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Assessing the Feasibility of a ‘Wilayah Mindanao’

by Joseph Franco

Abstract

Philippine-based militants led by Isnilon Hapilon are continuing their efforts to build an Islamic State presence in Central Mindanao. The Battle for Marawi has demonstrated how conflict-affected areas, specifically in the Lanao del Sur province, are favourable to the entry of foreign jihadists. These individuals may decide to join IS-affiliated groups in the Philippines instead of travelling to the Middle East. As the IS core faces increasing pressure from coalition forces, Mindanao could serve as a halfway house for Katibah Nusantara fighters seeking to hone their combat skills before returning to their countries of origin. Denying space to a potential ‘wilayah Mindanao’ rests on the success of the peace process with mainstream Filipino Muslim groups.

Introduction

The ongoing Battle for Marawi has cast harsh light on the state of internal security in the Southern Philippines. As the fighting continued to rage for more than two months, it is clear that a paradigm shift has occurred in the conflict-affected areas of Mindanao. Lanao del Sur Province (LDS) has always been the hotbed of Filipino Muslim militancy in mainland Mindanao. However, the Battle for Marawi was unprecedented in terms of its urban nature and the scale of the fighting.

This article highlights the utility of Mindanao training camps to the increasingly decentralized orientation of the so-called Islamic State (IS). It must be stressed that IS-inspired militants were not the first foreign elements who sought to exploit the ungoverned spaces found in Mindanao. Rather, IS-pledged militants were able to leverage emerging technologies such as social media to “sell” Mindanao as a destination for martyrdom and expeditionary jihadist violence. This article will also trace how IS-related themes and visuals influenced the indigenous Philippine terrorist propaganda. The conclusion addresses the future of the emerging transnational Southeast Asian militant network after the guns fall silent in Marawi.

The Battle for Marawi

The Battle for Marawi started on 23 May 2017 after an *in extremis* operation by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to capture Isnilon Hapilon, the designated *emir* or leader of IS-pledged militants in Mindanao. The raid immediately degenerated into a confused gun battle with hundreds of Maute Group (MG) members, Filipino militants and foreign fighters emerging from prepared positions across the city. As fighting raged into the month of August, Marawi remains desolate with 90 percent of the civilian population displaced to nearby municipalities and towns. More than 500 MG members and other jihadists have died as of early August 2017 along with 125 members of the security forces.[1]

Contrary to the earlier stages of the battle, the AFP has stopped issuing self-imposed deadlines for when the two remaining Maute-held *barangays* or villages will be cleared. The Philippine government has likewise pushed for the extension of martial rule beyond the 60 days provided for in the Constitution. Proclamation No. 216 suspended the writ of *habeas corpus* and placed Mindanao under martial rule.[2] More than a month ago, the Supreme Court of the Philippines upheld the state of martial law declared in Mindanao.[3]

It has been belatedly admitted by the security forces that the Maute Group and its allies were “underestimated”. [4] The Maute and its allies had time to plan a takeover of Marawi city, which included casing the headquarters of the Philippine Army’s 103rd Infantry Brigade and a safe house of a military intelligence group covering Marawi.[5] Had the 23 May raid not occurred, the militants intended to take over the city on 26 May 2017,

during the holy Muslim month of Ramadan. So while the Philippine military may have seized tactical surprise, it was offset by the strategic surprise attained by the MG.

IS Mindanao: From Basilan to Lanao?

In late January 2017, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana reported that 15 IS-affiliated terrorists were killed after a night-time airstrike in Central Mindanao.[6] Among the reported fatalities was an Indonesian national identified only as Mohisen. Also wounded in the strike was Isnilon Hapilon, leader of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) Basilan faction and leader of IS-pledged militants in the Philippines. Hapilon's faction moved from Basilan province to Butig municipality, LDS, as part of an initial overture to establish a permanent IS presence in the Philippines. Lorenzana remarked that Hapilon acted on the "behest of the ISIS people in the Middle East" to check whether the area would be a viable place for a *wilayah* (province of IS).[7] Lorenzana's blithe assessment reflects Manila's dated appreciation of how IS operates when compared to more traditional terrorist organizations.

