

Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point

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Chapter 1: The Emergence of the Islamic State in the Philippines

This chapter of the report provides an overview of the general environment, specific factors, and events that likely contributed to the Islamic State's emergence and influence in the Philippines. The exact year that the Islamic State began to emerge in the Philippines is subject to debate, however, by 2014, several commanders in the Philippines began making pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State.³⁰ Most notably though, Isnilon Hapilon of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) posted a video of his pledge to the Islamic State and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi mid-2014.³¹ This is significant as Hapilon was named the emir (head of the group) of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia by Islamic State Central prior to his death in 2017.³² Additionally, the Maute Group is an important Islamic State affiliate due to its leading role in the siege of Marawi City in 2017, a conflict that lasted for approximately five months.³³ Major Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines also include the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and Ansharul Khalifa Philippines (AKP), as identified in the regional report of this series.³⁴

One byproduct of the Islamic State's emergence in the Philippines was cooperation among affiliate groups with different familial or ethnic ties, posing a formidable challenge to Philippines security (as the Marawi siege demonstrated). Lost in many discussions of militancy in Mindanao is the fact that it is home to as many as thirteen indigenous ethnic groups and numerous competing clans.³⁵ Where militant groups often work alone, cooperation among them can create new security challenges, and prolong their survival in difficult circumstances.³⁶ Cooperation among various groups under the Islamic State banner has also exacerbated the difficulty of attributing and tracing specific attacks to responsible groups.

Furthermore, the Philippines has proved perhaps to be more fertile for the Islamic State to gain affiliates and territory due to persistent instability within the country, especially in the southern region of Mindanao. Severe socioeconomic and development issues, clan rivalries and disputes, and identity-based armed violence have presented serious and persistent challenges to social and political stability in Mindanao.³⁷ To put it into perspective, Mindanao accounts for about 37% of the country's poor, and four of the country's five poorest regions.³⁸ Violent disputes in the region have manifested in various forms, such as armed groups clashes with government forces, communal tensions, as well as religious extremism and criminal violence.³⁹ Further, the inability of the Philippines central government to convene and implement a peace agreement with major insurgent groups, such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), prior to the 2019 agreement has perpetuated instability, mistrust of the central government, and sustained violence.⁴⁰

30 For a more detailed analysis of the Islamic State's initial emergence in the Philippines, see "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," *IPAC Report No. 33*, October 25, 2016, and "Marawi, the 'East Asia Wilayah' and Indonesia."

31 Joseph Franco, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi," International Crisis Group, July 17, 2018; Rommel C. Banlaoi, "ISIS Followers in the Philippines: Threats to Philippine Security," *SD Magazine*, October 13, 2015.

32 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

33 Franco, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi."

34 See Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis for more details on these groups.

35 Sidney Jones, "Radicalisation in the Philippines: The Cotabato Cell of the 'East Asia Wilayah,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30:6 (2018): p. 936.

36 Tricia Bacon, "Is the Enemy of My Enemy my Friend? How Terrorist Groups Select Partners," *Security Studies* 27:3 (2018).

37 For example, see "Poverty in the Philippines: Causes Constraints and Opportunities," Asian Development Bank, December 2009; "Insecurity in Mindanao: Conflict and State-sponsored Violence," Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, February 2020.

38 "Insecurity in Mindanao: Conflict and State-sponsored Violence."

39 Ibid.

40 The authors discuss the history of negotiations between the Philippine government and the MNLF and MILF in greater detail in Section 1.2.

However, despite collaboration among militants under the banner of the Islamic State, it is important to note that the Islamic State is not a unitary coherent entity across Southeast Asia with a central control and command center. Certainly, the Philippine and Indonesian groups affiliated with the Islamic State remain distinct entities, which operate independently of each other.

This chapter begins with a short discussion of the Battle of Marawi, a five-month siege of Marawi City by Islamic State-linked militants in 2017. This event is arguably the most significant Islamic State event in the Philippines, if not Southeast Asia, and thus, warrants detailed discussion. The authors then highlight the major Islamic State Filipino affiliates (ASG, the Maute Group, the BIFF, and the AKP) as well as the role of foreign militants in the Philippines. They discuss major factors that have facilitated the emergence of the Islamic State in the Philippines including ethno-religious conflict, distrust of the Philippines central government (and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)), and the social and political roles of clans. The chapter ends with a discussion about the counterterrorism structure in the Philippines, led by the AFP, and counterterrorism challenges in the country.

1.1 Battle of Marawi

The most significant Islamic State-related event in the Philippines was the Battle of Marawi. The battle, also called the Marawi Crisis, began in May 2017 when a coalition of Islamic State-linked militants, led by Isnilon Hapilon's faction of Abu Sayyaf Group and the Maute Group, captured the city of Marawi. It lasted until the Armed Forces of the Philippines liberated the city in October 2017. As many as 600 militants, which included both local insurgents and external fighters, descended on Marawi, a city of approximately 200,000 people, in the Lanao del Sur province of the Muslim-majority southern region of Mindanao.⁴¹ The Islamic State set its sights on Marawi and Southeast Asia at large as it increasingly lost ground in its home territory in Iraq and Syria and attempted to cast "Mindanao as the hub for a new regional and global jihadi insurgency."⁴²

The capture and occupation of the city was accompanied by a rigorous Islamic State propaganda campaign that projected the operation's success (although this seemed to be more oriented toward an external audience rather than internal).⁴³ For example, the Islamic State released a propaganda video via Al-Hayat Media Center during the siege, showing urban warfare in Marawi, which called on regional fighters to join the fight.⁴⁴ Most importantly, the Battle of Marawi marked the first time that Islamic State-aligned militants collaborated to occupy territory in Southeast Asia, using fighting techniques and media strategies reflective of Islamic State operations in Syria and Iraq.⁴⁵ Additionally, the siege exposed the challenges faced by the AFP to tackle militants in an urban setting; the battle lasted for five months and the recovery of the city left behind a trail of death and destruction.

