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THE EMERGENCE OF ISIS IN THE PHILIPPINES

by

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THE EMERGENCE OF ISIS IN THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

In May 2017, the Islamic State Philippines (IS-P) engaged the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in the city of Marawi in what became a violent, five-month battle that resulted in the death of 165 Filipino soldiers and policemen, 920 militants, and over 47 civilians, along with the near total destruction of the city. This thesis aims to understand the conditions that led to the battle of Marawi, including which insurgent groups in Mindanao pledged the bayat to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—the oath of allegiance—and formed IS-P, and the resources these groups gained by aligning with ISIS. Using qualitative methods and visual analytics, the study reveals that ISIS gained a foothold in Mindanao by capitalizing on pre-existing Muslim insurgent groups that have historic grievances against the government. ISIS also brought important resources to the region, including foreign fighters, funding, social media support, and new tactics, techniques, and procedures. Ultimately, although the AFP ended the fighting in Marawi and eliminated two key insurgent leaders, the groups that formed IS-P and the underlying grievances still remain in Mindanao.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
AK	Al Khobar
AKP	Ansar al-Khilafah Philippines
AQ	Al Qaeda
ARMM	Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
BBL	Bangsamoro Basic Law
BIFF	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighter
BMILO	Bangsa Muslimin Islamic Liberation Organization
CPP-NPA-NDF	Communist Party of the Philippines - New People's Army - National Democratic Front
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IS-P	Islamic State-Philippines
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
JSOTF-P	Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines
KIM	Khilafa Islamiyah Mindanao
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MIM	Mindanao Independence Movement
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
MOA-AD	Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain
OPE-P	Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines
PNP	Philippine National Police
SAF	Special Action Force
SIGACTs	significant activities
TRAC	Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium
TTPs	tactics, techniques, and procedures

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—Bobby

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Since the 1990s, the Philippines has faced numerous threats from insurgent and terrorist organizations that have thrived in undergoverned regions. Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines, has served as a safe haven for transnational terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda (AQ), Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), and the recently arrived Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹ The porous island region of the Sulu Archipelago, spanning from Muslim-majority Malaysia and Indonesia, to the Sulu and Celebes Seas, to Mindanao, in particular, provides a security vacuum that jihadist groups have exploited in a number of ways: to move personnel and equipment, to recruit fighters, and to gain popular support through longstanding political and social grievances.²

Beginning in 2014, several preexisting jihadist groups in Mindanao pledged the *bayat*, or an oath of allegiance, to ISIS, including Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Ansar Khilafah Philippines (AKP), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and the Maute Group.³ By 2016, ISIS leadership formally recognized these groups, designating them the “harbingers” of *Daulah Islamiyah Wilayatul Mashriq*, or Islamic State in the Eastern Asia Region. Isnilon Hapilon, a former leader of ASG, took on the leadership of these groups as the emir of a prospective *wilayah*, or governorate, in Southeast Asia.⁴ The Philippine government and its allies named this new alliance with ISIS and groups in Mindanao the Islamic State of the Philippines (IS-P). Alongside this newly formed collaborative between historically divided groups in the region, ISIS provided funding

¹ Richard Javad Heydarian, “Crisis in Mindanao,” Aljazeera Centre for Studies. August 6, 2017, http://studies.aljazeera.net/mritems/Documents/2017/8/6/b03ba3f98f124b4ca3aa27b08d2740f1_100.pdf.

² William McCants, “The Polarizing Effect of Islamic State Aggression on the Global Jihadist Movement,” *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 7 (July 2016) accessed September 12, 2017, 21, <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-polarizing-effect-of-islamic-state-aggression-on-the-global-jihadist-movement>.

³ Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, “Marawi, The “East Asia Wilayah” and Indonesia,” IPAC Report 38 (2017), 3. See also: Peter Chalk, “The Islamic State in the Philippines: A Looming Shadow in Southeast Asia?,” *CTC-Sentinel* 9, no. 3 (March 17, 2016) accessed May 30, 2018, 12, <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-state-in-the-philippines-a-looming-shadow-in-southeast-asia>.

