.gov](#), September 4, 2020).

Multiple Boogaloo Bois are also facing charges in Michigan after plotting to kidnap the state's Governor, Gretchen Whitmer, and lay siege to the state Capitol building ([justice.gov](#), October 8, 2020; see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), January 5). While the militia responsible called itself "Wolverine Watchmen," individuals within that militia referred to themselves as "boojahideen." In addition, a leader of the Whitmer kidnapping plot, Joseph Morrison, used the online nickname "Boogaloo Bunyan" in digital forums ([Michigan.gov](#), October 2020).

Morrison and other plot participants were interviewed by a local TV station prior to their arrest during a second amendment gun rights rally. In the interview, Morrison sported a trucker hat with the Boogaloo flag patch on the front. His co-conspirators also donned Hawaiian shirts, a fashion trademark of Boogaloo participants ([Youtube/Target8News](#), October 9, 2020).

The kidnapping plot was launched in response to what the participants called "government tyranny" stemming from Whitmer's COVID-19 lockdown orders. The cell had been developing detailed plans to kidnap Whitmer, "try" her for "crimes," and lay siege to the Michigan state capitol building. Confidential FBI informants were able to leak plot information, meeting audios, and chat room conversations with the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force ([Michigan.gov](#), October 2020). This collaboration led to the arrest of everyone involved in the plot.

Boogaloo Responses to the Biden Administration

With the Joseph R. Biden-Kamala Harris administration transitioning into the White House, new dynamics will emerge between the Boogaloo movement and the U.S. government. Some Boogaloo cells have a history of seeking unity and offering aid to peaceful Black Lives Matter protesters ([Youtube/Black Lives Matter757](#), August 10, 2020; [Youtube/UnicornRiot](#), August 26, 2020). The Biden-Harris administration's criminal justice policy is expected to address Black Lives Matter protesters' demands ([joebiden.com/justice](#), January 2021). Thus, it is likely the Boogaloo movement will support these agenda items.

However, Boogaloo participants still have a rigid stance that U.S. citizens must maintain unimpeded constitutional second amendment rights, including the right to carry firearms in all capacities ([Youtube/MatthewRodier](#), October 17, 2020). The Biden-Harris administration, however, aims to eliminate the sale and import of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines ([joebiden.com/gunsafety](#), January 2021). It is highly likely the Boogaloo movement will push back against these changes.

In the past, boojahideen have voiced their discontent with firearm restrictions. On August 18, 2020 in Richmond, Virginia, for example, a large group of Boogaloo participants marched in full tactical gear while open-carrying weapons. During the event, Boogaloo participant Mike Dunn read an open letter that stated "any gun legislation proposed and passed will be seen as a direct act of war against the free people of Virginia. This includes any firearms ban and magazine capacity limitations" ([Youtube/News2Share](#), August 18, 2020). It is highly likely that the Biden administration's gun control laws will be viewed as a "direct act of war" in the eyes of the Boogaloo movement.

While the rallies Boogaloo militias have attended in 2020 remained peaceful, it is impossible to ignore the multiple terrorism-related incidents in which its participants have planned and participated. The attempted kidnapping of Governor Whitmer, attempt to provide material support to Hamas, and attack on federal building personnel display the willingness of boojahideen to attack government officials to advance their political agenda. While it is likely Boogaloo cells will support Joe Biden's decision to reform policing operations, the Biden administration's restrictions on select firearms will likely trigger rebellious activity from boojahideen nationwide.

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Boko Haram's Pan-Nigerian Affiliate System after the Kankara Kidnapping: A Microcosm of Islamic State's 'External Provinces'

Jacob Zenn

On December 11, 2020, around 300 male students were kidnapped from a Kankara, Katsina State school in northwestern Nigeria ([TheCable](#), December 13, 2020). The attack was inconsistent with typical northwestern Nigeria banditry operations involving smaller-scale kidnapping and extortion, pillaging, and assassination of local political enemies that have escalated in northwestern Nigerian in recent years. The attack was, however, consistent with the past activities of the Boko Haram faction led by Abubakar Shekau. Shekau's faction is responsible for the mass killing of male students in their dormitories in 2013 and the Chibok kidnapping of more than 200 female students in Borno State, northeastern Nigeria in 2014. Furthermore, the Kankara kidnapping reflected Boko Haram's "affiliate system" because the attack was conducted by Boko Haram's northwestern Nigerian "affiliate" in the Katsina-Niger-Zamfara state axis, which is comprised primarily of bandits ("Niger" refers to Niger State, Nigeria, not the Republic of Niger).

