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No End in Sight: Islamist Militancy in the Philippines since the Marawi Siege



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Abstract

Since the end of the siege over Marawi, the Armed Forces of Philippines have tried to neutralise the remnants of Islamic State-affiliated militancy. Success has been achieved. Yet, the dispersed militancy has not only managed to carry out odd attacks, but is demonstrating definite signs of revival. Not surprisingly, the hard line approach of President Duterte is being replaced by frequent calls for peace. Bringing militancy to an end will not be an easy task, and would depend a great deal on how the recent deal with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front pans out.

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On 26 July 2018, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte signed the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), implementing the 2014 peace accord with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and granting greater autonomy and fiscal powers to a Moro Muslim homeland on Mindanao.[1] This is yet another attempt by the central government to bring peace to the restive Muslim-dominated Mindanao region, in southern Philippines. The BOL apart from assuaging the autonomy aspirations of the Moros in Mindanao, in a way, finds Manila a useful partner in the MILF. The latter is now stakeholder in maintaining peace in the region. Three days later, Duterte invited the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) for peace talks, abandoning the government policy that ruled out negotiations with the terrorist group.[2] The ASG has not responded. Since the siege of Marawi ended in October 2017, Philippines has struggled to tame the remnants of violent extremism affiliated with the Islamic State.

End of Marawi Siege

The operation to liberate Marawi, on which the Islamic State affiliated ASG, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters(BIFF), and the Maute brothers had established control, led to the killing of 800 jihadists alongside 163 soldiers and at least 47 civilians. It devastated the city, displacing more than 400,000 people. An estimated 70 percent of the displaced Marawi residents are back in the city, although much of the university town remains in ruin. Rebuilding the city is now not only a logistical challenge, but is laced with financial and legal complications. However, from a military point of view, the operations had succeeded in eliminating Isnilon Hapilon, the leader of the Islamic State in Philippines. Hapilon was declared dead on 16 October 2017 and the city of Marawi was back in the hands of the government after a five-month long siege. 'Militant groups had suffered significant loss to their cadre strength and would take time to revive' - was the assessment.

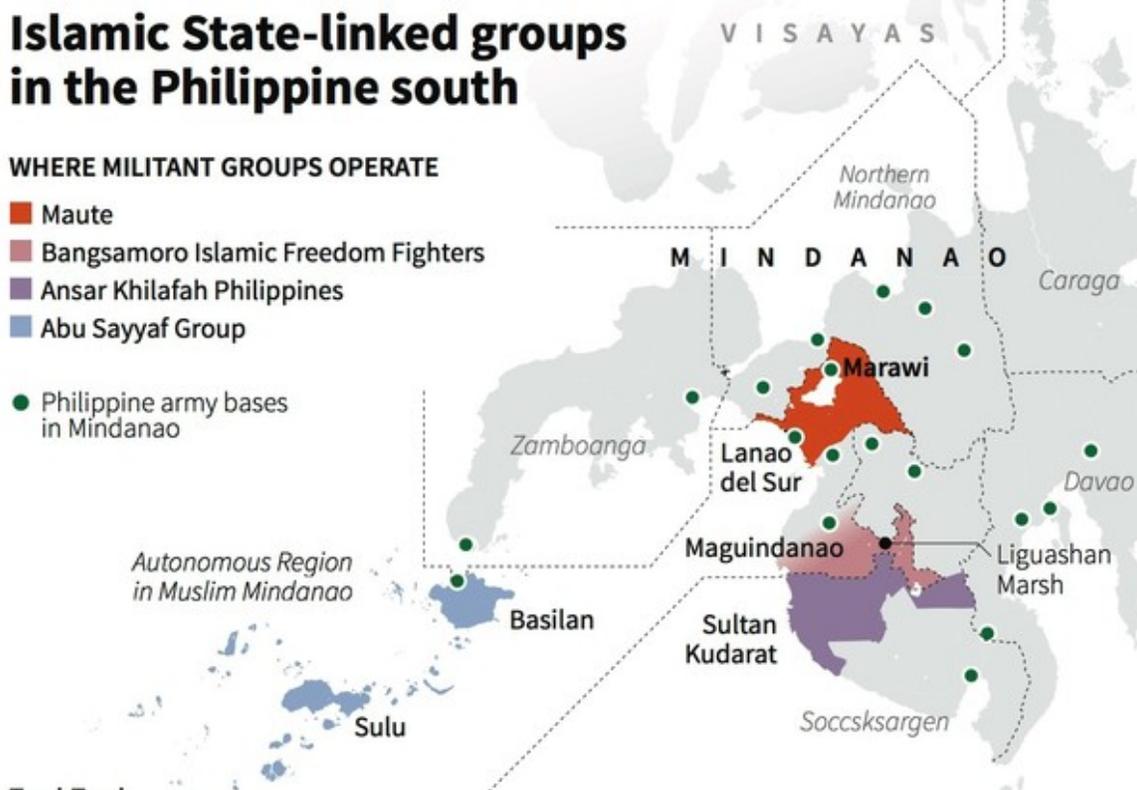
The fall of Marawi, however, has not cleansed Mindanao of militant presence. Even though the Armed Forces of Philippines (AFP) carried out their mop up operations in and around Marawi, the dispersed extremists showed a new level of resilience by regrouping and recruiting, albeit at a lesser rate in several other provinces. Although severely depleted, the remnants of the Islamic State-affiliated militants have demonstrated signs of consolidation and have attempted to carry out major attacks. According to some reports, the government has been threatened by insurgents of a bigger and even more devastating attack in the country. While this may be an alarmist assessment, the task for the security forces has indeed become harder. This article analyses the activities of the Islamic State-affiliated groups and the state response since the end to the siege of Marawi.