⁴ Heydarian, “Crisis in Mindanao,” 4.

and encouraged foreign fighters to come to Mindanao to help create an independent Islamic State. These fighters brought with them new tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) that they had learned in Iraq and Syria. Together, this new alliance and the resources provided by ISIS made IS-P a formidable force.

IS-P displayed its newfound capabilities in what became known as the Siege of Marawi, which began in May of 2017 when a joint operation of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and Philippine National Police (PNP) attempted to arrest Isnilon Hapilon, the leader of IS-P. In this initial confrontation, government troops encountered an unexpected level of resistance in a battle that extended for five months, until the fall of 2017. These violent clashes yielded a large number of casualties and thousands of civilians displaced from the city.¹ The humanitarian crisis, coupled with the violent ISIS expansion into Mindanao, was not only an important challenge for the Philippines, but also for the region, especially neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia, which also had a growing ISIS presence and considerable geographic challenges for stemming the tide of foreign and domestic fighters.²

The rise of IS-P in Mindanao was also of great concern to the United States. ISIS advanced into the region following the dissolution of the U.S.-led Joint Special Operations Task Force – Philippines (JSOTF-P) in 2015, an effort manned primarily by First Special Forces Group (Airborne) beginning in 2001. Within a year of the Task Force’s disbanding, ISIS had moved into the region and helped form new alliances among previous rival groups. On September 1, 2017, during the middle of the Battle of Marawi, the U.S. Government named Operation Pacific Eagle- Philippines (OPE-P) as a contingency operation “to support the Philippine government and military in their efforts to isolate, degrade, and defeat Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) affiliates and other terrorist organizations in the Philippines.”⁵ Despite the reallocation of resources and advisors to the region, U.S. and Philippine military forces are still struggling with a

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General, “Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines,” Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, Lead Inspector General Report to the U.S. Congress, Accessed January 8, 2018, 92. <http://www.dodig.mil/In-the-Spotlight/Article/1512630/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-and-operation-pacific-eag/>

comprehensive strategy for combating the rise of ISIS in Mindanao and beyond. In order to develop this strategy, however, there must first be an understanding of the problem.

B. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis investigates the following questions: What were the conditions under which ISIS emerged in Mindanao? How did ISIS come to have such a strong and growing presence in Mindanao? And what can the Philippine government and the United States learn from the Battle of Marawi about how to counter the presence of ISIS, as well as other potential transnational Islamist movements in the region?

C. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis uses qualitative methods and visual analytics to better understand the emergence of ISIS in the Philippines. Specifically, this thesis provides an analysis of preexisting groups in Mindanao and the Southern Philippines that can help identify which groups have aligned with ISIS and why. This analysis brings context for how certain Islamic groups became a sanctioned franchise of ISIS, what they brought to the fight, and how aligning with ISIS brought new resources to the area, including funding, TTPs, and foreign fighters.

Second, the thesis draws from primary sources to analyze ISIS TTPs in Mindanao, and particularly in the Battle of Marawi, and how these TTPs have evolved and differed from previous militant groups on the island. The thesis process traces the sequence of events leading up to the siege of the city, along with events in the battle, to understand how the siege was made possible and what challenges the AFP faced in countering ISIS' occupation of the city.

D. FINDINGS

This thesis finds that the emergence of ISIS in Mindanao was deeply rooted in the historical development of the Philippines. The grievances in Mindanao were not new, but ISIS was able to capitalize on these grievances and use them for its own purposes. Furthermore, ISIS formed alliances with different insurgent groups representing the Muslim populace, groups that all had combat experience and seasoned fighters. The

Islamic State leveraged these preexisting groups to gain a foothold in the region. Perhaps most important for Islamist insurgent groups in the region, ISIS was able to shore up groups that had historical differences and unite these groups under its banner. Although groups in Mindanao were established and seasoned, ISIS brought important resources such as foreign fighters, financing, and social media platforms to the Marawi fight.