The Bandits in Kankara

Suspicions of, and dread about, Boko Haram's involvement in the Kankara kidnapping increased when Shekau claimed responsibility for the kidnapping in a December 15 audio ([Telegram](#), December 15, 2020). Two days later, another Boko Haram video featured Kankara students being interviewed by an off-screen bandit interviewer and Shekau in split-screen, re-claiming the kidnapping ([Telegram](#), December 17, 2020). A boy in the video was pressured to say "we've been caught by the gang of Abubakar Shekau" and, consistent with Boko Haram's ideology, he urged Nigeria's government "to close any kind of schools, excluding Islamiyya [Islamic schools]." In addition, the boy requested the govern-

ment "to send them the money" and "send back the armies and jets who have come to help [rescue] us ([Telegram](#), December 17, 2020)."

This December 17 video corroborated Boko Haram's involvement because it otherwise would have been impossible for Boko Haram to display exclusive footage of more than 100 kidnapped schoolboys. Moreover, both December 15 and 17 videos had authentic trappings of Boko Haram videos' typical logos, styles, and online release mechanisms. Nevertheless, it is unlikely Shekau's direct chain-of-command was holding the Kankara schoolboys. Although the December 17 video's optics resembled Boko Haram's initial video of the Chibok schoolgirls in May 2014, Boko Haram has never publicly demanded money from Nigeria's government or warned the government about conducting rescue operations ([Youtube](#), May 12, 2014). Those two demands represented the Katsina-based bandits' interests, while Boko Haram's ideology was reflected in the boy's other statements.

Another difference between the Chibok and Kankara kidnappings is Shekau eventually approved the release of 103 Chibok schoolgirls, but only after more than three years of on-and-off negotiations and the exchange of Boko Haram prisoners and reportedly \$3 million ([thebable.ng](#), December 23, 2017; [Youtube](#), May 12, 2017). Several dozen Chibok schoolgirls also chose to remain with their Boko Haram husbands, while others died in captivity ([premiumtimes.ng](#), April 14, 2018). However, all the Kankara boys were released only three days after the kidnapping through negotiations between the government and bandits, with a ransom reportedly paid to the bandits ([TVCNewsNigeria](#), December 18).

The Kankara Kidnappers' Relationship to Abubakar Shekau

The Kankara kidnapping can be understood as involving bandits operating in northwestern Nigeria, who conducted the kidnapping. However, they had communication lines to Shekau not only for media, but also for orchestrating the kidnapping. The bandits would not have conducted such an unprecedentedly large-scale kidnapping for northwestern Nigerian bandits in the mold of the Chibok kidnapping unless Boko Haram advised them beforehand.

It remains unknown whether ransom money made it from the Kankara bandits to Shekau's Sambisa Forest base in southern Borno or whether Shekau approved the boys' release. Details about a second disrupted kidnapping of schoolboys near Kankara just hours after the Kankara schoolboys' release also remained unclear, but could suggest Shekau loyalists among the bandits attempted to compensate for the premature release of the Kankara schoolboys without Shekau's approval by kidnapping another set of schoolboys ([premiumtimesng.com](https://www.premiumtimesng.com), December 20, 2020). Nevertheless, given the lines of communication between Kankara bandits and Shekau, there were logistical routes that could have been used to pass ransom funds from the Kankara bandits to Shekau in Sambisa.

Furthermore, a series of Boko Haram videos in 2020 demonstrated that bandits operating not only in northwestern Nigeria were among other militants in Lake Chad and Cameroon who are loyal to Shekau. The bandits who conducted the Kankara kidnapping in Boko Haram's name were likely among those northwestern Nigerian bandits loyal to Shekau and not in the Sambisa-based "Boko Haram central": they were an "affiliate." Shekau, for his, part, has not commented on the Kankara schoolboys' release, but simply went about usual business by releasing an audio threatening prominent elder Nigerian Salafist theologian, Ahmad Gumi ([@Telegram](https://t.me/ahmadgumi), January 6).

