

Siege of Marawi: Spectre of 'new' terrorism in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The near five month siege of Marawi in Philippines by the militants inspired by the Islamic State ended on 23 October 2017. Notwithstanding the official claims of the military having nipped the bud of extremism, the episode could mark the beginning a new wave of terrorism in Southeast Asia.



(Filipino government troops after clearing the area from pro-Islamic State militant groups inside Marawi City. Photo: Business Insider)

The five month-war on the militants, inspired and supported by the Islamic State, ended in the southern Filipino town of Marawi on 23 October 2017. 1131 people including over 900 militants were officially declared dead and 300,000 civilians who have been displaced due to the war have little to return to, as much of the town now resembles a pile of rubble. Amid a [sense of relief and achievement](#), coming after several extensions to the war that the state had initially sought to conclude in few weeks, the stakeholders realise that the prolonged confrontation could potentially increase terrorist capacity across Southeast Asia in the coming years.

The Islamic State core could indeed be staring at a scenario of total vanquish in Iraq and Syria having lost key towns like Mosul and Raqqa which once constituted the epicentre of its activities. Many of its 40,000 foreign fighters, an achievement which it never stopped advertising, have either perished, have been taken into custody, or have simply disappeared. Its monthly publication 'Rumiyah' is [delayed by couple of weeks](#). However, there is a clear prospect that the outfit will now transform itself into a harder to crack insurgency in its erstwhile caliphate or will operate through the regional affiliates who have declared their *bayaa* (allegiance) to the Islamic State in the past years. The black flags of the Caliphate, thereby, would not flutter in patches of Iraq and Syria, but would sprout across other frontiers.

Indeed, during the last four years (2014-2017), the Islamic State not only nurtured and showcased an actual caliphate to the world, it's narrative of 'success' was also able to influence a large number of extremists in distant theatres to replicate the bravado in their own ways. Marawi's descent into chaos and extremism was not sudden. In this town and the surrounding Mindanao province, anti-government sentiments and activities have run high for past several decades. However, the audacity to capture it, declare it as a liberated territory, and opt for a total

confrontation with a superior military, even while facing a near certain scenario of death, was new and a direct fallout of the inspiration from the Islamic State.

The Marawi episode, hence, demonstrates four important trends.

First, the attempt of local militant groups to establish a liberated proto state underlines the fact that preexisting ability to orchestrate repeated violent acts in an area can be upgraded with or without external assistance. Some indications of direct linkages between the Islamic State and its Filipino affiliates- the Isnilon Hapilon faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Maute brothers- are available. The Islamic State reportedly transferred US\$1.5 million to finance the siege of Marawi and had repeatedly asked its sympathizers to head to Marawi to take part in the Jihad. Surprisingly, the entire money remained unspent and was recovered from the house of a top militant leader. Also, operational strength of the militants in Marawi did not appear to have come significantly from the 40 foreign militants, most of them from Indonesia and Malaysia, who ended up there, but the 860 Filipino cadres (all of whom are now reportedly dead) who decided to join the fight. They were products of combination of factors such as alienation from the central authorities which is rampant among the local population in southern Philippines, non-implementation of a two year old peace treaty with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and a slow process of extremist consolidation which has taken place in the region for past several years.

Second, in recent years Islamist radicalism has witnessed an upsurge in Southeast Asia and Australia, and bulk of Marawi's Islamists who prepared themselves for an entry to paradise was a product of this disturbing phenomenon. Over 1000 Southeast Asians and 165 Australians have travelled to Syria since 2014. Many have died and about 500 have returned voluntarily to their home countries or have been deported from Turkey. While some of these men and women might pose security threat to the region, bulk of the threat potentially will emanate from those who have not been able to travel the distance. According to the Indonesian military chief, each province of the country now has an Islamic State cell and thousands of Indonesians term their government as apostate and view it with disdain. Online radicalization is rampant among the ordinary Indonesians working abroad and has started producing female suicide bombers. Over 41 mosques in Indonesia's 16 provinces are under scanner for having running courses and teaching modules sympathetic to the Islamic State. Such radicalization indeed forms the base of the Jihadist camaraderie amply demonstrated in Marawi. Jihad in the region, confined mostly to the national boundaries, could indeed become transregional.

Third, while embarking on a mission to hold on to a territory and sacrifice their lives in the military campaign by the Filipino state, the militants are putting to use the tactic of 'propaganda by the deed'. Past terror attacks in Southeast Asia, since the days of the 2002 Bali bombings, remained standalone terror plots and little else. For the deaths and injuries they caused and havoc they wrought, the terrorists, some of whom were suicide attackers, hardly attracted public sympathy. The prolonged military campaign in Marawi and the destruction and killings, on the other hand, were a propaganda windfall for the Islamic State. With the killings and destruction of the Marawi town, for many Filipinos inhabiting the southern part of the country, the state is an aggressor and the extremists are victims. Similar feelings can easily reverberate across the region. In such a scenario, the extremists have probably left behind a legacy which can easily be converted into effective instrumentalities for recruitment and mobilisation.

And lastly, the Marawi episode marks the rise of anti-nationalist militancy in Southeast Asia, where the extremists closely identify themselves with global jihadists and wish to be a part of the Caliphate, sacrificing, thereby, their nationalist aspirations for independence from majoritarian rule. Although rest of the extremist paraphernalia remains intact and mostly undisturbed, this significant shift in objective can make the mobilisation for violent acts much more organised and durable.

The Philippines Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, on 24 October, speaking at a meeting of Southeast Asian defence ministers at Clark base outside Manila, claimed that his country has "nipped the budding infrastructure" of extremism. The end to the siege of Marawi was timed rather well to showcase it to the attending countries. However, there is apprehension in the region that the much aspired victory has limited utility. Islands of discontent are indeed mushrooming across southern Philippines and violence therefrom could easily spill over into the Southeast Asian countries, with or without significant Muslim population.

A new chapter of terrorism in Southeast Asia has already begun.

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