Militants' funding for the siege of Marawi appears to come from different sources. First, funding was channeled from the Islamic State to Marawi through Dr. Mahmud Ahmad, a Malaysian former professor.⁴⁶ Mahmud facilitated the transfer of as much as \$600,000 to Islamic State-linked militants

41 Zachary Abuza, "Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines? A Hard Look at a 'Success' Story," *War on the Rocks*, June 2018; Franco, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi," Temby, p. 116.

42 Charles Knight and Katja Theodorakis, "The Marawi Crisis—Urban Conflict and Information Operations," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, July 2019, p. 9.

43 Knight and Theodorakis; Franco, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi."

44 Chris Tomson, "ISIS releases English-spoken video about Marawi, calls on foreign fighters to join battle," *Al-Masdar News*, August 21, 2017.

45 Robert Postings, "A Guide to the Islamic State's Way of Urban Warfare," *Modern War Institute*, July 9, 2018.

46 Angelica Habulan, Muh Taufiqurrohman, Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani, Iftekhharul Bashar, Fan Zhi'An, and Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin, "Southeast Asia: Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Online Extremism," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 10:1 (2018): p. 13; "Marawi, the 'East Asia Wilayah' and Indonesia," p. 8.

in Marawi over the course of the five-month siege.⁴⁷ Second, funds from new recruits, many of whom came from affluent families, may have contributed to the Marawi operation.⁴⁸ Finally, participating militant groups allegedly acquired funding for the siege through transnational drug trafficking and other illicit activities, though evidence remains unclear.⁴⁹

A report by Amnesty International in 2017 states that the “estimated number of militants varied widely, with reports ranging from fewer than one hundred to more than one thousand.”⁵⁰ According to some accounts, a large majority of the 1,000 deaths resulting from the clashes between Islamic State supporters and the Armed Forces of the Philippines were reported to be militants.⁵¹ Still, it cannot be stated definitively how many civilians were killed in the process of trying to flee: while many civilians were able to flee the city unharmed, many were reportedly killed while trying to escape. The conflict displaced about 360,000 people, including Marawi and neighboring municipalities.⁵² Per official government statistics, “at least 920 militants, 165 soldiers, and 47 civilians were killed during the battle, and 1,780 hostages were rescued.”⁵³ Further, there is evidence that foreign fighters participated in the battle, although their numbers were relatively small; by official estimates, as many as 40 participated.⁵⁴

Several Islamic State-affiliated leaders were also casualties of the battle, including Isnilon Hapilon of Abu Sayyaf Group-Basilan and the Maute brothers, Omarkayam and Abdullah Maute.⁵⁵ As a result, major Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines including the Abu Sayyaf Group-Basilan and the Maute Group entered a rebuilding period following the conflict. At the same time, however, “the money and jewelry looted from the Marawi banks likely continues to be an important financial source to sustain the militants.”⁵⁶ There were reports of widespread looting by various parties, including Islamic State-affiliated militants during the siege, but the extent of it remains unknown.⁵⁷

A year after the conflict, as many as 65,000 remained unable to return to their homes.⁵⁸ Observers are concerned that the prolonged rebuilding process in Marawi and the grievance of residents over not being able to return home may be exploited by Islamic State affiliates for recruitment.⁵⁹ Even though the Philippine government has estimated completion of reconstruction work by the end of 2021, similar projections have not been met previously, and COVID-19 has caused further delays.⁶⁰ Any prolonged delays in rebuilding Marawi may be viewed as a propaganda victory for Islamic State-affiliated groups as it legitimizes their actions against the state.

47 Habulan et al., p. 13; “Marawi, the ‘East Asia Wilayah’ and Indonesia,” p. 8.

48 “Marawi, the ‘East Asia Wilayah’ and Indonesia,” p. 10.

49 Ibid., p. 9; Rommel C. Banlaoi, *Marawi City Siege and Threats of Narcoterrorism in the Philippines: Global Lessons Learned and Policy Options for the Duterte Government and Beyond* (Quezon City: Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research (PIPVTR), 2018).

50 “Philippines: ‘The Battle Of Marawi’. Death And Destruction In The Philippines,” Amnesty International, November 17, 2017.

51 Knight and Theodorakis; Franco, “Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi,” Temby, p. 117.

52 “Humanitarian Bulletin Philippines, Issue 6,” United Nations Organization for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), July 2017.

53 “Philippines: ‘Battle of Marawi’ leaves trail of death and destruction.”

54 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines* (Jakarta: Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2019), p. 9.

55 Pieter Van Ostaeen, “OSINT Summary: Suspected SVBIED attack in the Philippines’ Basilan suggests potential shift in Islamic State-affiliated militant tactics,” *Jane’s Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, August 7, 2018.

56 Ibid.

57 “Philippines: ‘The Battle of Marawi’. Death And Destruction In The Philippines.”

