The final days of April brought shocking news to the world: Filipino terrorist group Abu Sayyaf had executed a Canadian citizen, journalist and former employee of the mining company TVI Pacific, Inc. John Ridsdel. On September 21, 2015, he and four other tourists spending time at an upscale resort on the Philippine island of Samal were kidnapped for ransom by the group. Militants asked for $20 million in exchange for each hostage. On April 26, his severed head packed in a plastic bag was found in the center of Jolo, province of Sulu populated by the Muslim minority.

Today, terrorists continue to hold at least 22 more hostages from six countries. Past experience with Abu Sayyaf shows that hostages can only be saved if the Philippines’ security forces interfere (2 thousand policemen and military personnel armed with advanced weapons have already been deployed to hunt down the militants), or if the ransom is paid for them.

In cases where the Philippine government takes up a firm position not to negotiate with the terrorists that continue to successfully hide in hard to reach places, the salvation of the hostages depends on the financial standing of their families. Only those hostages able to pay for their lives get a chance to be set free. Otherwise, they are doomed to share John Ridsdel’s fate.

The Philippine government has been fighting Abu Sayyaf for many years now, but despite the fact that the group sustained substantial losses and was basically "beheaded" with the death of its leaders, it continues to be a major threat to the country's national security. In 2015, for the first time in its history, the country officially outlawed a terrorist group (Abu Sayyaf), following an example set by the UN that had put it on the list of global terrorist organizations and a number of countries: Australia, Canada, the United Arab Emirates, Great Britain and the US. Abu Sayyaf operates mainly in the southern parts of Philippines, on the island of Mindanao and the Jolo archipelago predominantly populated by Moro, a Muslim minority struggling for their independence from the central authority.

The ruthless killing of John Ridsdel perpetrated by Abu Sayyaf, which swore allegiance to Daesh in 2014, put this small (only about 200-400 militants), but notorious extremist organization operating in the southern Islamic regions of the Philippines in the spotlight. Rommel Banlaoi, Executive Director of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research is of the opinion that the execution of a foreigner has raised Abu Sayyaf's prestige among other terrorist organizations as they clearly demonstrated their capabilities of employing violence whenever their demands were not met.

Abu Sayyaf was created in 1991 following the return of Abdurajik Abubakar Janjalani from Afghanistan in the 1980s where he had fought in the ranks of the Mujahideen. At that time, he set an objective of uniting radical members of the Moro National Liberation Front and launching peace talks with the national government. That plan contradicted Abu Sayyaf’s desire to establish an independent Islamic state in the provinces of Jolo and Basilan, which it is still trying to implement by resorting to violence and terror.

After a standoff with the Philippine police and armed forces and the loss of its chief leaders, Abu Sayyaf split into several small groups formed on the principle of family and relation ties. There was no central leadership to supervise the groups either. Since then, Abu Sayyaf’s militants have been carrying out large-scale acts of terrorism (an explosion on a ferry in 2014 that claimed the lives of 116 people is still considered the largest act of terrorism at sea in the world) as well as less significant explosions, launching attacks on the police and army units, killing representatives of the authorities, taking hostages (mainly foreigners and Christians) as part of their program to create an independent Sharia state. Abu Sayyaf does not spare lives even of Muslims if militants believe that they do
not support the group's ideology. In July 2014, the group killed 21 Muslims celebrating the end of Ramadan simply because those people supported the peace process in the south of Philippines.

In the recent years, Abu Sayyaf, despite continuing to talk about its commitment to jihad, has mostly been involved in criminal affairs: robberies, kidnapping of people for ransom, racketeering, drug trafficking, thus resembling a criminal gang more than anything else. Since September 2014, Abu Sayyaf has been abducting people for ransom “in the name of Daesh.”

Personal profit is not the main reason of why Abu Sayyaf is engaged in criminal business. It is mainly because international terrorist organizations, primarily al-Qaeda, which had been funding its creation and later its activities, discontinued supporting it. As for the Islamic State, so far its ties with Abu Sayyaf have not been confirmed. Though it does not mean that this organization does not have a strong ideological influence on Philippine Islamists inspired by the idea of the creation of an Islamic Caliphate in Southeast Asia, which, according to the terrorists’ plans is supposed to include the current territories of Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and southern regions of Philippines and Thailand. Other regional extremist Islamist organizations, with which Abu Sayyaf maintains close contacts, share these aspirations. Militants from the Indonesian Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid and Jemaah Islamiyah, which also swore allegiance to Daesh undergo military training in Abu Sayyaf's camps and receive the organization's financial, logistics and military support.

The authorities of the Philippines, supported by the US Special Forces, have been countering this extremist organization in the southern parts of Philippines for the last 12 years. But effective legislation of the Philippines and international treaties limit the mission of the US solely to the training of the Philippine security forces, forbidding the participation of US military personnel in military operations. The Philippine army and police units carry out strikes, delivering attacks on militant camps, carry out cleansings and liberate hostages. Since Abu Sayyaf rejects the idea of peace talks with the government and impedes negotiations between the government and other separatist groups operating in the southern regions of the country, the authorities of Philippines are forced to use violent methods in their struggle against Abu Sayyaf carried out as part of the Internal Security and Peace Plan (2011–2016), with limited results so far.

Abu Sayyaf still threatens national and regional security. It is, therefore, quite logical that Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines adopted the symbolic decision in May 2016 to unite their efforts in the struggle against sea pirates, many of whom are members of Abu Sayyaf. However, the anti-terrorist actions of the countries of the region can only be successful if they engage in the global war on international terrorism, and, first of all, against Daesh. Whereas in the past the US was their only strategic partner and ally in this struggle, today can rely on cooperation with Russia to keep the situation in the region under control, not allowing it to become "a second front of the war with terrorism." The fact that these countries are looking into cooperation with Russia and that Russia is willing to support them was clearly demonstrated in the course of a recent meeting of the Defense Ministers of the countries of ASEAN and Russia in the run-up to the Russia–ASEAN Summit scheduled for the May of this year.

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