Regional Pledges of Loyalty to Abubakar Shekau

In 2020, loyalty videos between Boko Haram and jihadists in Lake Chad, northwestern Nigeria, and Cameroon were released at least three times. For example:

- Boko Haram offered 'glad tidings' in English, Hausa, Fulani, and French to "brothers" in Zamfara and Niger states in June 2020 ([@Telegram](https://t.me/boko_haram), June 15, 2020)
- "Mujahideen" in Niger State offered 'glad tidings' to Abubakar Shekau in July 2020 ([@Telegram](https://t.me/mujahideen_niger), July 7, 2020); and
- Boko Haram released Eid al-Adha videos from Shekau loyalists in Cameroon, Lake Chad, Niger State, and Sambisa on August 5, 2020 ([@Telegram](https://t.me/boko_haram), August 5, 2020);

Those videos reflected Shekau's efforts since 2019 to recruit jihadists outside of Borno State to Boko Haram. In fact, as early as 2014, Shekau released a video to Niger and Katsina states' Fulanis, presumably including bandits, to implore them to join Boko Haram. Shekau, however, did not succeed at that time. [1] The Kankara kidnapping was, therefore, conducted by the Boko Haram "affiliate" in northwestern Nigeria whose bandits finally pledged loyalty to Shekau in 2020 after his intermediaries established communications with them. Meanwhile, the Lake Chad "affiliate" has been led by Bakura and pledged loyalty to Shekau in a September 24, 2019 video, which was released one day after Shekau himself offered 'glad tidings' to the "mujahideen in Lake Chad" in a separate video ([@Telegram](https://t.me/abubakarshekau), September 23-24, 2019; see [Terrorism Monitor](https://www.terrorismmonitor.org), January 28, 2020).

While Shekau's Sambisa-based fighters, who constitute "Boko Haram central," conducted the November 2019 Zabarmari beheadings of dozens of farmers outside Borno State's capital, Maiduguri, and the Christmas 2019 abduction of a Chibok pastor, Bakura's fighters in the Lake Chad "affiliate" conducted the massacre in Toumour, Niger in December 2019. All of those operations were claimed by the Shekau-loyal "Boko Haram central's" anonymous spokesman ([@Telegram](https://t.me/abubakarshekau), December 1, 2020; [@Telegram](https://t.me/abubakarshekau), December 15, 2020; [@Telegram](https://t.me/abubakarshekau), December 29, 2020;). Likewise, the northwestern Nigerian, or perhaps more specifically, Katsina, "affiliate," conducted the Kankara kidnapping. Boko Haram attacks on Cameroon's Lake Chad shoreline are those of the Lake Chad "affiliate" while those in Cameroon along the southern Borno border are conducted by Cameroon-based Shekau loyalists, who comprise the Cameroon "affiliate" (africacenter.org, November 13, 2020).

Conclusion

One way to view Boko Haram's "affiliate system" is to compare it to Islamic State and its external provinces. Islamic State in Syria and Iraq had regular media contacts, but often only several intermediaries with, external provinces in Southeast Asia, Central Africa (Congo and Mozambique), and even Nigeria-based and Shekau-rival Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). These external provinces are loyal to Islamic State's leaders, ideology, and goals, but have a large amount of autonomy

to conduct their day-to-day insurgencies and only coordinate with Islamic State leadership for high-profile operations, media campaigns, funding, or trainings.

Likewise, Shekau-loyal bandits in Kankara coordinated this high-profile kidnapping with Boko Haram and liaised with Shekau through intermediaries about it. However, ultimately the bandits had a final say on whether to release the boys or not, with them opting to do so for whatever benefits they received. Just as Islamic State's external provinces, including in Libya, Khorasan (Afghanistan) and Sinai, have had greater coordination with Islamic State's "central" leadership in Syria and Iraq than other external provinces, Lake Chad and Cameroonian "affiliates" have closer coordination with "Boko Haram central" than does the northwestern Nigerian "affiliate."