Furthermore, the Siege of Marawi offers wider implications for governments and regions fighting ISIS. Though the AFP had fought these insurgent groups in the past, the combination of greater resources, new TTPs, and foreign fighters engaging in urban combat, forced the AFP to develop new TTPs of its own to win the battle. Ultimately, the AFP was successful in ending the siege. However, they were unable to eradicate the groups responsible for the devastation of the battle, which could be a source for eventual strategic defeat.

E. OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter II investigates the history of Mindanao, particularly stressing the core grievances that led to the formation of numerous insurgent groups opposed to the government and the specific insurgent groups formed with the goal of compelling greater autonomy or independence in the region. Chapter III highlights the near-term conditions that allowed for ISIS to emerge and take root in Mindanao. The chapter also uses visual analytics to show where key groups that pledged allegiance to ISIS operated in Mindanao, and how their alliance with ISIS allowed otherwise rival groups to work together. Chapter IV provides an overview of the Siege of Marawi and analyzes how the different groups operated under the banner of IS-P, using visual analytics. The chapter also describes new TTPs that ISIS brought to the region and that allowed groups to successfully engage in urban combat against the AFP. Chapter V presents key findings and implications from the analysis of the rise of IS-P in Mindanao.

II. OVERVIEW OF MINDANAO CONFLICTS

A. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of ISIS in the Philippines did not occur overnight, nor is this the first incident of Islamically motivated insurgency in the southern Philippines. Rather, the rise of ISIS in the Philippines was the result of Filipino Muslims' struggle for self-determination that is as old as the history of the Philippine nation itself. One cannot fully understand the ISIS problem in the Philippines without first studying the history of Mindanao and its people. This chapter provides a brief overview of Mindanao through four different periods: the pre-colonial, pre-Hispanic period (before 1565); the Spanish colonization period (1565–1898); the time of American Occupation (1898–1946); and Post-Independence (1946–present). As will be described, although each period helped foster the archipelago into a “developed” nation-state, it also shaped grievances that continue to threaten the integrity of the Philippine state and the security of the inhabitants for whom the state was intended. The Islamic State capitalized on these grievances for its own gains.

B. PRE-HISPANIC PERIOD (BEFORE 1565)

Prior to the Spaniards' arrival in what would later be known as the Philippines, the archipelago was not unified, but rather dispersed into several polities. The inhabitants on the different islands were organized into *barangays*, usually a kinship group headed by a *datu*, or chief.⁶ Since the *barangays* were many and spread across different islands, the people spoke different languages and dialects, in addition to practicing different customs and beliefs. Essentially, each *barangay* was autonomous from the others.

In 1380, Sheik Karim ul-Makhdum introduced Islam in what is now the province of Tawi-Tawi, the southernmost cluster of islands closest to Malaysia and Mindanao.⁷ Figure 1 shows a map of Mindanao. By 1500, there were Islamic communities in Sulu

⁶ Ronald E Dolan, *Philippines: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1939), 5, <https://www.loc.gov/item/92039812/>.

⁷ Al Jacinto, “Filipino Muslims Remember Arrival of Arab Missionary,” *Arab News*, November 5, 2005, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/275564>.

and Mindanao, with sultanates in Jolo, Maguindanao, and Sulu.⁸ Rizal G. Buendia claims that by that time, sultanates were also founded in Jolo, Maguindanao and Sulu.⁹ Islam expanded to Luzon by 1565.¹⁰

