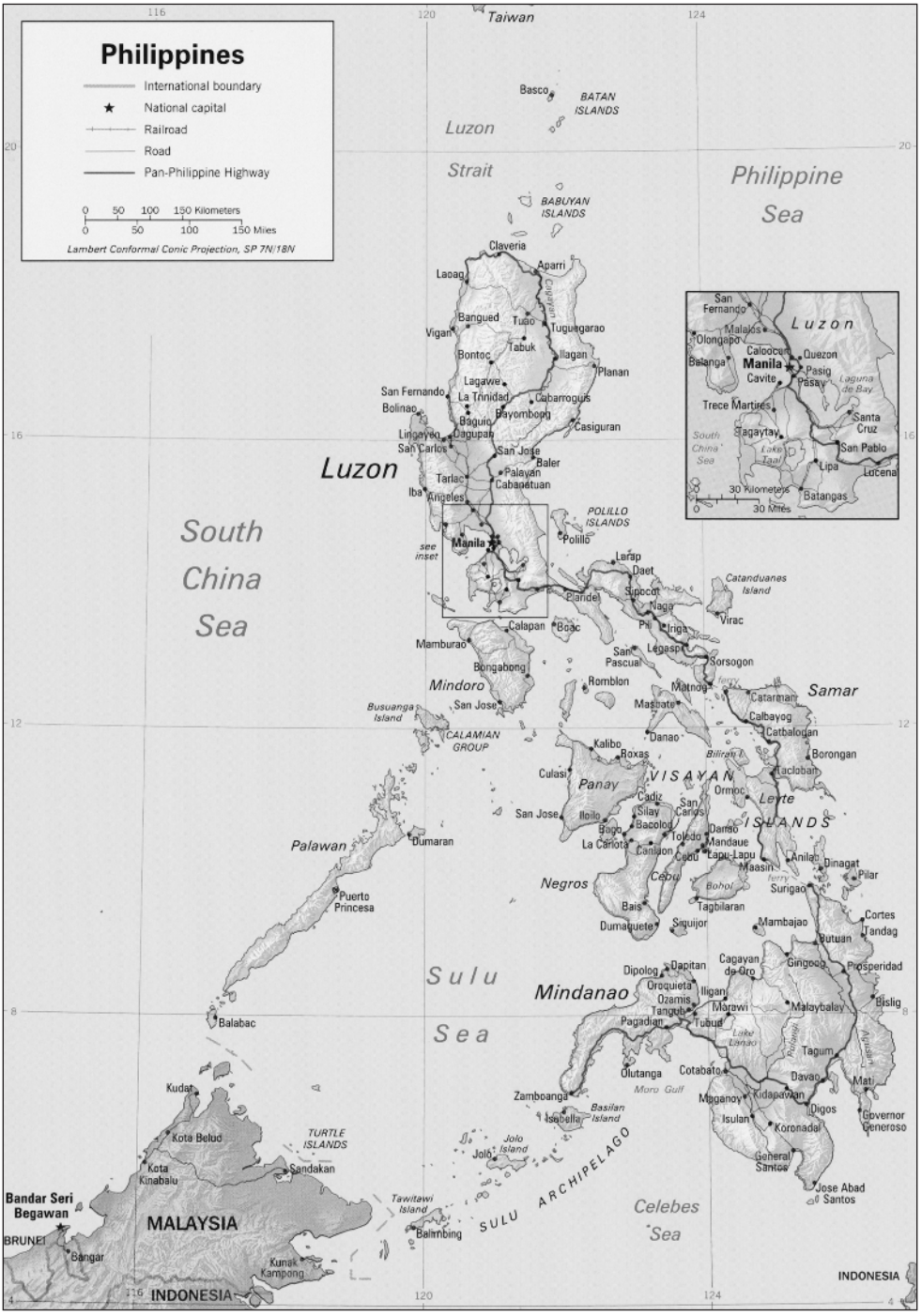
PART ONE

Brown Brothers: The Philippines


Philippines
International boundary
National capital
Railroad
Road
Pan-Philippine Highway
0 50 100 150 Kilometers
0 50 100 150 Miles
Lambert Conformal Conic Projection, SP 7N/18N
Taiwan
Basco
BATAN ISLANDS
Luzon Strait
Philippine Sea
BABUYAN ISLANDS
Claveria
Aparri
Laoag
Cagayan
Vigan
Bangued
Tuao
Tuguegarao
Bontoc
Tabuk
Ilagan
Planan
Lagawe
San Fernando
La Trinidad
Cabarroguis
Bolinao
Baguio
Bayombong
Casiguran
Lingayen
Dagupan
San Carlos
San Jose
Baler
Luzon
Tarlac
Palayan
Cabanatuan
Iba
Angeles
POLILLO ISLANDS
Polillo
Manila
see inset
Larap
Daet
Catanduanes Island
Sipocot
Naga
Virac
Pili
Iriga
Plaridel
Calapan
Boac
Mamburao
San Pascual
Legaspi
Sorsogon
Bongabong
Mindoro
Romblon
Matnog
Samar
Busuanga Island
San Jose
Masbate
Catarman
Calbayog
CALAMIAN GROUP
Catbalogan
Kalibo
Danao
Borongan
Roxas
Culasi
Panay
VISAYAN ISLANDS
Ormoc
Leyte
Cadiz
San Carlos
Silay
Iloilo
Bacolod
Dumaran
Palawan
Toledo
Mandaue
La Carlota
Cebu
Lapu-Lapu
Maasin
Dinagat
Negros
Bohol
Surigao
Puerto Princesa
Bais
Tagbilaran
Dumaguete
Siquijor
Mambajao
Cortes
Tandag
Butuan
Sulu Sea
Dipolog
Dapitan
Cagayan de Oro
Gingoog
Prosperidad
Oroquieta
Iligan
Ozamis
Mindanao
Malaybalay
Bislig
Tangub
Marawi
Pagadian
Tubud
Balabac
Tagum
Cotabato
Davao
Mati
Zamboanga
Moro Gulf
Maganoy
Kidapawan
Digos
Isabella
Basilan Island
Isulan
Koronadal
Governor Generoso
Kudat
Kota Belud
TURTLE ISLANDS
Jolo Island
Jolo
Kota Kinabalu
Sandakan
General Santos
Jose Abad Santos
Bandar Seri Begawan
MALAYSIA
Tawitawi Island
SULU ARCHIPELAGO
Celebes Sea
BRUNEI
Bangar
Balimbing
Kunak
Kampong
INDONESIA
INDONESIA
South China Sea
San Fernando
Malolos
Olongapo
Caloocan
Quezon
Balanga
Manila
Pasig
Cavite
Pasay
Laguna de Bay
Trece Martires
Tagaytay
Santa Cruz
Lake Taal
San Pablo
Lipa
Lucena
Batangas
30 Kilometers
30 Miles

1

The Doctor

The morning after the aerial attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, September 12, 2001, Americans awoke to the realization that al-Qaeda was a worldwide organization. In addition to its core Arab fighters and funders in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, other operatives lived, worked, and were winning favor among the Muslims of Southeast Asia. Al-Qaeda's contacts and contractors in the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore, it developed, were numerous.

There was the Pakistani Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, whom the 9/11 Commission called "the principal architect" of the 2001 attacks. He had operated out of Manila in 1994, planning other attacks and recruiting for al-Qaeda.