The expansionary model espoused by Lorenzana, where Filipino groups passively receive orders from the IS core, is more aligned with how Al Qaeda historically worked with its affiliates. Daniel Byman argued that Al Qaeda sought affiliates to achieve its strategic goal of fighting the "far enemy" or countries supporting "apostate" Arab regimes.[8]

In comparison, the IS model for expansion followed the idea of *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (Arab for 'remaining and expanding'), which was focused on "fighting locally" and "instituting limited governance".[9] IS *wilayahs* are premised in the ability of militants to exercise governance through armed coercion. IS decentralization is the culmination of the process AQ underwent in the late 2000s as it reeled from US military pressure.[10] For IS, therefore, affiliates outside of the Syria-Iraq region served as potential showpieces of Islamic governance first, expeditionary fighters second.

This appreciation of the necessity of situating global IS ideology in local contexts drove Hapilon to select Butig municipality in Lanao del Sur as the rallying point for other IS-pledged Filipino militants. While it remains debatable how much direct operational guidance the IS core gave to Hapilon, what is clear is that the mindset of some jihadist militants in Mindanao has changed beyond the top-down influence of AQ operatives.

Hapilon needed the clout of the Maute Group (MG) in LDS. Members of the MG pledged allegiance to IS caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in April 2015 and subsequently referred to themselves as "IS Ranao" in online chat applications.[11] To LDS residents, they are simply the 200-strong "*grupong ISIS*" or "group of ISIS".[12] On 24 November 2016, the MG made international headlines by issuing a statement and raising an IS flag in front of the disused Butig municipal hall.[13] Hapilon appeared convinced that the MG would be a useful ally, with the latter's ability to wage a protracted guerrilla campaign against government forces.

A More Viable 'Wilayah Mindanao'?

Attempts to establish a permanent presence for foreign jihadists in Central Mindanao have historical precedents. In 1994, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) built training camps for foreign jihadists with seed funding from Al Qaeda.[14] From 1996-1998, the camps trained hundreds of Southeast Asians, mostly from Indonesia, before they were dismantled after the 2000 "all-out war" against the MILF by the Philippine President Joseph Estrada.[15]

As AQ influence waned, the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) used pre-existing connections between Indonesian AQ militants and the MILF to build their own training camps in Central Mindanao. From 2003 to 2005, JI successively built and occupied a camp in Mt. Cararao and Camp Jabal Huda.[16] Khadaffy Janjalani, then

leader of the ASG, sensed an opportunity to consolidate forces with the JI in Central Mindanao but his group was interdicted by a joint MILF-Philippine military operation.[17]

The ASG's repeated attempts to relocate to Central Mindanao indicate awareness of the difficulties in sustaining a large armed presence in Basilan. Basilan's location in Western Mindanao is arguably more accessible for Indonesian and Malaysians planning a *hijrah* (migration). Hapilon traded Basilan's proximity to the Philippines' maritime borders for the more defensible location of Butig municipality. Compared to the constricted geography of Basilan, Lanao del Sur's complex terrain offers more obstacles against government forces.

For militants, the defensive depth of Central Mindanao is complemented by its abundance of resources. The JI training camps were set within rich and well-irrigated farmland, which allowed for indefinite sustainment of trainees and cadres. Agricultural produce sourced from farming communities controlled by militants find a ready market in the urban centres of Mindanao. The MILF, for example, were even able to charge above-market rates for harvested rice, by flaunting their weapons and subtle coercion.[18]

Selling Mindanao to Southeast Asian Jihadists

Hapilon's stature as an effective leader for IS fighters and supporters in Southeast Asia rests on forging the security and resources potential of Central Mindanao into a functioning base. The Battle for Marawi has most likely provided a beacon for would-be jihadist pilgrims to aspire to, notwithstanding the actual outcome of the battle.