58 Temby, p. 117.

59 Joseph Franco, “Detecting Future ‘Marawis’: Considering Alternative Indicators for Assessing the Potential for New Manifestations of Violent Extremism in Mindanao,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14:1 (2020): pp. 3-12; Temby.

60 Gallardo.

1.2 Existing Militant Landscape, Foreign Fighters, and Counterterrorism Structure

Several local dynamics within the Philippines landscape have facilitated the Islamic State's growing influence in the country. Firstly, the country hosts a number of local insurgent groups that, for various reasons discussed below, have been eager to adopt the Islamic State brand. Second, foreign fighters have played an important role in forging links between Islamic State Central and Philippines-based groups, and in generally disseminating the Islamic State's ideology. Finally, ethno-religious tensions rooted in historical divisions between the majority Catholic population and the minority Muslim population, as well as high levels of distrust toward the government and Armed Forces of the Philippines, and clan rivalry have contributed to pockets of instability, such as in Mindanao. Such domestic tensions have contributed to conditions conducive to militancy. Each of these factors are discussed in more detail below.

Preexisting Militant Groups

One of the major ways that the Islamic State changed the insurgent landscape in the Philippines was by uniting previously unconnected groups under the Islamic State brand. Whether these relationships will endure is uncertain, but the shared alignment with the Islamic State provided incentives for disparate groups and militants to collaborate, pooling resources and expertise, at least at the operational level. Many local groups such as Abu Sayyaf had previously been connected to transnational militant organizations such as al-Qa`ida.⁶¹ However, ethnic and familial differences among local groups often dissuaded groups from cooperating with other local Islamist groups.⁶²

As demonstrated by the Battle of Marawi, pledging allegiance to the Islamic State seemingly allowed groups to overcome traditional divisions and create a formidable collective challenge to counterterrorism in the Philippines.⁶³ In other words, aligning with the Islamic State became a mechanism for Islamic State-affiliated groups operating with their own goals and aspirations to cooperate under the Islamic State banner for practical benefits (such as resources and media attention). Additionally, a facilitating factor is the Islamic State's use of foreign fighters, many from Indonesia and Malaysia, who "have the advantage of not being bound by Philippine clan and family links, and they can move easily among different groups. They can provide expertise, international contacts and perhaps funding."⁶⁴ Estimates of the number of Islamic State-affiliated foreign fighters in the Philippines vary widely, but generally tend to be conservative. For example, as mentioned above, Philippines authorities believe that approximately 40 foreign fighters were involved in the Battle of Marawi.⁶⁵

As will be discussed more thoroughly in Section 2.6 of Chapter 2, connections to the Islamic State has had a profound impact on local affiliates' tactics, most notably the use of suicide bombings for the first time in the Philippines in recent history.⁶⁶ Despite the long history of insurgency and violence within the country, it was only in July 2018 that the first suicide bombing using an improvised explosive device (IED) occurred in Lamitan City, Basilan.⁶⁷

There are several groups with links to the Islamic State in the Philippines. In this section, the authors discuss the four major affiliates (Abu Sayyaf Group, Maute Group, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom

61 Franco, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi."

62 Ibid.

63 This is not to say that the Islamic State played any direct meaningful role in promoting cooperation among groups.

64 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," p. 10.

65 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 9.

66 Temby.

67 Ibid.

Fighters, and Ansharul Khalifa Philippines), focusing primarily on their relationship with the Islamic State. These groups were identified in the authors' first report in the Islamic State in Southeast Asia series as operational alliances of the Islamic State in the Philippines.⁶⁸ For the purposes of this study, a group is considered an Islamic State operational alliance if it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and claimed an attack that was concurrently claimed by the Islamic State. While the first report in the series employed a regional review and provided the background on the Islamic State's alliances, the following sections delineate the motivations of these groups to align themselves with the Islamic State and their roles in the Battle of Marawi.

Abu Sayyaf Group Factions

Factions of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), one of the major insurgent groups in the Philippines, declared allegiance to the Islamic State. There are several different ASG factions with different leaders and, as such, should be understood as "a network of networks, an alliance of smaller groups around individual charismatic leaders who compete and cooperate to maximize their reputation for violence."⁶⁹ The overall leader of ASG is Radullon Sahiron, who continues *not* to support the Islamic State.⁷⁰ However, the faction led by Isnilon Hapilon based in Basilan and later Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan's⁷¹ faction out of Sulu/Jolo have declared allegiance to the Islamic State.⁷² Some recent reports suggest that despite their differences in terms of alignment with the Islamic State, Sahiron may be collaborating with the Sawadjaan faction at a tactical level.⁷³

As with other groups, ASG leaders such as Hapilon were motivated to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State in order to 'cash in' on the Islamic State 'brand,' demonstrated by the group's use of the iconic Islamic State black flag in its ransom pictures and videos.⁷⁴ The allegiance with the Islamic State lends credibility to the group's threats and has helped the group extract greater ransoms for its kidnapping victims.⁷⁵

Arguably the most important of these factions in reference to the Islamic State, especially in the Islamic State's early years in Southeast Asia, was Isnilon Hapilon's faction based in Basilan province. Reports indicate that the Basilan faction of the group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State as early as 2014.⁷⁶ Importantly, it is Hapilon whom Islamic State Central declared the emir of its operations in Southeast Asia, viewed by some as a step toward declaring an Islamic State Wilayat (province) in Southeast Asia.⁷⁷ Given Basilan province's location and history, it is perhaps unsurprising that many

68 Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis.