The Targets

Primary targets of the government's operations, since October 2017, have been the BIFF, the ASG and the Maute group. BIFF, estimated to have 400 cadres (July 2018 estimate), are mostly disgruntled former members of the MILF, which signed a peace accord with the government on 27 March 2014. However, as the implementation of the peace accord faltered due to factionalism among militant groups, objections from some legislators to the autonomy provisions it envisaged for Muslim Mindanao, and violations of the ceasefire regime between the Philippines and the MILF, a faction walked away from the MILF alleging that the peace agreement negotiated only autonomy and not full independence. It is clear that since the end of the Marawi siege, the BIFF has emerged as the most dominant. It had sent only a small cohort to Marawi and therefore, did not suffer large scale casualties to its ranks.

The ASG was created in early 1990s by mobilizing the Filipino fighters who fought the war against Soviet Union in Afghanistan and maintained its links with the al Qaeda till the Islamic State was formed. Within Philippines, its main goal was the purge of all Christian influence in southern Philippines and establishment of an independent Islamic State of Mindanao. Both, BIFF and ASG have, from time to time, affirmed their backing for the Islamic State through social media.¹⁴ Both first pledged their allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014 – ASG in June and BIFF in August. This was, however, not a source of concern for the authorities prior to the beginning of Siege of Marawi.¹⁵ The ASG suffered serious damage to its cadre strength during the Marawi siege and currently boasts of about 500 fighters.

The Maute group too consists of the MILF remnants among others. Founded in 2012 by the Maute brothers, Omar and Abdullah Maute, members of the group come from diverse backgrounds, including former MILF members. The group formed an alliance with the ASG and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The group participated in all its strength in Marawi siege and in the forefront of placing its men, weapons, and resources in the city. Not surprisingly, it took the full brunt of the military onslaught. All seven brothers who were part of the group participating in the Marawi siege were confirmed killed. Few dozens of the Maute group cadres along with their leader Owaidah Abdulmajib Marohombsar, alias Abu Dar managed to escape and established a new camp in the neighbouring town of Tubaran. The camp operated for at least eight months before being captured by the security forces. This forced the Maute Group under Abu Dar to move deeper into Lanao del Sur, which continues to remain its core area of operation.



(Photo Courtesy: Reuters)

The Operations

The primary operating provinces of the three militant groups can be classified as following.

- BIFF in Maguindanao as its primary base, also in North Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat.
- ASG in Sulu, Basilan and Zamboanga.
- Maute Group in Lanao del Sur.