Shekau is neither affiliated with or loyal to Islamic State or al-Qaeda at present. Boko Haram's pan-Nigerian "affiliate system," which extends into Chad, Niger, and Cameroon's Lake Chad shorelines and Cameroonian borderlands with southern Borno, however, is somewhat of a microcosm of Islamic State's global province system.

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Notes

[1] The video was found in a Boko Haram camp, but not released until March 31, 2016 by Nigerian media agencies to which it was leaked by the Nigerian army. It can be seen at: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/04/09/iswap-investigate-video-march-31-2016-and-march-24-2016-surrender-video/>

Inside Duterte's Failed Response to the Philippines' Communist Insurgency and the Appeal of New People's Army among Indigenous Peoples

Jack Broome

On December 7, 2020, following speculation in the news, the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte finally announced that the government would not offer a holiday ceasefire—as is tradition for this time of year—to the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Duterte's announcement came during his weekly address to the nation on the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but Duterte went one step further by declaring that peace talks are "dead" and there would no longer be any ceasefires for the remainder of his presidency (abs-cbn.com, December 8, 2020).

The Promise of Peace

Despite the apparent conviction behind Duterte's statement, the Duterte administration's approach towards the NPA and the issue of Communism as a whole has been marked by variability and inconsistency. This reflects the complexity of Duterte's own relationship with left-wing politics in the Philippines. He is a former student of CPP founder, Jose Maria Sison, who Duterte admitted played a pivotal role in the formation of his political views and led him to become a member of Kabataang Makabayan, a socialist youth organization that Sison also founded (inquirer.net, March 28, 2017). The influence of Duterte's early exposure to socialism can also be seen in his partisan affiliation with Partido Demokratiko Pilipino–Lakas ng Bayan (PDP–Laban), which has its roots in the era of former Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos and was established through the convergence of key members of the political opposition, including Aquilino Pimentel Jr., and anti-authoritarian protest leaders, including Duterte himself.

Duterte's personal relationships and political background placed him in a unique position to secure an end to the 50-year-long NPA insurgency. Indeed, Sison believed that if Duterte were elected, then peace could be achieved. Prior to his election in 2016, Duterte also made clear his intentions by promising to release political prisoners, including CPP leaders Wilma and Benito Tiamzo, and allow the return of Sison to the Philippines from his exile in the Netherlands (cnnphilippines.com, June 16, 2016).

During his time as Mayor of Davao in Mindanao, Duterte had also gained a reputation for bringing law and order to the city, which until recently was one of the worst affected by crime in the Philippines. It is likely Duterte wished to replicate this success with the Communist threat, especially as the surrounding region of Davao is an NPA stronghold.

Upon ascension to the presidency, in his first State of the Nation Address, Duterte announced a unilateral ceasefire and called on the Communist rebels to reciprocate (abs-cbn.com, July 25, 2016). The ceasefire was revoked after just five days, however, after the NPA failed to respond. Following a series of clashes, a ceasefire was finally agreed when Duterte released the Tiamzos. A few days later, the first round of peace talks was held in Oslo, Norway and for the first time ever, both sides agreed to an indefinite, unilateral ceasefire (abs-cbn.com, August 22, 2016; abs-cbn.com, February 04, 2017). Talks progressed, but were later hampered by the government's refusal to release all political prisoners until a permanent ceasefire was signed. Finally, in February 2017, the process collapsed after the military blamed the NPA for the killings of two soldiers (abs-cbn.com, January 31, 2017).

However, for the first time in three years, on March 18, 2020 the government declared a ceasefire to free-up personnel to focus on combating the spread of the COVID-19 virus (rappler.com, March 18, 2020). Although initially hesitant, the CPP agreed to the ceasefire one week later (Inquirer.net, March 25, 2020). The ceasefire was short-lived though, as it failed to prevent continuing clashes. Duterte even threatened to impose martial law

in response to an April 2020 NPA attack on soldiers distributing cash assistance to residents in Agusan del Sur as part of the government's COVID-19 relief package (pna.gov, April 17, 2020; abs-cbn.com, April 24, 2020).