69 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 3.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

71 In August 2020, the Philippines Army's commanding general, Cirilito Sobejana, stated that Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan was wounded and likely killed in a July 6 gun battle in Sulu province. See Jim Gomez, "Army chief: Militant leader likely killed in Philippines," *Washington Post*, August 25, 2020. Per U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Sawadjaan's leadership was not acknowledged by rival faction leaders in the Philippines nor by Islamic State Central. See "Operation Pacific Eagle – Philippines, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress." Ongoing AFP efforts have targeted other ASG ranking members, such as Mundi Sawadjaan and Arsibar Sawadjaan in September 2020. For more information, see "Aby Sayyaf sub-leader killed in Sulu clash – military," CNN, September 28, 2020, and "Operation Pacific Eagle – Philippines: Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress."

72 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, pp. 2-3.

73 John Foulkes, "Radullon Sahiron—Is the Abu Sayyaf Leader Partnering with Islamic State in the Philippines?" Jamestown Foundation, December 4, 2020.

74 Banlaoi, "ISIS Followers in the Philippines;" "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

75 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

76 Okkie Tanupradja, "Groups Pledging Allegiance/Support to Islamic State in Southeast Asia," International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, July 2017.

77 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," p. 7.

“foreign fighters” under Hapilon were from Malaysia.⁷⁸ Many people from Basilan work as plantation or construction laborers in the state of Sabah, Malaysia, creating the infrastructure for personnel and funding networks for ASG-Basilan.⁷⁹ Hapilon’s faction also received foreign fighters from peninsular Malaysia, especially dangerous from a counterterrorism perspective due to these fighters’ higher levels of education and deeper Islamist ideology.⁸⁰ However, the group was dealt a huge blow in the aftermath of the Battle of Marawi in 2017, when Hapilon was killed by the AFP.⁸¹ There is speculation that Hapilon’s deputy, Furuji Indama, was leading the Basilan faction, though it is unclear whether he would be inclined to continue the faction’s alliances with the Islamic State.⁸² Recently though, there have been reports that the Philippine military believes that Indama may have been killed in an encounter in September 2020.⁸³

An increasingly important ASG faction is Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan’s (see footnote 70) group based in Sulu province. Sawadjaan did not directly participate in the Marawi siege, although some members of his ASG faction may have.⁸⁴ There is some evidence to suggest that Sawadjaan was elected Hapilon’s successor as emir in May 2018, although others recognized Sawadjaan’s key rival, Abu Dar, as emir;⁸⁵ per some sources, Sawadjaan’s leadership was not acknowledged by rival faction leaders nor by Islamic State Central.⁸⁶ Among several groups under Sawadjaan’s command is the Ajang-Ajang group, composed of “fighters [including children] whose relatives were killed in military or police operations and who wanted to avenge their deaths.”⁸⁷ Ajang-Ajang claimed responsibility for the Jolo Cathedral bombings in January 2019.⁸⁸

Maute Group

Another major Islamic State ally in the Philippines is the Maute Group, whose membership is primarily composed of Maute family members.⁸⁹ Based in the town of Butig, the group was founded in 2015 by brothers Omarkayam (Omar) and Abdullah Maute, who both studied in the Middle East.⁹⁰ The group is alternatively named Islamic State-Ranao, Daula Islamiya Fi Ranao, or the Islamic State of Lanao due to its base in the southern province of Lanao del Sur.⁹¹ The group declared allegiance to the Islamic State via a video posted online in April 2016.⁹² As with the Abu Sayyaf Group, the key reason for the Maute family’s *bay`a* to the Islamic State was “less because of any particular affinity for

78 Ibid., p. 2.

79 Ibid., p. 8.

80 Ibid., p. 9.

81 Van Ostaeyen.

82 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 3.

83 “Military believes Abu Sayyaf subleader Furuji Indama is dead,” Rappler, October 30, 2020; “Abu Sayyaf Leader in Basilan Killed, Philippine Military Says,” BenarNews, October 30, 2020.

84 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 3.

85 Ibid., pp. 2-4. Abu Dar was killed in a counterterrorism operation in April 2019. Carmela Fonbuena, “Leader of Isis in Philippines Killed, DNA Tests Confirm,” *Guardian*, April 14, 2019.

86 See “Operation Pacific Eagle – Philippines, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress.”

87 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 4.

88 Cathrine Gonzalez, “Ajang-Ajang Suspects in Jolo Cathedral Blasts Surrender,” *Inquirer News*, February 4, 2019.

89 For more details on the background of this group, see Joseph Franco, “Preventing Other ‘Marawis’ in the Southern Philippines,” *Asia & The Pacific Policy Studies* 5:2 (2018): pp. 362–69; Julie Chernov Hwang, “Relatives, Redemption, and Rice: Motivations for Joining the Maute Group,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:8 (2019); Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis; and “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia.”

90 Franco, “Preventing Other ‘Marawis’ in the Southern Philippines,” p. 363; “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia,” pp. 14-15.