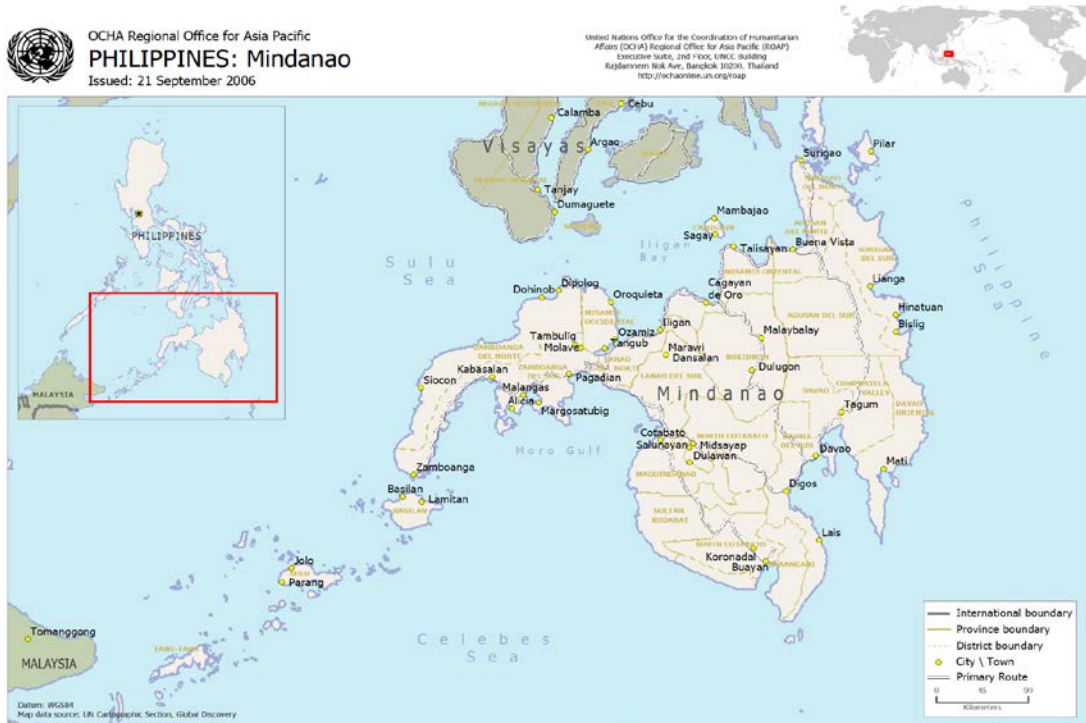


Figure 1. Map of Mindanao.¹¹

In his research on Muslim insurgency in the Philippines, Alan Luga claims that Islam provided a religious bond that tied the diverse tribal groups in the region, and created a new and distinctive Muslim ethnic identity.¹² He adds,

⁸ Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2002), 186.

⁹ Rizal G. Buendia, “The State-Moro Armed Conflict in the Philippines Unresolved National Question or Question of Governance?,” *Asian Journal of Political Science* 13, no. 1 (June 1, 2005): 110–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185370508434252>.

¹⁰ Dolan, *Philippines*, 5.

¹¹ “Philippines: National Reference Map - Mindanao (21 September 2006),” ReliefWeb, September 21, 2006, <https://reliefweb.int/map/philippines/philippines-national-reference-map-mindanao-21-september-2006>.

¹² Alan Luga, “Muslim Insurgency in Mindanao” (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2002), 15.

Islam emerged as the rallying religious, political, and historical force that enabled the Muslims to resist the onslaught of Spanish colonization and later American imperialism. Islam and its survival is still the underlying factor for the animosity between Muslim and Christian Filipinos.¹³

The arrival of Islam to the region, therefore, was a major turning point for unifying otherwise disparate groups.

C. SPANISH COLONIZATION (1565–1898)

In 1521 the Portuguese explorer, Ferdinand Magellan, landed on the islands in the Visayas, claimed the archipelago for Spain, and began converting the inhabitants to Christianity. Local Muslim chieftain Lapu-lapu killed Magellan that same year during the Battle of Mactan.¹⁴ Despite his defeat, Spain later sent five additional expeditions to the Philippines. In 1565, the fifth expedition, under the command of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi, established the first enduring Spanish settlement in the Visayas and began to colonize the entire archipelago.¹⁵

As previously mentioned, by this time, Islam was well-established in Mindanao and was expanding to the northern islands.¹⁶ Buendia asserts that this expansion is significant because “this signifies the rising influence of Islam in the country that could transform the entire archipelago into a Muslim nation similar to its neighbouring countries.”¹⁷

From the Visayas, where the Spaniards were able to secure a foothold, they subdued the northern island of Luzon, converted the inhabitants (whom they called *Indio*, meaning “native”) to Roman Catholicism and established a seat of government in

¹³ Luga, “Muslim Insurgency in Mindanao,” 15.