Since the return to hostilities, almost daily reports of NPA soldiers either captured, killed or capitulated have appeared, and in late 2020, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the government repeatedly stated that the NPA is on the verge of collapse (kalinawnews.com, November 18, 2020). Yet at the same time, National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon alleged that the NPA took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic and became "the number one political security threat" according to the president (benarnews.org, October 28, 2020).

Duterte's Anti-Communist Campaign

The government's constant flip-flopping on its approach towards the Communist insurgency is a symptom of how politically motivated the issue has become. Since having made it a central part of his election campaign, Duterte has been under significant pressure to find a resolution to the conflict. After the ceasefire collapsed in March 2020, Duterte promised that where engagement had failed, more hardline measures would prevail instead. In early July, Duterte unilaterally declared the NPA a terrorist organization without following the necessary legal procedure, which requires gaining prior approval from the Department of Justice (Inquirer.net, July 9, 2020; Inquirer.net, July 9, 2020). One month later, Randall Enchalis, a peace consultant with the CPP's political branch, the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), was killed by agents who were widely assumed to have acted under the government's direction (abs-cbn.com, August 11, 2020). This pattern continued through November 2020 with the deaths of two further NDFP peace consultants, as well as the arrest of a third, and then into December with the announcement that the NDFP-Mindanao spokesperson had been killed (sunstar.com, December 2, 2020; Inquirer.net, November 27, 2020; Inquirer.net, December 10, 2020).

Meanwhile, “red-tagging”, which refers to the labeling of someone as a Communist sympathizer for political gain, remained unchecked. Duterte has been accused of using red-tagging as a diversionary tactic to detract attention away from his government’s inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic ([Inquirer.net](#), December 2, 2020). Blame has also been placed on the military for employing red-tagging as a means to exaggerate the threat of communism and the NPA-led insurgency and thereby increase military budgetary funding ([Inquirer.net](#), December 3, 2020).

Red-tagging has become so common that, in November 2020, the Philippine Senate was forced to initiate an inquiry to address the problem. Far from rectifying the issue, however, the inquiry simply became an additional forum for red-tagging ([Inquirer.net](#), November 24, 2020). In fact, while the inquiry was still ongoing, Duterte identified the Makabayan bloc, a coalition of leftist party-list political parties, as a CPP legal front ([sunstar.com](#), November 30, 2020).

The Philippines’ indigenous peoples, which the Makabayan bloc seeks to represent through organizations like Katribu and Kalipunan ng mga Katutubong Mamanay ng Pilipinas (KAMP), were also implicated in this fresh wave of red-tagging. Two days before Duterte’s announcement, the daughter of Representative Eufemia Campos Cullamat, whose party Bayan Muna is in the Makabayan bloc, was killed during a clash with the AFP. The military said that the daughter, Jevilyn, was a medic for the NPA’s youth propaganda wing ([benarnews.org](#), November 30, 2020). Jevilyn and her mother are members of the Manobo ethnic minority group, which is among more than 20 different indigenous Austronesian ethnicities based in Mindanao and collectively referred to as Lumads.

Indigenous Peoples and Communism in the Philippines

The Duterte administration’s difficulty in finding an effective policy solution to the communist insurgency is not because of the conflict’s apparent intractability, but rather the government’s failure to address its underlying causes. This can be most clearly seen in the enduring

appeal of militant Communism among the Philippines’ indigenous communities. The Lumads, for example, accounted for 70 percent of NPA fighters in 2019, according to the Senate Cultural Communities Committee ([mb.com.ph](#), August 27, 2019). At one time, Lumads controlled land covering 17 of Mindanao’s 24 provinces. However, in response to government-sponsored in-migration of Visayan people from the middle islands of the country, Lumads were forced to retreat to the highlands and forests. Due to the loss of their lands and economic livelihoods, as well as their relative isolation from mainstream society, Lumads are now disproportionately affected by issues related to poverty and poor access to education.

