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Policy Forum Article

Preventing Other ‘Marawis’ in the Southern Philippines

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Abstract

After more than 5 months of intense fighting, the Battle for Marawi has concluded as the largest urban combat scenario in modern Philippine history. Winning a kinetic campaign against violent extremist organisations like the Maute Group is insufficient in itself to prevent the eruption of other ‘Marawis’ in the future. The Duterte Administration should craft a cohesive countering violent extremism strategy. A prospective strategy should recognise the importance of coherent messaging and focus on the non-ideological drivers of conflict.

Key words: Philippines, Islamic State, Mindanao, Countering Violent Extremism, Terrorism

1. Introduction

The Battle for Marawi brought to fore the linkages between the Filipino militants and the Islamic State (IS). The protracted battle triggered discussion as to how much foreign terrorist fighters influenced their Filipino counterparts. Was Marawi the prelude for a systematic campaign to bring the caliphate to Southeast Asia? Sans context, the urban warfare seen in the streets of Marawi was a successful export of tactics and strategy from Raqqa, Syria or Mosul, Iraq. But such an assessment ignores the socio-economic and historical context of Mindanao. Marawi was

the proverbial perfect storm—the Maute Group (MG) and its allies were opportunistic actors who exploited the violent milieu provided by the city and the wider central Mindanao region. Preventing future ‘Marawis’ cannot be premised on counter-ideological approaches nor be fixated against IS narratives alone.

On 23 May 2017, Philippine security forces raided a safe house in the Marawi City occupied by Isnilon Hapilon, the so-called *emir* or leader of militants who pledged allegiance to IS. With him were Omarkhayyam and Abdullah Maute, brothers and founders of the eponymous MG, who built their reputation as the centre of gravity for IS supporters in central Mindanao (Institute of the Policy Analysis of Conflict 2017). What was intended as an in-extremis raid to disrupt a plot to seize Marawi in the holy month of Ramadan degenerated into a protracted months-long battle.

Compared to prior episodes of urban combat in Mindanao, the MG and its allies stood their ground and exacted a heavy toll on the security forces who responded to the crisis. By the end of the fighting, 920 terrorist fighters were killed along with 165 members of the security forces and 47 civilians (Rappler 2017). Hundreds of thousands of Marawi residents were also displaced and compelled to seek refuge in neighbouring cities in Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte provinces. In the face of repeated promises by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte to swiftly resolve the conflict, the MG and its allies held out for more than 5 months. Duterte declared the city liberated on 16 October 2017, a week before Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana officially

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announced the termination of major combat operations (Morales & Serapio Jr. 2017).

2. The Maute Group Prior to Marawi

It can be argued that the decision of the MG to hold out may be a reflection of their commitment to IS ideology. Prior to the Battle for Marawi, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) units would often contend with Mindanao-based groups who relied on guerrilla-style attacks. Rather than facing government troops force on force, violent extremists would rely on close-range ambushes against military units or annihilating far-flung detachments. These attacks are launched primarily with the intent to seize weapons and other war materiel from government forces (Gutierrez 2015).

The outward displays of fealty and the use of IS-related imagery by the MG suggest that they pose a distinct threat. Legacy groups such as the Abu Sayyaf (ASG) were previously inspired by Al Qaeda or Jemaah Islamiyah (Ressa 2004).¹ It must be stressed however that terrorist groups such as the MG simultaneously engage in and seek propaganda opportunities. Simply observing propaganda content and jihadist iconography released by the MG are not reliable indicators of an armed group's fighting will. It is more useful to look at the trends concerning the MG's fighting capability in central Mindanao. These comprise the signals that have been inadvertently missed by the Philippine security forces.

First, the MG has been building up its capabilities since 2015. The MG through its various accounts and channels in messaging apps ascribed to itself the moniker 'Islamic State Ranao', an allusion to the archaic name

previously used to refer to the Philippine provinces of Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur (Franco 2017a), which is populated mostly by the Maranao ethnic group.² The stronghold of the MG was in Butig, a rural municipality south of Marawi where the Maute clan hails from (Gopalakrishnan & Mogato 2017). Using the relative inaccessibility of the town, the MG was able to conduct training programs for child combatants and foreign fighters (Ansis 2016 and Gaglac 2017). Butig was the site of several clashes with the military as early as 2015. On hindsight, those skirmishes acted as test missions for the MG.

Second, the MG invested in developing rudimentary aerial surveillance capabilities by procuring commercial-off-the-shelf, consumer-grade drones (Luna 2017). From simple fixed-wing drones, the MG transitioned into using quadcopter-style drones, which can loft a stabilised video camera. These MG-operated drones were used to monitor and provide advance warning of incoming military raids. Footage obtained by the drones were also a boon for their propaganda activities and media work as seen in the IS media-released 'Inside the Khilafah' series.

Third, the MG was able to leverage into kinship links with some residents of Marawi, providing an almost permissive environment for them to operate prior to the Battle (Franco 2017b). Recovered footage from killed MG members showed how its cells were able to conduct close reconnaissance of military installations in the city (Gomez & Pitman 2017). These include safe houses used by the intelligence units covering Marawi and the entrances to Camp Ranao, the headquarters of the Philippine Army's 103rd Infantry Brigade.³ Counterintelligence by the MG was very effective that they were able to kill an Army major who was in charge of military intelligence in

1. The ASG was organised in 1989 by Filipino veterans of the anti-Soviet conflict waged by Afghan mujahideen. It was seeded by funding from known relatives of AQ founder Osama bin Laden, specifically Khalid Sheikh Mohamed. The ASG gained notoriety after kidnapping more than a dozen foreign nationals (including Western European tourists) from a resort on Sipadan Island, Malaysia, in 2000.

2. The application of choice for IS sympathisers was Telegram with the IS Ranao channel active for 5 months before inexplicably disappearing. The author was able to subscribe to public channels maintained by IS sympathisers. Screenshots were saved and published in Franco (2017a).

3. The author visited Camp Ranao in 2009 as part of a research trip spanning Western Mindanao. The camp is built atop a hill overlooking Marawi and Lake Lanao.

the city (Cabrera 2017). MG propagandists also posted the *ghanimah* or ‘spoils of war’ from a senior non-commissioned officer conducting intelligence tasks they killed.⁴

3. Marawi Was Not Built in a Day

In the aftermath of the Battle for Marawi, there were some concerns over how other Mindanao cities might be targeted next by remnants of the MG or other IS-inspired terrorist groups. Cities like Cotabato in neighbouring Maguindanao province are viewed warily by the military owing to the presence of other IS-pledged militants such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).⁵

Marawi was the proverbial perfect storm for an urban siege. Prevailing insecurity, the built environment and its alienated population coalesced into a setting conducive for the MG. Even if the MG and or IS did not exist, the conditions in the city laid the conditions for the eventual emergence of a violent extremist group.

Mindanao has been associated with the prevalence of family disputes known colloquially as *rido* (Torres III 2007). These disputes often stem from parochial concerns such as disputes over land ownership or even affronts to personal honour.⁶ *Rido* emerges mostly in rural communities beyond the reach of formal adjudication mechanisms provided by the state. But it is not far-fetched to see *rido*-inspired clashes to encroach into cities like Marawi. Further complicating the resolution of such long-standing conflicts is the proliferation of illicit firearms in Mindanao, which incentivises and facilitates the use of

violence (Lara Jr. & Schoofs 2013). The greater population density of Marawi compared to its rural fringes translates into a very fragile social fabric. Marawi residents are incentivised to amass firearms, with some families and clans maintaining significant arms caches.

Unsurprisingly, the prevailing insecurity in Marawi and its surrounding municipalities sets the stage for high levels of crime. Prior to the Marawi siege, the city was considered as one of the centres of illicit economic activity in Mindanao (International Alert Philippines 2017). Extortion gangs were active in the city and targeted small and medium enterprises such as retail stores and gas stations.⁷ Kidnapping was also rampant in the city, albeit the common modus operandi were short-term ‘express kidnappings’ that were more akin to mugging rather than long-term coercive confinement.⁸

The prevailing insecurity in Marawi is linked to the emergence of a built environment that is distinct from other cities in Mindanao or even the Philippines. In rural Mindanao, communities located in conflict areas often have simple dugouts. Houses and establishments in Marawi are built from reinforced concrete or what the locals term as *buhos*.⁹ Robust structures are a hedge against what Marawi residents perceive as widespread lawlessness in their city. It is a response to the chronic absence of adequate law enforcement in their communities, notwithstanding the presence of the 103rd Brigade in Camp Ranao.

7. The author was in Marawi City in 2009 as part of a research trip. Briefings from security services at the time disclosed extortion and protection rackets operated by private armed groups. More recently, the author interviewed infantry officers from Infantry Battalions and joint special operations task forces deployed during the Marawi siege. They shared how similar criminal activities occurred up until early 2017, before the Battle for Marawi.

8. The usual modus is for perpetrators to bring their victims to automated teller machines. Kidnappers usually release their victims after getting PHP 15,000–30,000 (roughly AUD 500–1,000) through 2–3 automated teller machine transactions. The term ‘express’ is meant to distinguish these smaller ransom payouts with higher profile multi-million ransoms groups like the ASG can extract.

9. *Buhos* literally translates into ‘poured’. In Marawi, more homes are built from poured concrete rather than the usual cinder blocks used as structural material in other Philippine cities.

4. The photo was posted on the IS Ranao Telegram channel. At the time of the killing, the military leadership in Manila dismissed the killing as a botched robbery. Screenshots published in Franco (2017a).

5. The BIFF is a splinter group from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Led by the late Ameril Umbra Kato, the BIFF emerged in response to the MILF’s peace overtures to Manila in 2008. Contrary to the pro-autonomy stance of the MILF, the BIFF sought to retain the original secessionist goals of the MILF.

6. Such disputes also occur in other parts of the Philippines. They are referred to in Filipino by the phrase *ubusan ng lahi*, which literally translates into ‘eradicating the opposing clan’.

A typical house would not only have their buhos walls to shield families. Households would build concrete-lined dugouts and bomb shelters to provide succour from rido-related violence. These shelters would at the same time be used to store the aforementioned arms caches. When the fighting erupted, family homes and business acted as ready-made fortifications for the MG and its allies. The terrorists were able to use abandoned structures as fighting positions. This negated the ability of the AFP to effectively use its indirect fire assets (i.e. 105-mm artillery) and close air support from strike aircraft.

The self-help and family-centred nature of Marawi's clan-based enclaves not only created physical structures and micro-environments. The climate of distrust and insecurity meant that there is a fragmented sense of community, which could have inoculated against the appeal of IS. In tangible terms, the perennial siege mentality cast over the city meant that the military could not hope to rely on the community providing information on infiltrating militants. The same hardy, self-reliant mindset that built the city's physical infrastructure effectively walled-off the population from the security services. Decades of political conflict and violence in Mindanao, involving Filipino Muslim secessionist groups distinct from the Abu Sayyaf and MG, have raised a generation who are distrustful of military forces (George, 1980; McKenna, 1998; Vitug & Gloria, 2000; Yegar, 2002).¹⁰ Rather than an outpost of national military force, some Marawi residents would view Camp Ranao as the stronghold of an occupation force.

It is ironic that what is considered to be the centre of Islamic education in the Philippines was beset by extremist ideologies. Mindanao

State University, housed on the western fringes of Marawi, was exploited by the Maute clan as a recruiting ground for disaffected youths. When the Battle started, reports emerged of how the MG enticed future recruits with promises of cash (Gagalac 2017). Given the limited opportunities in the city and the province as a whole, membership with the MG promised economic mobility and substantive financial gain.

4. Marawi: More than the Sum of Its Parts

What must be emphasised is that Marawi was more than just the sum of its parts. Other cities in Mindanao may have similar feelings of alienation or lawlessness. Other rural communities may also face illicit arms proliferation or rido incidents. But nowhere do these factors coalesce together like in Marawi.

The scale of the destruction and the tenacity of the MG may have surprised observers, but it was never doubted that Marawi would be reclaimed even if it took a year or so. The aspiration of the MG to carve out an IS enclave like Raqqa, Syria or Mosul, Iraq was very far-fetched. Even the IS leadership itself was aware of the limitations of militants in Mindanao, denying Hapilon and his followers the distinction of being considered as one of the *wilayahs* or IS provinces (Winter 2016).¹¹ Nonetheless, it would take at least a month for the AFP to regain its footing and start dislodging the MG from the buildings it occupied.

The fighting exposed gaps in the ability of the AFP to fight in an urban scenario. The AFP's pre-occupation with counterinsurgency meant that it is trained, organised and experienced to fight as light infantry formations. As such, the AFP lacked units trained extensively in close quarter battle and armoured operations. This mismatch between operational requirements and the AFP units' capabilities was brought to stark relief by the large number

10. The MNLF was founded in 1972, espousing the creation of a *Bangsamoro* or 'Moro Nation' that would secede from the Republic of the Philippines. While a Final Peace Agreement was signed in 1996 between Manila and the MNLF, it never fully resolved secessionist impulses in Mindanao. One MNLF splinter group, the MILF, only signed a peace agreement in 2014. However, the establishment of an autonomous Bangsamoro political entity remains in limbo after MILF forces were involved in deadly clash with Philippine National Police commandos in 2015.

11. In *Dabiq* no. 5, the IS leadership announced they have 'delayed the announcement' of a *wilayah* in Mindanao. It is a recognition of the inability the IS-pledged militants in Mindanao to occupy and administer physical territory.

of casualties incurred by the military from MG precision fire and improvised explosive devices.

Fortunately, the AFP was able to adapt through field-expedient measures. Mechanised infantry units took the initiative to install home-made wooded armour to protect their vehicles from MG anti-tank weapons (Mizokami 2017). Taking a cue from the MG, AFP special operations units supplemented their existing aerial surveillance assets by procuring the same class of consumer-grade quadcopter drones used by the MG (Luna 2017).¹² As the battle dragged on, the superior training and equipment of AFP snipers exacted a heavy toll on the MG, specifically the latter's small cadre of self-taught marksmen. It is clear that the AFP would need to enhance its kinetic capabilities for future contingencies in urban terrain. The tactics used by the MG could be mimicked by other threat actors, not just jihadist-inspired movements.

5. Military Measures to Prevent Another 'Marawi'

First, the AFP should incorporate the lessons of Marawi into military training curriculums. Prior to Marawi, the largest urban combat scenario in the Philippines unfolded in Zamboanga City, when 500 MNLF armed members tried to raise their banner atop the city square's flagpole.¹³ At the time, the bulk of the fighting was carried by the United States-trained Light Reaction Battalion (LRB), the elite counterterrorist force of the AFP (Fonbuena 2014).¹⁴ Urban combat training across the wider AFP would also

reduce the penchant of the military leadership to overextend the capabilities of special units. It would also minimise instances wherein the AFP would use *ad hoc* formations during contingencies such as Marawi.¹⁵ The spearhead in Marawi was comprised by elite forces and elite forces *in training*.¹⁶

Second, these retooled forces need the appropriate equipment to execute their expanded mission set. The actions put in place which covered the emergency procurement of drones and the fabrication of do-it-yourself armour should be transformed into more codified standard operating procedures. For big-ticket items like aircraft and naval vessels, Philippine defence procurement legislation already has special provisions for expediting the acquisition of military assets.¹⁷

Third, Manila should foster its existing partnerships with foreign military forces. During the crisis, US special operations forces (SOF) were immediately deployed to Camp Ranao to provide intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support to their Philippine counterparts. This included the deployment of P-3 Orion aircraft over the city (Villamor 2017). American intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support was joined by an Australian contingent, which also deployed their own AP-3 aircraft in separate sorties (Baxendale 2017). The deployment of these forces was invaluable in addressing the capability gaps of the AFP.

In spite of President Duterte's penchant to publicly excoriate Manila's Western allies, it was clear that the AFP maintained a high level of trust with its foreign military partners. Duterte's repeated false attribution of AFP tactical successes to Chinese military aid is belied by the actual Philippine SOF involved

12. According to Luna, the MG fielded DJI Phantom 3 drones while the Philippine military used DJI Phantom 4 drones.

13. Author interview with MNLF inmates detained in the Special Intensive Care Area 2, Camp Bagong Diwa, Taguig City, Philippines, 2014.

14. When Marawi erupted, the LRB was already expanded into a full regiment (LRR) as part of post-Zamboanga reforms. But while the LRR had an increased headcount, it still needed to re-learn some of the tactics that were relevant to a built-up area like Marawi.

15. Author interview via Facebook Messenger with Philippine Army officer assigned to the Light Reaction Regiment in early June 2017.

16. AFP personnel seeking entry into special units are required to go on 'test missions' before graduation. These missions are considered the capstone exercise prior to the end of a special operations training class.

17. As per the provisions of Republic Act 9184 'The Government Procurement Reform Act'.

in the fighting.¹⁸ It is highly likely that in spite of Duterte's grandstanding, the working relationships between the AFP and its Western counterparts would be generally marked by continuity.