¹⁴ “Ferdinand Magellan,” *New World Encyclopedia*, accessed May 9, 2018, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ferdinand_Magellan.

¹⁵ “Miguel López de Legazpi,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 28, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Miguel-Lopez-de-Legazpi#ref272626>.

¹⁶ Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*, 186.

¹⁷ Buendia, “The State-Moro Armed Conflict in the Philippines,” 111.

Manila.¹⁸ Muslims in the south, however, fiercely resisted Spain's attempts to expand their conquest into Mindanao. Buendia notes that the Spaniards referred to their Muslim opposition as *Moros*, "alluding to the Muslim Moorish occupation of the Iberian Peninsula in the northern coast of the African continent in 711 A.D."¹⁹

Confrontations between the Spaniards and Muslims led to what is known as the Moro Wars of 1569.²⁰ Peter G. Gowing, scholar of Muslim history in Mindanao, asserts that, for the Spaniards, these wars of attrition were waged primarily to curb piratical incursions of sultans and their followers, and to attain glory for Spain and Christianity.²¹ For the Muslims, on the other hand, these wars were a defensive jihad waged to preserve the Islamic faith and freedom, and ultimately to avoid what they perceived as foreign occupation.²² Gowing further notes that, during these wars, the Spaniards adopted a policy of depopulation by burning settlements, plantations, fields, and orchards, coupled with the enslavement of Muslims in the region.²³ The Moro Wars lasted until 1762, when the British invaded the Philippines during their Seven Years' War.²⁴ Hostilities again erupted following the departure of the British in 1764, lasting until 1898 when the United States arrived in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War.²⁵

For 329 years, Muslims successfully defended their Islamic faith and freedom from the Spaniards. When the Spaniards lost the Philippines in 1898, they left behind a divided Christian and Muslim population. The estrangement between the two groups, combined with Muslim animosity toward the growing authority of Manila, intensified

¹⁸ Salvatore Schiavo-Campo and Mary Judd, "The Mindanao Conflict in the Philippines: Roots, Costs, and Potential Peace Dividend," World Bank Social Development Papers, Paper No. 24 (February 2005): 1, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCPR/214578-1111996036679/20482477/WP24_Web.pdf.

¹⁹ Buendia, "The State-Moro Armed Conflict in the Philippines," 110.

²⁰ Larry Batalla, "Countering the ISIS Threat to the Philippines: Working with Partners or Acting Alone?" (Fort McNair, Washington D.C.: National Defense University, 2017), 16.

²¹ Peter G. Gowing and Robert Day McAmis, *The Muslim Filipinos* (Manila, Philippines: Solidaridad Pub House, 1974), 7.

²² Gowing and McAmis, *The Muslim Filipinos*, 7.

²³ Gowing and McAmis, *The Muslim Filipinos*, 8.

²⁴ Batalla, "Countering the ISIS Threat to the Philippines," 16.

²⁵ U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian, *Milestones: 1899–1913*, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/war>.

even more during the succeeding periods in Philippine history beginning with the American occupation of the Philippines.