Mindanao is often cited by the government as the last remaining NPA stronghold and therefore a key area of focus for the AFP’s counter-insurgency activities. Unfortunately for the AFP, the remoteness of areas inhabited by Lumads also makes them ideal hideouts for the Communist insurgents and means that Lumad civilians are frequently caught in the midst of conflict between the NPA and government forces. Such factors have made Lumads easy targets for NPA recruiters, and have only been exacerbated by the government’s aggressive attempts to combat NPA recruitment. For instance, 50 Lumad schools, which Duterte had previously threatened to bomb after declaring them to be NPA recruiting centers, were closed in 2017 ([abs-cbn.com](#), July 24, 2017).

Lumad communities have been further destabilized due to the AFP’s sponsorship of Lumad paramilitary groups as a means of preventing the NPA infiltration of Lumad lands. One such group is the Magahat Baghani Force, which roughly translates to “tribal defense force” ([the-newhumanitarian.org](#), April 28, 2016). Despite the name, in 2015 Magahat Baghani fighters were blamed for killing two Lumad schoolteachers and a tribal leader, and burning teacher’s cottages ([mindanews.com](#), September 1, 2015; [Inquirer.net](#), November 12, 2015). The attacks triggered mass evacuations of Lumads from surrounding areas and Magahat Baghani claimed that, in both cases, the schools were facilitating NPA recruitment. Indicative of the degree of power and autonomy afforded to Magahat Baghani by the military, an army

battalion was camped only 100 meters away from the site in which the first Lumad schoolteachers' killings occurred, but it made no attempt to intervene (thenewhumanitarian.org, April 28, 2016). The Magahat Baghani leader was alleged to have been killed by the NPA in October 2020 (Inquirer.net, October 5, 2020).

For similar reasons to the Lumads, several other Philippines' indigenous peoples have become embroiled in the conflict between the NPA and the government. Recently, Aeta communities in Zambales have been particularly affected. Aeta is another collective term for a group of ethnicities indigenous to the island of Luzon in the northern Philippines. In August 2020, clashes between the military and the NPA displaced up to 200 Aeta families, after which five Aetas were detained on suspicion of being NPA members (Inquirer.net, August 24, 2020). During this conflict period, government soldiers were accused of mistreating Aeta community members and forcing them to eat human excrement (abs-cbn.com, September 1, 2020). Two Aetas were also the first people to be charged under the controversial Anti-Terrorism Act after they were accused of killing a soldier in the August 2020 clashes (Inquirer.net, November 18, 2020; philstar.com, August 23, 2020). While under military custody, the two were alleged to have suffered 'horrendous' torture, including being threatened with execution (abs-cbn.com, November 20, 2020).

Another indigenous group to be affected by the Communist insurgency is the Tumanduk (also known as Suludnon), who are an alliance of 17 indigenous communities in Panay Islands. In December 2020, nine residents of remote Tumanduk villages were killed in a joint police and military operation and at least 17 other people from nearby villages were arrested. The Philippine National Police (PNP) claimed that those killed were NPA members who resisted when officers served search warrants for the illegal possession of firearms, ammunition and explosives (Inquirer.net, December 30, 2020). Also in December 2020, four members of the Mangyan tribe in Oriental Mindoro, who were alleged leaders of an NPA unit operating on the island, surrendered to the military (Inquirer.net, December 30, 2020).

Conclusion

The Duterte administration's lack of a clear strategy when it comes to resolving the Communist insurgency, as well as its failure to address the conflict's underlying causes, present significant obstacles to the government's goal of securing peace by the end of Duterte's term in 2022 (Inquirer.net, October 13, 2019). Already the military are managing expectations by claiming that only central and northern Luzon will be Communist-free by 2022 (philstar.com, December 23, 2020). The government further backed itself into a corner when the Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) formally declared the CPP and the NPA a terrorist organization on December 25, 2020 (Inquirer.net, December 25, 2020). Both legally and from a political perspective, this makes it difficult for Duterte to resume negotiations with the CPP-NDFP-NPA in the future. Shortly after the ATC's declaration, for example, the NPA announced that it would revive urban hit squads to attack "enemy units and officers who have committed bloody crimes against the people" (benarnews.org, January 4). For a president who many thought was best placed to deal with the Communists, a negotiated settlement to the conflict now seems further off than it did at the beginning of Duterte's term.

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