Ever since the end of the Marawi siege, government's efforts have combined rebuilding the city as well as continuing area clearing operations in provinces of Basilan, Cotabato, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, Sulu, and Zamboanga. The AFP confirmed in January 2018, "a total of 48 fighters were monitored during the Marawi siege. Ten foreigners attempted to enter the main battle area to augment terrorists fighting state forces in October 2017, while 15 Indonesian terrorists also entered the southern Philippines in November."^[6] Most of them were killed during the operations, while some fled.^[7] Since the end of the siege an Indonesian militant was killed in November 2017.^[8] Media reports have also indicated that five Indonesians and a lone Singaporean were among those killed in a clash at Liguasan Marsh in June 2018.^[9] Another unidentified foreigner suspected of recruiting domestic fighters for pro-Islamic State militant groups was arrested in February 2018.^[10]

In March, police announced the arrest of a suspected pro-Islamic State militant accused of killing civilians during the Marawi siege.^[11] But a key target of the military offensive, identified as Kagi Karialan alias Imam Minimbang, escaped rocket and mortar fire that landed on his base on the outskirts of Maguindanao.^[12] In June 2018, however, Suaib Hayudini, an ASG sub-leader, was caught in the remote southern island of Jolo. Hayudini, carrying a head money of 600,000 pesos was allegedly involved in the abductions of a group of hostages, including tourists from Germany, France, South Africa, Lebanon, and Finland, as well as Malaysian and Filipino resort workers 17 years ago from the popular Malaysian resort of Sipadan.^[13]

AFP's ground operations, aided occasionally by air and artillery strikes, have been continuing since mid-November 2017. Destruction of temporary BIFF shelters in separate *barangays* (villages) in Maguindanao are believed to have^[14] led to considerable attrition in the militant ranks. For instance, an airstrike conducted at the night of Christmas, following the attack staged by BIFF members at Sitio Makon, killed four BIFF cadres in Datu Unsay.^[15] At least 44 militants were killed^[16] in a clash between BIFF and the Filipino troops on 10 March. On 30 May, the army and police commandos seized a BIFF 'firearms factory' in Maguindanao. 6,000 firearms were recovered which is estimated to constitute at least 10 percent of the total illegal firearms in the Mindanao, the military claimed.^[17] In June, government troops destroyed the BIFF's main Improvised Explosive Device (IED) factory in Southern Liguasan in Maguindanao province, following intense military operations there that killed 15 militants.^[18] A fresh phase of operations against the BIFF were launched on 1 June. At least 45 militants have been killed and 28 others injured since then (till 20 July).^[19] In Olandang village in North Cotabato's Midsayap town troops raided a BIFF hideout looking for militant leader Mando Mamalumpong. Although Mamalumpong was not captured, an M16 automatic rifle, ammunition, two grenades and improvised explosive, were recovered.

Security force operations have resulted in a series of surrenders by militants. While cumulative data is not available, considerable degradation in the militant ranks is evident. A total of 144 ASG cadres had surrendered and another 128 were killed in 2017.^[20] By March 2018, another 28 ASG^[21] and 42 Maute group^[22] cadres had surrendered to the military. On 10 May, 17 BIFF and ASG cadres surrendered citing battle fatigue amid relentless military offensives.^[23]

The operations have also led to displacements of significant number of civilians. In December 2017, the United Nations experts said that 2,500 Lumads were displaced since the October operations by the military in the province of South Cotabao. According to the UN, military operations had been conducted on the basis of "unfounded suspicions that Lumads are involved with militant groups or in view of their resistance to mining activities on their ancestral lands,"^[24] Such statements, however, have done little to de-intensity the operations.^[25] The April 2018 operations to neutralise Kagi Karialan alias Imam Minimbang forced hundreds of families to flee in fear of getting caught in the crossfire. Schools were shut for days in four towns of General Salipada Pendatun, Pagalungan, Rajah

Buayan and Montawal. In June, more than 11,000 residents from Lanao del Sur were forced to flee their homes following fresh fighting between the military and the Maute group.[26]

Militant Activities



(Site of the car bomb explosion in Lamitan, Basilan on 31 July 2018, Photo Courtesy: TRT world)

It is clear that the Islamist militants in Philippines seek to implement a global Jihadist agenda, which aims not only at liberating southern Philippines from central control, but also using their struggle for regional extremist mobilization. The Islamic State is desperate not to let this opportunity pass. Its official sanction for the East Asia Wilayat may partially boost the recruitment drives of the ASG, BIFF and the Maute group; and continue to flag Philippines as a potential ground for convergence of global jihadists.