91 Jones, “Radicalisation in the Philippines;” “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia;” Hwang.

92 Jones, “Radicalisation in the Philippines.”

ISIS's ideology than to burnish its fading image as a tough enforcer."⁹³

Like many other insurgent groups in the country, the Mautes had connections to the MILF. For example, the MILF's renegade Commander Bravo allowed the Mautes access to one of the group's training camps.⁹⁴ After a falling out between the two, however, the Maute Group established its own camp and allegedly began recruiting dissatisfied younger MILF members.⁹⁵ Furthermore, the Mautes exploited universities such as Mindanao State University "as a recruiting ground for disaffected youths."⁹⁶ While there are several reasons that new recruits joined the group, major ones include material benefits and economic mobility.⁹⁷

The Mautes played a central role in several Islamic State-linked attacks after pledging allegiance, including the Davao night market attack in September 2016.⁹⁸ Further, the group was key in orchestrating the capture of Marawi City in 2017. It was the Maute Group, in concert with the Islamic State, that was responsible for building the coalition that overtook Marawi, "bringing together Maranao, Tausug, and Maguindanao, and that included Isnilon Hapilon's faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group; an Islamic State cell from the town of Cotabato; and Ansharul Khalifa Philippines (AKP) based in Sultan Kudarat."⁹⁹ Additionally, the Maute Group, deeply tied into the local shadow economy, formed several hideouts in Marawi City, which helped to draw the AFP into an urban battle.¹⁰⁰ The group exploited its "homefield advantage" and the traditional reinforced concrete homes in the city to keep the AFP on the ropes for several months.¹⁰¹ As with Hapilon's faction of ASG, however, the Maute Group suffered key leadership losses as a result of the battle, namely the deaths of Omar and Abdullah Maute.¹⁰²

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) is a splinter group of the MILF formed in 2010 and based in Maguindanao.¹⁰³ The group, under the command of Ustadz Ameril Umbra Kato, split from the MILF over its dissatisfaction with the slow progress in the negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF for an autonomous region in Mindanao.¹⁰⁴ Shortly after Kato's death in 2015, the group split into three factions.¹⁰⁵ Two factions, under Imam Bongos and Imam Karialan, have not declared allegiance to the Islamic State.¹⁰⁶ However, a third faction, led by Esmael Abdulmalek,

93 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

94 Hwang, p. 24; "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," p. 16.

95 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," p. 17.

96 Franco, "Preventing Other 'Marawis' in the Southern Philippines," p. 365.

97 Ibid., p. 367.

98 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," p. 10.

99 Hwang, p. 24.

100 Mona Kanwal ed., *Global Jihad in Southeast Asia* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019); Knight and Theodorakis.

101 Temby, p. 117.

102 Van Ostaeyen.

103 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

104 "Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, August 2018; "Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters; Peter Chalk, "The Islamic State in the Philippines: A Looming Shadow in Southeast Asia?" *CTC Sentinel* 9:3 (2016).

105 Jeffrey Maitem, "BIFF has split into 3 factions – MILF," *Inquirer Mindanao*, November 6, 2014; John Unson, "Hostility between MILF, BIFF faction escalates," *Philippine Star*, September 7, 2017; John Unson, "Troops go after BIFF raiders in Maguindanao," *Philippine Star*, August 31, 2017.

106 Noel Punzalan, "BARMM negotiating with 2 BIFF factions for possible surrender," *Philippines News Agency*, September 4, 2019; "Hostility between MILF, BIFF faction escalates."

alias Abu Torayfe, pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State in 2016.¹⁰⁷ As with other Islamic State affiliates, Torayfe was motivated to use the Islamic State brand to bolster his faction's image locally.¹⁰⁸

The extent to which Torayfe's faction participated in the Battle of Marawi is unclear: official sources¹⁰⁹ claim that the group supported the Maute-ASG coalition that overtook the city while the group itself denies this allegation.¹¹⁰ Torayfe's BIFF faction has arguably played a bigger role as an Islamic State affiliate post-Marawi siege, particularly in the wake of key leadership deaths in the Maute Group and ASG-Basilian faction. After the deaths of Hapilon of ASG and the Maute brothers, the network of Islamic State-linked militants in the Philippines has become increasingly decentralized. One of the key nodes of this network has become Torayfe's BIFF faction based out of Maguindanao province.¹¹¹ The group is suspected of being behind the Cotabato City bombing in December 2018.¹¹²

Ansarul Khilafah Philippines (AKP)

Another Filipino Islamic State affiliate is Ansarul Khilafah Philippines (AKP), based in Sarangani and Sultan Kudarat provinces. The group, led by a former MILF member Mohammad Jaafar Maguid (alias Tokboy), was founded in 2008.¹¹³ The AKP had strong ties to foreign fighters, particularly those from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Syria, some of whom helped with AKP strategy and funding.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, Tokboy had direct connections with Islamic State Central, which may have facilitated recruitment.¹¹⁵

The AKP was among the first groups in the Philippines to give *bay`a* to the Islamic State when it did so in September 2014.¹¹⁶ The AKP's base in Sultan Kudarat served as a military training camp for recruits from neighboring provinces and other parts of the Philippines.¹¹⁷ Indeed, providing a training camp for new recruits has been one of the group's key roles as an Islamic State affiliate. However, one of the AKP's training camps was attacked in December 2015 and Islamic State training moved to the Maute Group's base in Butig, Lanao del Sur.¹¹⁸

The group was the smallest Islamic State affiliate to participate in the Battle of Marawi in 2017, through providing operational support.¹¹⁹ The AKP's major setback occurred a few months prior in January 2017: Tokboy's death.¹²⁰ While the AKP is now fewer in number, the group is still operational and was

107 "No Activities Monitored after BIFF Pledge of Allegiance to ISIS – Army Official," GMA News Online, September 30, 2014; "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

108 Michael Hart, "Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters Assume ISIS' Mantle in the Philippines' Troubled South," Geopolitical Monitor, February 12, 2018.