Then there was Khalid's nephew Ramzi Yousef. After successfully blasting a six-story-deep crater in the foundation of the World Trade Center on February 26, 1993, he shifted his base of operations to Manila and began concocting a bizarre and ultimately failed plot known as Operation Bojinka, to simultaneously blow six American airliners out of the sky while assassinating Pope John Paul II and President Bill Clinton.

Riduan Isamuddin, an Indonesian better known as Hambali and a protégé of Kalid, recruited seventeen members of the Indonesian terrorist group Jemaah Islamiya to participate in a 9/11-style "second wave" aerial attack on the U.S. Bank Tower in Los Angeles.

Saudis Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, both connected to the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in East Africa and both aboard American Airlines Flight 77 when it plowed into the Pentagon, attended a critical al-Qaeda planning session in January 2000 at a golf resort condominium outside Kuala Lumpur. Their host was Yazid Sufaat, a Malaysian biochemist and a graduate of California State University.

These men and numerous others were linked to al-Qaeda either directly or through its Southeast Asian franchises. Their goals and tactics varied extensively at the time and they still do. Likewise, the degree of violence they employ, their impact on local populations, and the effectiveness of governments in containing them differ significantly from country to country in the region. Consequently, the countries in which they operate require individually tailored attention from the United States. Many of the people with whom we spoke, whose daily existences were intimately affected by the radical Islamist threat, are hoping that the Obama administration will begin paying them that level of attention. Based on what we heard, a new template of educational and economic assistance would help relieve the extremist pressure. If we can help them in ways they need and want, we will help ourselves.

The first stop on our journey through Southeast Asia was Mindanao, at the southern end of the thousand-mile-long Philippines archipelago, the ancestral home of the country's four-million-member Muslim minority. Decades of continuing war in Mindanao between Muslims and the Christian-dominated central government have followed America's botched and only attempt at colonial rule. In much the same way, today's bloody messes in Iraq and Kashmir resulted from Britain's inept efforts to extricate itself from the responsibility of ruling no-longer-profitable imperial outposts.