On 31 July 2018, a car bomb exploded at a security check point at Lamitan in Basilan province which killed 11 people including a detachment commander from the 19th Special Forces of the military, a woman and a child.[27] The Islamic State claimed responsibility naming Abu Kathir, a Moroccan Jihadist as the person who executed the attack. Previously, in April 2016, a Moroccan Mohammad Khatab had been killed in a shootout in Basilan. Khatab, the AFP had claimed, was living in the country for past three years and was a bomb instructor, a jihadist preacher and a go between between ASG and the Islamic State.[28] Unconfirmed accounts have suggested that as many as 43 Moroccan Islamic State fighters could be operating in Philippines.

A small BIFF faction of 22 members led by Ismail Abdulmalik alias Abu Turaife was being seen as a major threat by the military since December 2017. After the death of ASG's Isnilon Hapilon towards the end of the Marawi siege, Abu Turaife was believed to have been chosen as the next emir of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia.[29] In July 2018, AFP intelligence identified Maute Group leader Owaidah Abdulmajib Marohombsar, alias Abu Dar as the new "emir" of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia. However, in reality Abu Dar probably could only be the Islamic State leader in southern Philippines. On 16 July, his wife Nafisah Pundug was arrested from Purok Maunlad in Barangay Apopong in Mindanao on charges of violating the Republic Act 9516 or illegal possession of explosives. She was earlier detained at the Marawi City jail but managed to escape in 2016. On the day of her arrest, Najib Calimba Pundug, alias Najib Hussein, a bomb maker and reputedly a hardcore member of the Maute group, was killed after he tried to resist arrest in Barangay Fatima, his supposed hiding place.[31]

The 31 July car bomb explosion in Basilan seems to confirm a trend that the militants could be seeking to carry out explosions as a primary mode of warfare in addition to the unavoidable clashes with the military. In July 2018, two bombing attempts have been foiled in the city of Tacurong in the Sultan Kudarat province prompting the government to urge the public to stay alert and vigilant at all times. In the first incident, a civilian discovered an IED along General Lim Street and immediately informed authorities about it. The device was deactivated. In the second attempt, another IED planted near a school was discovered well in time. The AFP has blamed BIFF bombmakers Brah Lumambas and Bohari Adam for the plots.

Sporadic attacks and attempt to engage the military have remained the strategy of the militants to protect their stronghold areas in Basilan, North Cotabato, and Maguindanao. While losing cadres, militants have managed, on few occasions, to inflict morale boosting casualties on the AFP personnel as well as official militia. Two weeks after the end of Marawi siege, intense fighting, which lasted for four hours, broke out in Sumisip town of Basilan between government troops and ASG members resulting in the death of six soldiers and the wounding four other government troopers.^[32] In the first week of November 2017, two members of the Civilian Army Auxiliary (CAA) force were killed in an ambush that carried out by the ASG in Sumisip.^[33] Around mid-January 2018, Maute group militants clashed with the troops resulting in injuries to six soldiers in a district in Lanao del Sur province.^[34]

In the month of January 2018, ASG cadres beheaded a married couple in a remote village in Basilan on suspicion that they are feeding information to the military. While paranoia may have driven the ASG to committing such action, eliminating official sources of intelligence and coercing the civilians to submit to their dominance has long been ASG's strategy in the region. Many of the recent operations by the AFP have relied on tip off by the residents regarding presence of militants in their areas.