109 Michael Hart, "A Year After Marawi, What's Left of ISIS in the Philippines?" Diplomat, October 25, 2018; Peter Chalk, "The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters: The Newest Obstacles to Peace in the Southern Philippines?" *CTC Sentinel* 6:11 (2013).

110 Jeffrey Maitem, "Autonomy Could Strip Foreign Fighters of Southern Philippine Sanctuaries: MILF Chief," BenarNews, July 25, 2017.

111 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 2.

112 Temby, p. 130.

113 Joseph Jubelag, "Police Arrest Suspected Islamic State-Linked Militant in Southern Philippines," BenarNews, September 18, 2019; "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia.," p. 10.

114 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

115 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

116 "Marawi, The 'East Asia Wilayah' and Indonesia," p. 2.

117 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 2.

118 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*.

119 Hart, "A Year After Marawi, What's Left of ISIS in the Philippines?"

120 "Ansarul Khilafah Philippines (AKP) / Islamic State Philippines (ISEA) | Terrorist Groups | TRAC," Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium, accessed March 21, 2020.

allegedly being led by Jeffrey Nilong, also known as Commander Momoy.¹²¹ In September 2020, some sources reported that security forces had allegedly killed two brothers in the town of Surallah in South Cotabato province, who were identified as “Jeffrey Nilong alias Momoy,” and his younger brother “Amen.”¹²²

The Role of Foreign Fighters

Foreign fighters play a key role in facilitating the linkages between Islamic State Central and endemic militant groups in the Philippines. While the estimated number of foreign fighters in the country varies widely, most tend to be modest with estimates between 10 and 40.¹²³ The foreign fighters linked to the Islamic State that infiltrated the Philippines came both from other states in Southeast Asia (predominantly Indonesia and Malaysia) and other regions including East Asia, Central Asia, Northern Africa, and the Middle East.¹²⁴ It is estimated that as many as 40 foreign and foreign-trained fighters fought under the command of Isnilon Hapilon in the Battle of Marawi.¹²⁵ A key reason that Islamic State-affiliated foreign fighters travel to the Philippines, specifically Mindanao, is that it is arguably the only place in the region where they may be able to claim territory and establish a physical wilaya. Furthermore, Islamic State militants from Southeast Asia are more likely to stay in the region than to travel to Iraq and Syria in the wake of al-Baghdadi’s death and the Islamic State’s loss of territory.¹²⁶

Arguably the biggest impact that foreign fighters have made on the militant landscape in the Philippines is the proliferation of suicide attacks. Most of the suicide bombers in the Philippines are believed to have been foreign fighters, including the Lamitan City bombing in July 2018, the Jolo Cathedral bombings in January 2019, and the September 2019 bombing in Indanan, Sulu.¹²⁷ However, the suicide attack in Indanan in June 2019 is thought to have involved Filipino assailants.¹²⁸ This is a concerning trend in part because it may inspire Filipino militants to become suicide bombers in the future, a trend that will be hard to reverse even after the Islamic State’s influence in the country wanes.¹²⁹

The Sociopolitical Landscape

There are several factors that have facilitated both militancy in the Philippines in general and linkages with the Islamic State specifically, primarily in the southern region of Mindanao, including historical ethno-religious conflict, distrust of the government and AFP, political corruption, and conflict related to clans. As illustrated in the proceeding sections, most Islamic State-linked militancy, and militancy in general, in the Philippines is concentrated in Mindanao. Islamic State recruitment in the Philippines is distinct from that in Indonesia and Malaysia in that it is not an appeal to Islamist ideology,

121 Rommel C. Banlaoi, “Terrorism In The Philippines During The Pandemic: Persistent Threats Three Years After Marawi Siege,” *Eurasia Review*, May 15, 2020; “ISIS-inspired terror group kills 2 cops,” *Tempo*, April 30, 2020; “Terror group member nabbed in SoCot raid,” Philippine News Agency, March 15, 2019.

122 “Philippine General Says Bomb Makers Killed in Gun Battle,” BenarNews, September 2020.

123 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*; Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Carmela Fonbuena, “Philippines: scores of Islamic State fighters on Mindanao island,” *Guardian*, November 11, 2018.

124 Kenneth Yeo, “Philippines’ Foreign Fighter Phenomenon,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 11:7 (2019): 16-21; Rommel Banlaoi, “The Maute Group and Rise of Family Terrorism,” *Rappler*, June 15, 2017; *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*.

125 Van Ostaeeyen; *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 9; Temby, p. 120.

126 Zachary Abuza, “Suicide Bombings Take Root in the Southern Philippines,” BenarNews, November 12, 2019.

127 *Ibid.*; Temby.

128 Jim Gomez, “Philippines: 1st known Filipino suicide attacker identified,” Associated Press, July 2, 2019; Abuza, “Suicide Bombings Take Root in the Southern Philippines.”