In the long run, the ascension of new *wilayahs* is mutually beneficial for the IS leadership and would-be *wilayah* emirs for it demonstrates that IS is succeeding in its divine mission, while obscure jihadist groups get a chance to "sign up for the hottest thing".[19] Even the threat of a future *wilayah* could be useful for jihadist groups such as the Hapilon faction, short of an actual declaration by Baghdadi or other senior members of the IS core. In November 2014, *Dabiq* issue no. 5 mentioned that the pledge from Philippine groups had been accepted but like some other countries had "delayed the announcement of their respective [*wilayah*]..."[20]

There appears to be tacit recognition within the IS leadership that Southeast Asian groups continued to have no "infrastructure of control" that could be the basis for a formal *wilayah*, albeit such an assessment could change in the months following the end of the crisis in Marawi.[21] Al-Baghdadi's alleged choice of the Southern Philippines as "the ISIS' base" in Southeast Asia appears intentionally vague.[22] This appears consistent with the assessment that IS may have abandoned its *wilayah*-based expansion model, which is premised on the idea of "remaining and expanding".[23] This strategic ambiguity allows Hapilon the discretion to consolidate his influence. In a June 2016 video, Malaysian Abu Aun al-Malysi along with other unidentified Indonesian and Filipino militants, exhorted followers to join their "brothers" in Mindanao.[24]

It must be noted however, that the call did not mention the establishment of a *wilayah*. Instead of being declared a "wali", Hapilon was referred to as a "emir" or leader of an IS "division", with the Philippines being considered part of "the land of jihad" and not as the "land of the caliphate".[25] The reluctance of the IS leadership to declare a *wilayah* is probably due to the current inability of Hapilon's faction to exercise de facto governance. [26] At present, cooperation among jihadist groups in the Philippines occurs through ad hoc arrangements. [27] Even without the full *wilayah* designation, Hapilon and his followers appear set in producing indigenous propaganda content that promotes the existence of an actively fighting IS division.

Connections Through IS-influenced Propaganda

As of this writing, slick propaganda content which repackages the gritty footage coming out of Marawi has yet to emerge. It can only be assumed that edited propaganda videos will emerge in line with trends in indigenous Philippine propaganda discussed below.

towards the Amaq template underscores the changing motivations for producing content. For content disseminated via Telegram, there is a deliberate attempt to package the content to look like “official” IS material. The template is as follows: (1) 15-45 seconds of generic IS computer-generated imagery (CGI) consisting of logos and black flags; (2) 5 to 7 minutes of ASG footage; (3) 15-30 seconds of additional IS-themed CGI; all overlaid with (4) subtitles.[35]

In comparison, pre-IS indigenous propaganda involved straightforward videos designed to act as “proof-of-life” videos for kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) activities. The only group that appears to produce KFR-related videos is the ASG faction in Sulu (ASG-Sulu) headed by Hatib Sawadjaan. Online material depicting the executions of Canadian hostages John Ridsdel and Robert Hall (Figure 3), were free of distinctive markers found in IS videos such as CGI/animated logos, watermarks or *nasheed* audio tracks.[36]

Figure 3: Execution of Robert Hall



Only a crude reproduction of an IS flag could be seen in the Ridsdel and Hall videos. These proof-of-life/KFR videos were not as widely disseminated on Telegram channels frequented by IS sympathisers. The lack of IS branding has limited the reach of such propaganda, demonstrating the utility of Amaq-style aesthetics.