U.S. colonial rule began in 1898, when Washington annexed the islands during the brief Spanish-American War and paid Spain $20 million. The Philippine-American war of resistance, which began six weeks later, lasted for three years. Little taught in U.S. schools today,

it was a particularly brutal conflict, resulting in tens of thousands of Filipinos and thousands of Americans being killed. Forty-eight years later, in 1946, the United States got out of the colonial business and granted independence to the Philippines. To this day, the relationship remains erratic, and numerous Filipinos believe that an amorphous "Washington" somehow controls their homeland. Still, the great majority hold deep affection for all things American.

Dr. Nilo Barandino and his wife, Cristina, who live on the Mindanao island of Basilan, put the Islamist threat in blunt, personal terms. On November 28, 1992, a group of Muslim men armed with automatic weapons kidnapped the couple and nine of their children as they were driving from their home, in the small city of Isabela, to their farm in the countryside. The assailants were members of the Abu Sayyaf Group, a particularly vicious Islamic separatist organization that operates throughout the southern Philippines. Basilan, a tiny, deceptively lovely island some 575 miles south of Manila in the deep-emerald Celebes Sea, was an Abu Sayyaf stronghold.

After thirteen days of captivity at a jungle hideout, where some of the men raped Cristina in front of him, Barandino was released and instructed to come up with ransom money. Two weeks later he bought the family's freedom with $45,000 raised by mortgaging the farm.

Barandino, a physician, garrulous and given to a touch of self-aggrandizement, is also a deep brooder, a man who doesn't easily forgive or forget. At age seventy, when we met, he was compactly built and looked as fit as a well-conditioned man twenty years his junior. He claimed to have challenged Abu Sayyaf to put up five of its gunmen in an automatic-weapons duel with him. "They've never responded," he told us.

Barandino wanted revenge. In May 1993, he talked his way into accompanying a team of fifty-three government troops in an amphibious raid on Abu Sayyaf's Camp al-Madina. "I was old enough to be the father of most of them and still I was the best shot," he said. In the course of a running, nine-day gun battle, Barandino and the soldiers killed thirty-four terrorists and suffered no casualties

of their own. "I settled the score," he said. For that he would pay a price much stiffer than the $45,000 ransom money. Two years after the raid, one of his sons was gunned down at a fish market. The shooter allegedly was a young Abu Sayyaf initiate making his bones. Whether Barandino's son had been singled out or was just a random target was never officially determined.

A Roman Catholic, Barandino was born in Isabela, a city of seventy-four thousand, and has lived there his entire life. He has numerous Muslim friends. "I went to school with Abdurajak Janjalani [who founded Abu Sayyaf in 1991 and was killed by police in 1998] and I know many of their people. . . . They're protected by the police and many are family members of police officers and government people. The military doesn't know who's who because the soldiers are not from this area. The only way they can arrest someone is if a friend or a family member volunteers to identify them."

In December 2004, representatives of the U.S. embassy in Manila presented the State Department's $1 million "Rewards for Justice" program payment, in bricks of Philippine pesos packed in three suitcases, to three unnamed Filipinos at a public ceremony. The three, who fingered the brutal Abu Sayyaf commander Hamsiraji Sali, considered it prudent to disguise themselves with masks, sunglasses, oversized white sweatshirts, blue trousers, blue baseball caps, and even gloves at the reward ceremony.

Since their release, the Barandinos have taken costly steps to protect themselves. They completely rebuilt their house. The new structure, which stands on a hilly roadside above Isabela's bustling ferry dock, has sloped, 18-inch concrete walls, small barred windows, and a heavy black steel door. It looks more like a bunker than a dwelling. Belowground is a gloomy, claustrophobic, one-room clinic where Dr. Barandino sees patients when he's not on hospital duty. With no sunlight, the floor is constantly damp. When we were there, the room smelled of disinfectant. "Last January—the eighteenth, actually—someone tossed a grenade at us," said Cristina, with about the same level of emotion as a housewife elsewhere might complain of a clogged garbage disposal. "It just bounced off and exploded on the street."

After passing around cups of sweet, milky instant coffee, Cristina pulled three fat red photo albums from a cramped bookshelf and handed them to her husband. One by one, Nilo opened the books across his knees. He turned the plasticized pages slowly, as though to maximize dramatic effect, and recited the names of the figures in the three-by-five snapshots, the dates and circumstances of each killing.

He knew them all by heart. "This is from April 8, 2004," he said with clinical remove. "It's Commander Hamsiraji Sali, also known as José Ramirez. You will see that the side of the head has been blown away." Until troops ambushed and killed him, Hamsiraji was one of the top five leaders of Abu Sayyaf and was considered its most successful assassin.