Hostage taking for ransom and killing them for non-payment has been an old tactic of the ASG to gather much needed finances. Filipino authorities have confirmed that the ASG is holding 12 hostages who include three Indonesians, one Vietnamese, one Dutch national and seven Filipinos, in the boondocks of Basilan and Sulu.^[35] Two Canadians, two Vietnamese and a German national were beheaded over the last two years after their governments refused to pay ransom.^[36] Ransom money has bolstered the war chest of the militants who otherwise continue to receive a substantial portion of their revenue from remittances from other countries of Southeast Asia and drug trade.^[37] The chief financier for the Marawi siege, former Malaysian university lecturer Mahmud Ahmad has been declared dead by Philippines. The Malaysian government is yet to do the same, as his body has not been found. Apart from Mahmud, finances to the militants have been provided by Malaysians espousing the cause of the Islamic State and the overseas Filipino migrant workers, who are mostly the relatives, friends and former classmates of the Maute group. Reports indicate that availability of such finance has helped the militants maintain a stockpile of weapons including M16 rifles and rocket launchers.

Militant activities have also focused on reorganising, recruiting and retraining.^[38] The ASG is aiming to add to its present strength of less than 500 members. New recruits have been from Madrassas or Islamic schools, are either children and are relatives of Maute group members who died during the Marawi siege.^[39] Maute group leader Abu Dar reportedly escaped with more than US\$577,000 in looted cash from Marawi, which government officials said he could use for recruitment and rebuilding of the battered organisation. The AFP sources have also pointed at the militant strategy of recruiting Muslim youths with promises of cash payments to the tune of Peso 100,000 to each recruit^[40], they would not be able to earn elsewhere in the largely poor rural communities of Mindanao. Delay in the reconstruction of Marawi is also helping the Islamists to recruit dissatisfied residents, mostly poor and uneducated young men.

The government is trying to overcome the deficiencies in ground level intelligence by seeking active cooperation of the civilians. Much of the military's deficiency is rooted in the lack of resources, as availability of adequate money could have helped it buy informers and even prevent even an embarrassing event like the Marawi siege. The government's new CT and CVE approach underlines that preventing and countering violent extremism is a shared responsibility of all members of the society, especially of the people in the communities. The military is also working to stem the recruitment capacities of the militants with the help of imams and other moderate Moro preachers by visiting *madrassahs*, wherein they expound on the evils of extremism and, at the same time, on the goodness of Islam as a peace-loving religion.^[41]

End not in sight

Notwithstanding the AFP's claim of steady progress, military operations would have its limitations in curtailing the spread of militancy which is dispersed and is desperate to survive. Not surprisingly, the hard line approach of President Duterte is being replaced by frequent calls for peace. For instance, in May 2018, Duterte appealed to Islamist militants to abandon hostilities and start a dialogue. Duterte accepted that the presence of foreign fighters in street battles was a proof that Islamic State had gained a foothold on the restive island of Mindanao, but there was still a chance for peace.^[42] His July 2018 call to the ASG for negotiations is a remarkable shift from the much-touted path of 'no negotiation with terrorists'.

It is in this context that the signing and implementation of the BOL assumes critical importance. Apart from granting autonomy and disbanding the 30,000-40,000 MILF cadres, it creates a much-needed ally for the central government in Mindanao, where its acceptability and legitimacy is at its lowest. Sincere implementation of the peace agreement would, therefore, make the MILF a key stakeholder in sharing the responsibility for establishing peace and deal with the Islamic State affiliated militants in its own ways. The situation can spiral out of control and degenerate into a fratricidal war. Nevertheless, the collaboration between the government and the MILF may address the critical deficiencies of the military. Nothing would, however, be achieved in quick time. The entrenched militancy and its alliances outside would resist all attempts to bring peace and stability to the restive region. Duterte, therefore, must stick to his path of implementing the BOL with all sincerity and hope that the fruits of peace and development may convince the militants to see the futility in perpetually fighting and dying for a lost cause.

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- Produce cutting edge research and provide alternatives by employing qualitative and quantitative methodology, primarily field based studies;
- Serve as a platform for exchange of ideas and strategy involving scholars, researchers, academia, media, governmental and non-governmental personnel/institutions.
- Provide advisory and consultancy services.
- Outreach and partnerships with likeminded institutions/ individuals.

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