129 *Ibid.*

such as promises of reward in the afterlife, but rather the prospects of gaining material benefits.¹³⁰ Mindanao has high levels of crime and poverty, and low literacy and life expectancy rates.¹³¹ Furthermore, as detailed below, the historic inability of the Philippine central government to strike and enact an agreement with major insurgent groups (the MNLF and MILF) prior to the 2019 agreement has perpetuated social and political instability in the region. This environment, marked by different types of conflict and violence, has proven fertile ground for insurgents and has attracted the attention of the Islamic State.¹³²

One of the key long-term drivers of violence in Mindanao is ethno-religious conflict and the marginalization of the Muslim community. Most of the country's Muslim population, about 11% of the total population, is located in central Mindanao and the Sulu Islands.¹³³ The roots of the animosity between the majority Catholic population and the Muslim population can be traced back at least as far as the Philippines' colonial period, if not earlier. Under American rule, "the American policy of economic development and political alliance with local 'big men' or *datus* successfully stabilized Mindanao, but also encouraged large-scale immigration of Christian settlers to that relatively underpopulated island—settlers who frequently displaced local Muslim peasants."¹³⁴ The Muslim population in Mindanao subsequently declined as an increasing number of Christians acquired land, prompting Muslim protests.¹³⁵ This uneasy social dynamic led to conflict over land between the two groups.¹³⁶ Tensions worsened when former President Ferdinand Marcos implemented repressive measures from 1968 to 1972.¹³⁷ These measures included violence toward Muslims, most notably the Jabidah massacre where Christian soldiers killed as many as 28 Muslims in 1968.¹³⁸ The situation in Mindanao eventually deteriorated into a separatist insurgency, which saw the emergence of groups such as the MNLF and the declaration of martial law in Mindanao in 1972.¹³⁹ The result of decades of ethno-religious conflict and marginalization is that Filipino Muslims tend to identify primarily with their clan and ethnolinguistic group, rather than as part of the Filipino nation.¹⁴⁰

Frustrations with the Philippine government over the slow negotiation and implementation of political autonomy in Mindanao has created an atmosphere of governmental distrust, a factor that facilitates Islamic State recruitment in the region. Following decades of ethno-nationalist conflict and the repression of Muslims, the Philippine government created the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in 1989, which included the southern provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi.¹⁴¹ The creation of the ARMM granted the region semi-autonomy from the Philippine central government, including a regional government with the ability to levy its own taxes and limited application of sharia.¹⁴² However, this did not cease instability and insurgency in the region. Subse-

130 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

131 Melissa Etehad, "How Militants Linked to Islamic State Took Hold of a City in the Philippines," *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 2017; Alan Tidwell, "Duterte, Mindanao, and Political Culture," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, East-West Center, November 9, 2016; "Insecurity in Mindanao: Conflict and State-sponsored Violence."

132 Zachary Abuza, "Duterte Thinks He Can Bomb Islamists Into Submission. He Cannot," *New York Times*, June 21, 2017; Chalk, "The Islamic State in the Philippines: A Looming Shadow in Southeast Asia?"; Amadar and Tuttle.

133 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

134 Stuart J. Kaufman, "The Limits of Nation-Building in the Philippines," *International Area Studies Review* 16:1 (2013): p. 11.

135 *Ibid.*

136 *Ibid.*

137 *Ibid.*

138 Etehad.

139 Kaufman.

140 *Ibid.*

141 The province of Basilan and the city of Marawi were added during the 2001 expansion. See "ARMM history and organization," GMA News Online, August 11, 2008.

142 *Ibid.*

quently, the Philippine government has attempted to negotiate peace deals with insurgent groups such as the MNLF and MILF, with limited success. The government reached a peace agreement with the MNLF in 1996, but the agreement was not accepted by the MILF.¹⁴³ The Philippine government eventually made an agreement with the MILF in 2008, but it was deemed unconstitutional by the Philippine Supreme Court.¹⁴⁴ However, the Philippine government and the MILF signed the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro in 2014, which gave the region (and the MILF) more political autonomy and “more equitable resource sharing.”¹⁴⁵ The agreement was ultimately not implemented due to hesitations both on the part of Philippine legislators and militants.¹⁴⁶ Frustration with both the Philippine government and MILF leadership “led to a proliferation of radical militant groups,” and many commanders who had doubted the government’s intentions began to provide cover to Islamists.¹⁴⁷ Further encouraging extremist violence was a failed counterterrorism operation in 2015. While the government was negotiating a peace agreement with the MILF, it also attempted a raid on militants in Maguindanao province, resulting in the deaths of 44 officers.¹⁴⁸ This operation raised questions about the government’s intentions, and was exploited as propaganda for recruitment purposes by the country’s Islamist insurgents.¹⁴⁹

It is in the context of failed peace negotiations between older groups like the MNLF and MILF and the central Philippine government that the Islamic State began to garner support in the Philippines. While the central government has traditionally been the target of individuals’ grievance over the delayed peace process, the MNLF and MILF are increasingly drawing ire from the younger population, which feels alienated and considers the Moro cause to have been betrayed through collaboration with Manila.¹⁵⁰

Negative perceptions of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) also impact insurgency in Mindanao. Local distrust of the AFP is bolstered by some of its heavy-handed tactics, such as the use of field artillery in counterterrorism operations.¹⁵¹ During the Battle of Marawi, for example, the sheer devastation of the city as a result of aerial bombing has resulted in accusations of excessive and indiscriminate force by the AFP.¹⁵² Furthermore, even when the AFP is successful in its counterterrorism operations, its impact is short-lasting because the conditions that facilitate insurgency (such as grievances and distrust of the AFP) continue to attract new recruits and support.¹⁵³ Additionally, the imprisonment of militants may perpetuate insurgency, as the prisons are crowded, prone to jail breaks, and ripe for new recruits.¹⁵⁴ In light of COVID outbreaks in prisons, the Philippines—and neighboring countries—has committed to early release initiatives to mitigate the spread of the virus.¹⁵⁵

143 Kaufman.

144 Ibid.

145 “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia.”

146 Ibid.

147 Abuza, “Duterte Thinks He Can Bomb Islamists Into Submission;” Chalk, “The Islamic State in the Philippines.”

148 Carlo Muñoz, “Islamic State Fighters Add Complications to U.S. Counterterrorism Mission in Philippines,” *Washington Times*, September 30, 2018.

149 Ibid.

150 Temby, p. 130.

151 Abuza, “Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines?”; Scott McKay and David Webb, “Comparing Counterterrorism in Indonesia and the Philippines,” *CTC Sentinel* 8:2 (2015).

152 Knight and Theodorakis, p. 5.

153 Abuza, “Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines?”; McKay and Webb.

154 Abuza, “Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines?”; Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Anna Sheveland, Maxim Babush, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi, Michele Ng Bonto, and Rohan Gunaratna, “What a Difference Two Years Make: Patterns of Radicalization in a Philippine Jail,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 9:1-3 (2016).

155 “Operation Pacific Eagle – Philippines: Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress,” p. 18.

Weak governance is another underlying factor that contributes to Islamic State support in Mindanao. Mindanao is politically dominated by clans, which has led to corrupt practices such as vote-buying for clans to gain or maintain power and influence.¹⁵⁶ Clans have incentives to ally with a large organization such as the Islamic State that not only can provide funding but also elevate the clan's status vis-à-vis other clans. Relatedly, feuds between clans, or *rido*, also perpetuate regional instability.¹⁵⁷ Perhaps the best example of this is the Maute family of Lanao del Sur, whose familial militia later became the Maute Group, a key Islamic State ally.¹⁵⁸ It may have been an escalated *rido* that led to the emergence of the Maute Group as a militant organization.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, the prevalence of *rido*, especially in densely populated urban areas like Marawi, have led families and clans to amass caches of firearms and reside in homes with reinforced concrete walls known as *buhos*.¹⁶⁰ Taken together, clan influence and *rido* have enabled a sense of lawlessness in the region that facilitates Islamic State recruitment.

It is in this context that insurgency has flourished in Mindanao. The Philippine government, like the colonial governments of the Spanish and Americans before it, has been largely unable to exert control and stability over the region due to the prevalence of strong clans.¹⁶¹ As a result, Mindanao remains in “a state of recurring hostilities between families and kinship groups characterized by a series of retaliatory acts of violence carried out to avenge a perceived affront or injustice.”¹⁶²

Counterterrorism Structure in the Philippines

Although the counterterrorism apparatus in the Philippines includes the involvement of multiple agencies and organizations, and some operations have involved joint military-police forces, the bulk of operations against militants have been led by the AFP instead of law enforcement, due to the nature of the insurgent threat.¹⁶³ There have been efforts though to improve the training of the Philippine National Police Special Action Force and other specialized law enforcement units to improve their capacity to tackle terrorist threats.¹⁶⁴

The AFP's counterterrorism efforts have been supported by the United States through funding, training, logistical support, and the deployment of U.S. soldiers, primarily in Mindanao.¹⁶⁵ A key issue for the AFP, especially with Islamic State-linked attacks such as the siege of Marawi, is its relative unpreparedness for urban combat.¹⁶⁶ The AFP is trained for counterinsurgency operations in jungle settings as most clashes with insurgents have typically taken place in rural Mindanao.¹⁶⁷ Tactics such as the use of airstrikes and heavy artillery to combat militants, which may be effective counterinsurgent tools in the jungle, are less effective in urban settings and can result in civilian casualties and infrastructure damage. Indeed, while the AFP was ultimately able to liberate Marawi from Islamic State militants, much of the city was destroyed and many people were displaced as a result.¹⁶⁸ The use of heavy artillery and airstrikes during conflicts with Islamic State-affiliated militants such as in the Battle of Marawi is

156 Franco, “Detecting Future ‘Marawis,’” pp. 4-5.

157 For a detailed discussion of the formation of the Maute Group due to *rido*, see *Ibid.*, pp. 4-6.

158 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

159 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

160 Franco, “Preventing Other ‘Marawis’ in the Southern Philippines,” p. 364.

161 Tidwell.

162 *Ibid.*

163 McKay and Webb, p. 20.

164 “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Philippines.”

165 McKay and Webb.

166 Knight and Theodorakis, p. 4.

167 Temby, p. 117.

168 *Ibid.*

problematic partially because it feeds support for the Islamic State's cause and lessens trust in the AFP. In fact, groups such as the Maute Group may try to draw the AFP into such urban conflicts knowing that it will use tactics that will likely result in civilian casualties, furthering the narrative of mistrust toward the AFP that the Islamic State pitches to potential supporters.¹⁶⁹ This is important for the AFP to consider, given that it has reportedly been working with local partners to encourage defections from militant groups in order to reintegrate them, and the use of strategic communications can be one way to combat the spread of support for the Islamic State.¹⁷⁰

169 Knight and Theodorakis.

170 "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Philippines;" Knight and Theodorakis; "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."