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The Maute Group: New Vanguard of IS in Southeast Asia?

By Joseph Franco

Synopsis

Skirmishes in the southern Philippine city of Marawi highlight the emergence of the Maute Group (MG) as a potential new magnet for other IS-inspired militants in Mindanao. Manila must act swiftly to contain and defeat IS-inspired militants in central Mindanao lest a protracted conflict increases Mindanao's attractiveness as a hub for foreign terrorist fighters.

Commentary

ON 23 MAY 2017, security forces attempted to arrest Isnilon Hapilon who was allegedly recovering from injuries sustained in a previous battle with the Philippine military. Hapilon was recognised by Dabiq, the online magazine of Islamic State (IS), as the “emir” or leader of an Islamic State “division” since October 2014 but stopped short of designating him as a “wali” (governor) of a wilayah (province). What was intended as a short raid degenerated into a series of skirmishes in the city centre.

Fighters from the MG, Isnilon's Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) faction, and other armed gangs coalesced into an ad hoc combat unit to resist the Philippine security forces. What transpired was an episode of “pintakasi”, where different armed groups converge together for mutual support and to seize firearms from decimated military units. Pintakasi has complicated efforts to clear the city of terrorists. Nearly a week into the fighting, 90 percent of Marawi's civilian population has been displaced. Dozens of militants have been killed, including foreign fighters from Indonesia and Malaysia. The Malaysian authorities have confirmed that two fighters from Kedah and Kelantan were involved in the battle.

The Maute Dynasty

At the heart of the current crisis is the MG who pledged allegiance to IS caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in April 2015. They refer to themselves as “IS Lanao” alluding to the archaic name of Lanao del Sur province. To residents in Marawi they are known simply as “grupong ISIS” (the “ISIS group”) founded by brothers Abdullah and Omarkhayyam Maute. The brothers are scions of the Maute clan, a political family who actively fields candidates for local government elections. Prior to pledging to IS, the Maute brothers headed a private militia that targeted sawmill operators and rural electrical infrastructure for extortion.

The MG pledge was a calculated move by the Maute brothers to project a fiercer image. For Hapilon, the pledge made MG an attractive partner to enhance his status as emir. Merging the MG with Hapilon’s armed group could lead to greater fighting capability and territorial control. In Western Mindanao, other Abu Sayyaf factions (i.e. ASG in Sulu Province) appeared to focus their armed activities on lucrative cross-border kidnapping. Hapilon’s Basilan-based ASG faction struggled to find similar sources of illicit funds.

The Hapilon faction’s move from Basilan province was both an initial overture to establish a permanent IS presence in the Philippines and to link with the resource-rich Maute clan. Prior attempts by the ASG to move into central Mindanao had met with failure due to the difficulty of integrating into the complex human terrain. Hapilon’s link-up with the MG expedited the process and expanded the number of his sympathisers.

Threat of Urbanised Maute Group Violence

The Battle for Marawi highlights how Philippine-based militants are able to operate in more urbanised areas aside from their usual hinterland strongholds. This portends further complications for Philippine security forces who are more accustomed to operations in the jungles of Mindanao.

First, more frequent incidents of urban combat could provide militants more opportunities to create and disseminate terrorist propaganda due to the density of civilians. Soft targets are in greater supply in the urban centres of Mindanao and can lead to more mass casualty events. In addition, launching attacks in cities would lead to greater media coverage as compared to a militant attack occurring in a remote locality.

Second, the target-rich environment would lower the bar in terms of the necessary combat skills necessary for would-be jihadists. Foreign militants would no longer be hampered by the necessity of trying to survive in the jungles of Mindanao. Nor would they need to acquire more advanced skills such as jungle warfare.

Third, the ubiquity of civilian targets would provide the opportunity for more lone-wolf attacks as encouraged by IS. Rather than resorting to knife and vehicle attacks, would-be jihadists in Mindanao would be able to tap into the copious supply of loose firearms in central Mindanao.

Externalities of Martial Law

Given the confusion during the opening salvos of the Battle for Marawi, President Rodrigo Duterte's proclamation of martial law appears defensible. It has come to light however that several incidents used to rationalise the proclamation were either the result of MG propaganda or the "fog of war" inherent in a crisis situation. For example, further investigation revealed that the Amai Pakpak Medical Centre was not occupied by the MG. Reports that mentioned the beheading of a Lanao police chief was also disproven.

Hapilon's intent to have IS declare a "wilayah Mindanao" must be considered in any decision to either lift martial law or extend it across the entire Philippines. To recall, IS through Dabiq recognised Hapilon's pledge but had "delayed the announcement of their respective [wilayah]". The reluctance to declare a wilayah is a tacit admission of the IS core that Hapilon and his followers have yet to exercise control in their localities.

Paradoxically, the declaration of martial law may be interpreted by the IS core that Mindanao had been sundered from the Philippines by Hapilon. Instead of a show of force, martial law may be taken as a go-signal by foreign terrorist fighters to exploit the perceived lapse of government control in Mindanao. Prior to the Battle of Marawi, there were already more than a dozen foreign fighters being monitored by the Philippine military in-country. This was before the June 2016 exhortation of Malaysian Abu Aun al-Malysi for other Southeast Asians to join their "brothers" in Mindanao if one could not travel to Syria.

Normalising Mindanao

To manage this externality, it is in the interest of Manila to normalise the Mindanao situation swiftly. Defeating the MG would deny them the space to exert territorial control that is critical in acquiring more support from the IS core. Beyond the battlefield, a quick conclusion to the military campaign will deny the MG the narrative that it has achieved parity with state security forces.

As the Philippines fights the MG, it must avoid collateral damage to prevent the MG from mischaracterising fighting as an existential struggle between Filipino Christian "crusaders" and Filipino Muslims. As the jihadist centre of gravity shifts to the Maute Group, the Philippines must adapt and overcome the distinct challenge it poses compared to other legacy groups such as the ASG.

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