The photos amounted to a gruesome history of Basilan. Some, like that of Hamsiraji, were of alleged terrorists government forces killed; others were of their victims. All were gut-churning—corpses torn by gaping wounds, blackened in the sodden heat of the equatorial southern Philippines, many with limbs or heads missing. One was no more than a torso. "It was found in the mangroves," Nilo said. "The arms and legs were chopped off and it was decapitated. We couldn't locate the head, so it was never identified."

The grisly collection showed twelve decapitations, a trademark of the Abu Sayyaf Group. "Actually," the doctor said as he unfolded a white sheet of figures his wife had begun typing fourteen years ago, "there have been more than 56 beheadings. Sorry, our records are not up to date, but this gives a general idea; also, more than 452 killings and 183 kidnappings."

Abu Sayyaf–related violence is just a small piece of the complex jigsaw puzzle of Islamic separatist-related bloodshed in the southern Philippines. Since the early 1970s, an estimated 120,000 people have been killed and property damage has been put at $3 billion. Well over 240,000 people remain displaced from their homes. Horror is so tightly woven into the fabric of Basilan's daily life that it is barely discernible to those who live there as anything other than ordinary, a subject for a family scrapbook. A small but particularly violent terror organization, Abu Sayyaf operates on

Basilan and other heavily Muslim islands of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. Its members, never more than seven hundred and now down to perhaps half that, use kidnapping, extortion, bombing, and assassination to pursue their goal of breaking away from the predominantly Catholic Philippines government and reestablishing what historically had been an independent Islamic sultanate.

Abu Sayyaf, Arabic for "Bearer of the Sword," is only one link in a loose chain of extremist Islamic groups strung across Southeast Asia from the southern end of Thailand through the arc of Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Newer links have begun appearing of late in such unlikely places as Vietnam and Cambodia. Some of these groups are narrowly focused independent operators, seeking greater autonomy for Muslim minorities within countries dominated by Christians or Buddhists or where ethnic Chinese minorities run the economies. Others are tied to each other and to al-Qaeda, sharing Osama bin Laden's grand vision of rescuing Islamic states from perceived American and other Western neocolonialism.

Like Osama, those who study jihad at his feet nourish the vision of restoring the caliphate, the theocratic leadership that governed the world's Muslims and dominated much of North Africa, Europe, and Asia for more than three hundred years after the death of the Prophet Mohammed in A.D. 634. The caliphate is the only form of governance that has ever been fully approved by Muslims. Toward the end of the ninth century, the caliphate began slipping into a long, drawn-out decline. In 1924, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the secular dictator of modern Turkey, abolished it altogether, along with the veil for women and the fez for men, which he considered unacceptable symbols of Islamic backwardness.

Ever since, some Muslims throughout the world have stewed in bitter frustration over what they consider the vicious emasculation by the West and its acolytes of Islam as a global power. They believe that only by reestablishing a borderless, ultraconservative caliphate will Muslims reclaim greatness.

Like Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, some of Southeast Asia's other Islamist groups use terror as their principal weapon in the struggle; others rely more on political manipulation, peer pressure,

propagandizing, and fundamentalist indoctrination of schoolchildren. It is by no means clear yet which tactic will yield the most effective, long-term results. For obvious though not necessarily the wisest reasons, the United States has focused its attention almost entirely on the terrorists.

Yet fundamentalist social pressure, with minimal violence, may well prove more powerful over time than bombings and murder in shifting Southeast Asia's Muslims toward ultraconservatism. At this stage, with social progress and regression pitted against each other in a protracted struggle, it's too soon to tell.

As grim as daily life can be in places such as Basilan, faint glimmers of better times do on occasion break through the clouds. Across the Isabela town square from the Barandinos' house, a Jollibee restaurant, an outpost of the Philippines' leading homegrown fast-food chain, sparkled a brilliant, mock-McDonald's red and yellow, its trademark smiling bumblebee buzzing with corporate confidence in Basilan's future. Hopeful residents see the arrival of a new Jollibee in any hard-pressed Philippines town as a sign that they are joining the world. The Isabela branch opened in 2005, shortly after a U.S. military Joint Special Operations task force wrapped up a three-year campaign of training Philippine soldiers and marines in counterterrorism and civic action techniques.

Judged by the sharp reduction in kidnappings and beheadings along with the elimination of many Abu Sayyaf fighters, the task force achieved great success. The Americans then transferred the "Basilan model" to Jolo, the next troubled island down the archipelago. But while Nilo Barandino acknowledged that Basilan had become much more peaceful, he was reserving final judgment. "It's simply too soon to tell," he said.

To help us gain better insight as to what remained undone and what ought to be done, the doctor offered to take us to meet his friend the judge. As always, before leaving home, he packed a green, zippered gym bag with three high-powered automatic handguns, all fully loaded, and spare magazines. He slung it over his shoulder, where it settled with a clank. "A precaution," Nilo explained, heading out the door with his guests.