The content of IS-influenced indigenous propaganda also provides clues to novel techniques and tactics that were imparted to Filipino militants from overseas. IS in Syria and Iraq demonstrated that it is possible to use consumer-grade quadcopter drones to deliver lethal payloads.[37] In the Philippines, MG members documented a test flight of their surveillance drone (Figure 4).[38] The device in question is a simple glider-type drone which is less sophisticated than the quadcopters used by IS to drop grenades. It is currently unknown if the MG were able to progress from rudimentary surveillance drones to the quadcopter bombers of IS in Iraq/Syria.[39]

Figure 4: Drone launch by Filipino jihadists



A New Southeast Asia Alumni Network

With Isnilon Hapilon as IS leader in Mindanao, there is a greater chance that displaced Southeast Asian foreign fighters from the KN would have a figurehead to seek out and follow. Hapilon’s history and stature as one of the founders of the Abu Sayyaf in the late 1990s has been buttressed by his pledge of allegiance to IS.

There is already concern that when foreign fighters return to the region “they will build a kind of alumni network, like the fighters from Afghanistan nearly two decades ago”.[40] The Philippines, with its lax security legislation, may prove to be a better option for Malaysians escaping the re-capture of Mosul and Raqqa. Indonesian and Malaysian fighters returning from the Katibah Nusantara (KN) may find Central Mindanao a more inviting prospect than returning to their home countries.

The most established networks are from Malaysia. A recently disrupted plot uncovered that Sabah was slated to be the transit point for Southeast and South Asian militants keen to join Hapilon and his Malaysian backer Dr. Mahmud Ahmad. Ahmad was formerly a faculty member of the University of Malaya and is suspected to be the financier of Malaysian foreign fighters in Mindanao. Malaysia’s Special Branch was able to disrupt the plot, when it arrested four suspects trying to recruit new IS members from Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Myanmar.[41] Malaysia has legislation that covers membership with terrorist organisations overseas.[42] From Indonesia, the networks to infiltrate the southern Philippines appear to be headed by Bahrun Naim.[43]

Thinking Beyond the Battle for Marawi

The Battle for Marawi has raised fears of copycat attacks against other targets in the Philippines and other places in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asians fighting in urban areas in Syria and Iraq now have a template to apply those lessons in the tropical cities of their home countries. On the other hand, the rural environment of Mindanao is a close match to the climate and terrain of both Indonesia and Malaysia. The combination of newly-acquired urban combat skills and previously acquired jungle warfare capabilities by militants can be a potent mix against state security forces in Southeast Asia.

As early as April 2016, Hapilon’s faction, together with foreign nationals, launched what some observers claimed as being the first IS attack on Philippine soil.[44] ASG fighters along with foreign fighters ambushed troops from the 55th Infantry Battalion. Killed were 18 soldiers and 26 militants, including the Moroccan bomb maker Mohammad Khattab. Amaq propagandists claimed 100 soldiers were killed in Basilan during the 9th of April attack (Figure 5).[45]

Figure 5: Amaq Agency infographic on alleged Philippine military casualties



This new alumni network can take advantage of the “terrorist transit triangle” area comprised of the borderlands of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines surrounding the Sulawesi Sea.[46] The triangle is also known for the ease of movement for other undocumented individuals. For example, General Santos City in Eastern Mindanao is a known ingress point for Indonesian militants but has limited intelligence coverage available.[47] This distinct geography and border configuration once provided Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) a conducive environment for the movement of logistics to launch its attacks.[48]

Weapons from Central Mindanao first arrived in Indonesia’s Ambon province during the height of the sectarian conflict there.[49] Firearms were moved through established smuggling routes emanating from Mindanao, passing through Manado in Northern Sulawesi and then onwards to Ambon. While the sectarian conflict there has diminished, the corridors remain active. The late Santoso’s East Indonesia Mujahideen continued to use this route, acquiring several firearms, including grenade launchers, in 2014.[50] Less established are the routes to smuggle arms into Malaysia, perhaps due to the smaller number of firearms involved. Rather than relying on smuggling networks, weapons are simply ferried by fishing boats plying the waters between Tawau in Sabah state and Mindanao.[51]

Severing Connections

The multi-faceted connections between Filipino and Southeast Asian militants pose an inherently complex problem. The AFP Development Support and Security Plan (DSSP) *Kapayapaan* (“Peace”) continues to prescribe the use of intelligence-driven, combat operations against terrorist groups like the ASG. Combat operations continue to take precedence over negotiations at the tactical level. The Battle for Marawi highlighted tactical capabilities of the Philippine armed forces such as the use of precision guided munitions, embedded forward air control, and joint special operations - all in a massive urban operation.

