

United States Senate

September 1, 2016

COMMITTEES
ARMED SERVICES
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION
AND FORESTRY
HOMELAND SECURITY
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
SMALL BUSINESS
AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

President Barack Obama
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20500

President Obama:

I write to you today regarding your upcoming trip to Asia and the rise of Islamic extremism under the flag of ISIS in the region. While I understand there are many pressing issues to discuss with Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, including growing human rights concerns and increasing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, I urge you to also focus on crafting strategies and discussing policies to best counter the rise of ISIS in the Philippines.

Shortly after the horrific attacks on September 11, 2001, U.S. Special Operations Forces were operating in the Philippines in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. When the Joint Special Operations Task Force officially concluded its operations in 2014, the U.S. had successfully helped the Philippines take great steps forward to curb the rise of Islamic extremist groups, like Abu Sayyaf. Unfortunately, much of the progress that was made has been lost as we continue to see these groups regain strength, increase aggression and alarmingly unite beneath the flag of ISIS. This is most recently and tragically highlighted by the death of 15 Filipino soldiers in a battle against ISIS linked militants this week.

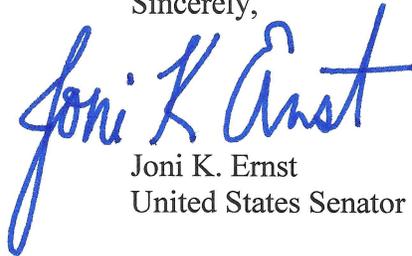
The Islamic extremist groups in the southern Philippines, following their pledge to ISIS, have publically called for others to join them. In June of this year, they released a video in which they stated, "If you can't get to Syria, join the mujahedeen in the Philippines." Following the death of 44 Filipino Special Action Police in a single battle against these militants last year, it is clear these are not mere criminal gangs or disorganized rebels, but rather a mirror of the violent Islamic extremists we are seeing throughout the Middle East. For these reasons, I believe we must take strong steps forward to address this growing threat.

I have continued to urge you for stronger support of our allies in the Middle East in their fight against ISIS, specifically the Kurdish Peshmerga. Today, I call upon you for an increased focus in Asia. In your upcoming meeting with President Duterte, I ask you to discuss ways to help the Philippine Government in their growing fight against ISIS and consider the following:

1. How can the U.S. and the Philippines leverage the five new bases recently announced for U.S. personnel in the region to counter the rise of ISIS?
2. The U.S. has continued to increase its presence in the region to counter the rise of China in the South China Sea. How can those same U.S. forces already in the region provide support to counter the rise of ISIS?
3. The use of U.S. Special Operations Forces training the Filipino forces has a successful track record in the region. Additionally, annual training exercises, such as Balikatan, continue to be successful each year. What steps can be taken to resume, increase, or alter existing training for Filipino forces to ensure ISIS does not increase its footprint in the region?

I thank you for the consideration of these options in your discussion with President Duterte on your upcoming trip to Asia. As we continue to witness the growing threat of ISIS at home and abroad, I believe we must do all that we can to support our allies and show U.S. strength to stop the spread of Islamic extremism.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joni K. Ernst". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "J".

Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator