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The Basilan Attack: First Significant IS Battle in Southeast Asia

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

Following the attack by IS on the Philippine army in Western Mindanao, Manila should make fighting IS its national security priority and step up cooperation with its counterparts in Southeast Asia to eliminate the threat. Otherwise, IS will grow and affect the security and stability of the region.

Commentary

THE SELF-STYLED Islamic State (IS) mounted an attack on the Philippine army in Basilan, Western Mindanao, killing 18 and injuring 53 on 9 April 2016. Although Manila did not acknowledge the clash as a fight between government forces and IS, the group that fought the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) was led by the IS' designated leader in the southern Philippines, Isnilon Hapilon, a former deputy head of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Defence Secretary Voltaire Gazmin and the Armed Forces Chief of Staff flew to Zamboanga City and Basilan the next day.

The operation by AFP was poorly executed and demonstrated the lack of appreciation of the emerging IS threat. Last year, on 25 January 2015, the police suffered a similar debacle when 44 Special Action Force Troopers were killed in Mamasapano. Although the operation killed Marwan, the top Malaysian terrorist, it demonstrated the difficulty of AFP effectively operating in Mindanao. An IS press release was subsequently issued on 13 April 2016 entitled "100 Killed from the Philippine Crusader Army in Operations by Soldiers of the Caliphate in Philippines". Significantly it was signed off in the name of "The Islamic State, Philippines".

Formation of IS Philippines

The 13 April announcement by IS Central in Syria/Iraq confirms it as the first official IS entity in Southeast Asia. The group that pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi is led by Hapilon. A RSIS Commentary on 15 January 2016 by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research had forecast that IS was on the verge of declaring a wilayat (province) of the Caliphate. Until IS officially declared the attacks against the AFP on 9 April, the Government of the Philippines did not take the threat seriously and even denied the presence of IS on its soil.

With 125 men led by Hapilon, the newly-created IS nucleus demonstrated that they could hold ground and fight AFP. The IS has been steadfastly influencing and building their capabilities in northern, southern and western Mindanao in the Philippines. In northern Mindanao, *Tawhid Wal Jihad* has renamed itself as Islamic State of Lanao in Butig. Although IS Central in Syria and Iraq has not acknowledged the Butig-based group as an official branch, the group presents a major threat. It has fought AFP and is currently holding several civilian hostages. In southern Mindanao, *Ansar Khilafa* Mindanao has also fought with AFP and conducted IS-style beheadings. The group was involved in arms transfers to IS Indonesia and hosted Indonesian instructor Ibrahim Ali Sucipto who was killed in South Cotabato on 26 November 2015.

Philippine marines in the village of Butri in Sultan Kudarat killed six including Ibrahim, who was working for the IS-associated Indonesian group Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT). The most significant of the IS entities is Hapilon's Basilan-based former Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members. Considered the official IS-designated entity in the Philippines, Hapilon unified Ansar Khilafa Mindanao with a handful of fighters from Malaysia to proclaim an IS Branch.

AFP – MILF cooperation

The AFP operation aimed at capturing Al Barka, the IS base, to kill or capture Hapilon. The United States offered a reward of US\$5 million for the death or capture of Hapilon. In this operation, AFP was supported by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which has observed a ceasefire with the government since March 2014.

The MILF informed AFP that the IS base was five kilometres from the MILF community in the the village of Macalang. The MILF and ASG were former partners but the relationship had deteriorated after MILF joined the peace process and ASG Basilan joined IS. As AFP had requested MILF to clear out of the area, the AFP movements were compromised. The IS was forewarned and well prepared. While MILF fighters and their families moved out, IS prepared to confront the AFP raid in a region dominated by IS.

The Joint Task Force that included special forces spearheaded the fight. The battle hardened ASG fighters used mines, M203 and mortars. In the ten-hour firefight in Basilan, the AFP did not anticipate the degree of preparation by IS. The media on 10 April highlighted the AFP failure to prepare adequately to fight IS.

The IS fighters were motivated and well-equipped and supported by a few foreign fighters. The AFP recovered the body of a Moroccan fighter Mohammad Khattab, an explosives expert. Another foreign fighter, the Malaysian, Mohammad Najib Hussain alias Abu Anas was killed in Makalang, Al Baraka Town in Basilan on 15 December 2015.

Influence of IS Spreading

While IS influence is spreading throughout Southeast Asia in the Philippines IS has established territorial control and established training bases. The fight against IS requires a higher level of commitment and leadership. Rather than deploying general purpose forces, it is imperative for the special operations forces to spearhead the fight.

With their best intelligence assets, the Special Operations Commander of AFP should move to Basilan and remain in the Sulu Archipelago until all the groups that pledged allegiance to IS are dismantled and their leaders captured or killed. There is no better moment to mobilise and mount an uncompromising intelligence-led military operation than at this point when the nation will rally around AFP.

Otherwise, IS influence will slowly and steadily spread and IS capabilities will grow - a phenomenon witnessed since last year. With a new government to be elected shortly in Manila the new president will have to confront the rise of IS in both its influence and capabilities. Though it is a distraction from the peace process Manila should continue to work with MILF in a range of preventive and preemptive operations to stop IS in its tracks.

The fight against IS should be decisive and should become the government's top priority. The governments in the region should support Manila and keep IS out of their countries and Southeast Asia.

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