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Jolo and Maguindanao: New IS Epicentres in Philippines?

By Jasminder Singh and Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff

Synopsis

The presence of the so-called Islamic State in the Philippines continues to be a significant threat in this region. After Marawi, IS fighters have been reported as still active in the southern part of the country. Jolo and Maguindanao are likely to be the next IS stronghold.

Commentary

ON 22 MARCH 2018, exactly five months after the Philippine government liberated Marawi, An-Naba, the self-proclaimed Islamic State's (IS) mouthpiece, reported a clash between Abu Sayyaf (ASG) fighters and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in the island of Jolo.

The constant update from IS Central through its publications, such as An-Naba, about incidents happening in the Philippines could suggest the trajectory of the group's activities in the country. The latest are in Jolo and Maguindanao.

Shifting Grounds

Prior to the Marawi siege from March to October 2017, the pro-IS groups were mainly located in four key areas in the Philippines. They were also called IS Basilan, IS Ranao, IS Maguindanao and IS Cotabato – all in the Mindanao region of south Philippines.

Since the failure of the 'Marawi project', the pro-IS groups that escaped from Marawi City or were outside the operational zone, have been regrouping. This has led to a new development with fighters from the former four pro-IS areas being reorganised into two, now based in Jolo and Maguindanao.

While the An-Naba news report would indicate that there have been constant communication between pro-IS jihadists in the Philippines and IS Central, more significantly is the decision to zero in on Jolo and Maguindanao as the new IS strongholds in the Philippines.

The IS report also highlighted the importance of Muslims in Mindanao and Sulu in undertaking 'jihad'. It advocated continuing the mentality of the war against the colonial power in the last 490 years, and replace the current political system in the Philippines with an Islamic ruler and governance.

Why Jolo and Maguindanao?

Maguindanao has been an old ASG stronghold that had pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi long before the Marawi siege. Equally important is the fact that there is a major jihadi group based there, called Jamaatul Muhajireen Wal Ansar. It is led by Abu Turaifi and associated with the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), a breakaway faction from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Similarly, Jolo has long been associated with the ASG. In the present political and military constellation, Jolo is also associated with Amin Baco, one of the leaders of the Marawi siege who succeeded in escaping from the AFP crackdown. Amin's first father-in-law, Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan, is a key ASG leader in Sulu and is from the town of Patikul in Jolo where many of the ASG fighters, including Amin, are believed to be in the inaccessible mountains off Patikul.

Turaifi and Amin are important magnets that have drawn local jihadists and apparently foreign ones too. Since the end of the Marawi siege, there has been a call to '*hijrah*' (migrate) from Basilan and Cotabato to Jolo and Maguindanao, to rebuild the pro-IS jihadi strongholds. This effort has been greatly facilitated by the presence of another key pro-IS jihadi leader involved in the Marawi siege, Humam Abdul Najid also known as Abu Dar.

Together with Dr Mahmud Ahmad from Malaysia, Abu Dar was responsible for recruiting foreigners and obtaining international funding for the Marawi project. Abu Dar is also believed to be in control of the 'war loot' taken from Marawi City and hence, in a position to finance not just the '*hijrah*' of local and foreign fighters but also in strengthening the declining military capability of the jihadists.

Two Other Factors

Apart from the significant leaders mentioned above, there are two other factors that could facilitate the rise of Jolo and Maguindano as new IS strongholds. First, historically these areas have developed a robust and resilient infrastructure to support jihadi operations and are regarded as a 'no go zone' for the AFP and Philippines Police, who fear being kidnapped for ransom.

Second, the failure of the Philippine Government to endorse the peace treaty, called Bangsamoro Basic Law, has created a toxic environment for Manila or any Muslim group keen on negotiating with the Philippines Government. This has the effect of

strengthening the jihadist narrative that only a military solution would benefit them and hence, the support for jihadists in Jolo and Maguindanao.

Impact of Rise of Jolo and Maguindanao

The loss of Marawi and the death of Isnilon Hapilon, the leader of the Abu Sayyaf group, and Omarkhayam Maute, leader of the Maute group, do not signal the end of the pro-IS and pro-jihadi struggle in the Philippines. Efforts are being made to find a replacement for Hapilon with Amin Baco, Abu Turaifi and Abu Dar often named as possibilities.

There have been suggestions earlier that Amin Baco could be dead. Hence another possibility is Yassir Igasan, a Libya-trained ASG commander with extensive links with Middle Eastern jihadi groups. Regardless of whoever replaces Hapilon, the decades-old struggle will continue.

While it will only be a matter of time before a new consensual figure acceptable to all is elected to replace Hapilon, the Marawi Siege has totally changed the character of *jihad* in southern Philippines. The snail-paced reconstruction and rehabilitation of Marawi City will only benefit the jihadists with the government seen as the source of the people's misery, providing additional recruits to the jihadists. This does not include families who lost their loved ones in the Marawi Siege.

In an endeavour to avenge the deaths of their comrades, leaders and the loss of Marawi City, these jihadists can be expected to target security personnel in revenge killings. For the past three months since January 2018, there have been reports of ASG and BIFF clashing with security personnel. In addition to attacking military targets, groups in the Philippines have also taken the advantage to target non-military targets to widen the war to both embarrass the Philippine Government as well as to spread the security forces thin.

New Phase?

The quest for revenge, the tasting of 'power' for five months over a Filipino city, the massive destruction and loss of lives, among others, would be critical in shaping the 'jihadi' struggle in southern Philippines in the coming years. The movement of local and foreign jihadists to the new pro-IS strongholds, confirmed by images in the social media, is an indication that a new phase of violence is likely to break out in southern Philippines.

Given the circumstances, the security apparatus in the Philippines and neighbouring countries should be more vigilant as violence is likely to escalate. Keeping track of the jihadists' movements is imperative in curbing another Marawi. Particularly important to focus on is the extensive jihadi networks of Amin Baco and Abu Dar, both in the Philippines and in Malaysia and Indonesia.

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