6. Prioritising Upstream Initiatives

The Battle of Marawi highlighted the limitations of relying on armed or 'kinetic' military responses. The use of force does not resolve the underlying issues that have allowed for the emergence and resilience of a violent extremist organisation such as the MG. The lack of governance and the pervasive corruption that allowed for the ascent of political kingmakers like MG clan matriarch Farhana Maute would not be resolved simply by a military campaign. Lack of appreciation of the need to resolve the roots of conflict leads to a surprising reality. Even though the Philippines has been facing multiple secession and terrorist threats in Mindanao for more than four decades, no presidency has yet to come out with national-level countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy.

Violent extremism in Mindanao is driven by largely material considerations (Human Development Network 2005). Thus, counter-ideological work such as promoting a state-supported brand of Islam may only prove to be counterproductive and further alienate Filipino Muslims. It would also fail to address the material quality-of-life issues that underpin conflict. A heavy-handed ideological approach would further exacerbate the bifurcation of

18. 'Scout Ranger Books' is a Facebook page maintained by a former officer of the PA's First Scout Ranger Regiment. The page contained dispatches and photos taken by First Scout Ranger Regiment operators and other AFP SOF. Throughout the course of the Battle for Marawi, the page recounted combat engagements where Filipino troops were utilising American-made small arms. Duterte publicly announced twice how Chinese-donated rifles were used to kill two Isnilon Hapilon and Omarhanyam Maute. Scout Ranger Books and other mainstream media have published numerous interviews of soldiers involved in the operation that killed Hapilon and Maute. All remarked that they did not use any Chinese-supplied weaponry during the operations leading to that fateful encounter.

identities between Muslims, Christians and the indigenous peoples of Mindanao.

First, President Duterte must follow through with the promise for Bangsamoro political autonomy as outlined in the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro between the Philippines and the MILF. The creation of a Bangsamoro should take precedence over the hard push of Duterte's allies to convert the Republic of the Philippines into a federal state. A shift to a federal form of government would render moot the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro and could likely lead to a flare-up in violence. By allowing the establishment of a Bangsamoro, it is hoped that the patchwork of atomistic clans in Mindanao can be organised into a more cohesive collective.

Second, the youth should be given particular attention in any socio-economic and human development improvements in Mindanao. The MG was able to recruit its fighters from disaffected youth in the Lanao provinces. For impoverished youth, the MG promised financial rewards and economic mobility. For those who were educated and hailed from wealthy Maranao clans, the MG promised adventure and the fulfilment of a sense of duty to fight the 'crusaders' from the Philippine military. This tailored messaging by extremists requires similarly responsive counter-narratives.

7. Winning the War after the Battle

The recommendations above would likely accrue benefits over the long term. The critical task now is to revive Marawi rather than simply rebuilding it. The first task is to ensure the prompt return of residents, especially in areas which were not as severely damaged as the MBA. Allowing internally displaced persons to wallow in evacuation camps would only allow resentment against government forces to increase. Delaying a return to normalcy would also only inflate the residents' threat perception of IS-pledged groups.

Manila should also ensure that the city is not only rebuilt but built up better. It is unclear how soon can reconstruction begin in the shattered city centre, for months known simply

as the main battle area. Experts estimated that rebuilding the city would require PHP 90 billion (or more than AUD 2 billion) (Salaverria 2017). Beyond the physical environment, resources would have to be spent on resolving lingering land disputes in the city, which could be the future source of reignited ridos. The AFP has a clear role to play in the proper dispensation of land titles as a significant part of Marawi is classified as a military reservation.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the final disposition of the cash and other valuables that the MG looted from Marawi homes and business establishments. It is estimated that the militants looted nearly AUD 50 million (PHP 2 billion) worth of cash, gold and jewellery during the siege (Allard 2018). Military officials claim that some of the money may already have been used to recruit replacements in the aftermath of the battle. By January 2018, military intelligence warned that possibly 50 foreign terrorists remain in Mindanao, rebuilding a 400 strong force 'almost the same strength that initially turned (sic) Marawi' (Torres-Tupas 2018).

8. Conclusion

Manila's response to the aftermath of the Battle for Marawi is of greater consequence than the actual fighting. President Duterte should use his political capital to mobilise resources and stakeholders to build back Marawi better. Beyond this immediate goal, it is important for Manila to recognise the non-ideological drivers of conflict and the distinct forces that led to the Battle for Marawi. Rather than viewing the liberation of Marawi as an end in itself, it is better to look at it as turning point for the larger task of attaining peace in Mindanao.

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