It is at the strategic-level where Manila’s response falters due to the absence of a nationwide countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy. No Philippine presidency has formulated a comprehensive CVE initiative to counter Islamist terrorism in the Philippines that brings together civilian and military stakeholders. On the ground, the military relies on community development and infrastructure building to win ‘hearts and minds’. These efforts, however, are designed around countering the long-lasting secular Communist insurgency.

Another complicating factor for the military’s approach is its very limited capability to secure the porous southern borders. The immediate solution is to strengthen regional cooperation. Joint maritime patrols to secure the Sulawesi and Sulu Seas have been reinvigorated after the 3rd Trilateral Defence Minister’s Meeting in August 2016.[52] Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines came to the agreement in response to a series of kidnappings that victimised Indonesian and Malaysians citizens.

Denying Hapilon the opportunity to consolidate IS influence in the Philippines hinges on the successful peace negotiations between the Manila government and the MILF, more than on the defeat of the IS-inspired militants entrenched in Marawi. Failed peace negotiations may drive the younger generation of secessionists into the arms of jihadists, especially with the propaganda boon provided by the Battle for Marawi. President Rodrigo Duterte’s restart of the stalled Mindanao peace process by reconstituting the Bangsamoro Transition Commission in February 2017 is an important first step. Making sure that the draft Bangsamoro Basic Law passes into law is the next critical juncture for the Duterte Administration.[53]

Beyond a political settlement, the Philippines must look ahead for new avenues to defeat the extremist ideology being pushed by the ASG and MG. A nationwide CVE programme tailored to the distinct human and social terrain of Mindanao is long overdue. Initiatives similar to disengagement programmes aimed at Communist insurgents could be a potential starting point.

The reconstruction of Marawi is being planned even before the city is cleared. More than half of the AFP's engineering units will be tasked into one Joint Engineering Task Force to implement the national government's rehabilitation plan.[54] Rebuilding Marawi, especially its ravaged commercial centre will be a costly endeavour. The Battle for Marawi has surpassed the damage of previous episodes of urban combat in the southern Philippines such as the 2013 Zamboanga Crisis.[55]

Conclusion

Existing linkages among Southeast Asian jihadists make Mindanao vulnerable to infiltration by returning foreign fighters. Mindanao's porous borders further facilitate the movement of jihadists keen to link up with Hapilon's faction, whether they are returnees or new recruits from Southeast Asia.

The Battle for Marawi is an indication that the transnational jihadist threat has come to roost in Mindanao. Parallels are already being drawn between the destruction in Marawi and previously IS-held cities such as Mosul in Iraq. Increased IS influence in Mindanao was overlooked by security services in Mindanao.

As the IS core buckles under pressure in Iraq and Syria, it will try to expand its influence more subtly. IS command and control of affiliated groups is shifting from the centralised *wilayah* system to a more dispersed division system. Direct operational links and the financing of terror plots through the *wilayah* system are more susceptible to detection by security services.

In comparison, a loose network composed of IS divisions would be more resilient against counter-terrorist activities as seen in Marawi. A decentralised network of divisions will also serve as a wider platform for propaganda production and dissemination. Creating a wider propaganda footprint would complement the IS call for more lone wolf attacks.

Rather than an outright threat reduction, the fall of Mosul and Raqqa may only herald a new phase of jihadist violence in Southeast Asia. The Battle of Marawi may just be the harbinger for future incidents of urban jihadist combat.

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