D. AMERICAN OCCUPATION (1898–1946)

The Treaty of Paris, signed on December 10, 1898, ended the Spanish-American War. One result was that control of the Philippines passed from Spain to the United States. However, Nestor Ganancial argues in his anthropological research about Muslims in Mindanao that “the Moros claim they are not Filipinos because they were never conquered by Spain.”²⁶ Alunan Glang, a Muslim scholar, argues that the Moros’ separate status from the Philippines was evident when Filipino General Emilio Aguinaldo, who had fought against the Spaniards and later the Americans, tried to “negotiate with the Moros of Sulu and Mindanao to establish national solidarity on the basis of a real federation with absolute respect for their beliefs and traditions.”²⁷

On May 19, 1899, the United States occupied and governed Mindanao and Sulu.²⁸ The Bates Agreement, forged between Brigadier General John C. Bates and Sulu Sultan Jamalul Kiram II, along with unwritten agreements made with the other Moro chiefs in Mindanao, solidified the United States’ administration of the southern islands.²⁹ Through these agreements, the Moros acknowledged American sovereignty and the Americans acknowledged the Sultan of Sulu’s authority, as well as the duty to defend the Moros from foreign aggression. Additionally, the United States agreed not to interfere with the Moro traditional way of life, including its religion, governance, and intra-Moro affairs.³⁰ For the United States, the agreements prevented the Moros from joining the conflict in the northern Philippines as well as avoided a separate Moro conflict in the south. For the

²⁶ Nelson Sixto H. Ganancial, “The Underdevelopment of the Moroland: A Case Study in Anthropology of Development,” Scribd. August 8, 2010, 2, <https://www.scribd.com/document/35550213/Underdevelopment-of-the-Moroland>.

²⁷ Alunan C. Glang, *Muslim Secession or Integration* (Quezon City, Philippines: R.P. Garcia Publishing, 1969), 10.

²⁸ Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*, 213.

²⁹ Gowing and McAmis, *The Muslim Filipinos*, 34.

³⁰ Robert A. Fulton, “A Brief History of America and the Moros 1899-1920,” accessed May 9, 2018, http://www.morolandhistory.com/00.Text%20Document/a_brief_history_of_.htm.

Muslims, the United States protected both Islam and its tradition from Christian Filipinos, and permitted Muslims to govern themselves based on shariah law and the *datu* system. Robert A. Fulton, author of *Moroland: The History of Uncle Sam and the Moros*, argues that the Bates agreement not only kept the Moros on the sidelines during the Philippine-American War, it also allowed the Moros to assist the Americans in decisively defeating Christian *insurrectos* in northern Mindanao.³¹

On July 1, 1902, at the end of the Philippine-American War, President Theodore Roosevelt signed into law the Philippine Bill, also known as the Cooper Act.³² This bill paved the way for the creation of a civil government in the Philippines and the eventual establishment of the Philippine Assembly. With this act and the termination of conflict in central and northern Philippines, the United States nullified the Bates agreement, which abolished the parallel government of the Sultanate in the southern Philippines, made slavery illegal and protected citizens of the southern Philippines who were formerly the subjects of the *datu*s.³³

In 1903, the U.S. government opted to bring the citizens of the southern Philippines under their direct rule. The American administration placed the Moro Province under a military governor stationed in Zamboanga City. This period accelerated the development of Mindanao as Wan Kadir bin Che Man, a Thai-Malay scholar who has conducted extensive fieldwork in the Philippines, notes,

As part of the programme to “develop,” “civilize” and “educate” [the Moros], the American system of government and concepts of justice were introduced. Well-ordered provincial and district governments were organized. Schools and hospitals on the Western model were built. Agriculture and commerce were expanded. Certain practices of the Moros, such as slavery, were made illegal. Furthermore, Filipino Christians from the northern provinces were encouraged to migrate to Moroland.³⁴

³¹ Fulton, “A Brief History.”

³² “Philippine Bill of 1902,” Corpus Juris. accessed May 24, 208, <http://www.thecorpusjuris.com/constitutions/philippine-autonomy-act.php>.

³³ Gowing and McAmis, *The Muslim Filipinos*, 36.

³⁴ Wan Kadir bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press Pte. Ltd., 1990), 48.

The Christian migration, coupled with the policy of direct rule, contributed to the animosity between Christians and Muslims in the south, in addition to weakening the authority and position of the Muslim leadership.³⁵ Gowing argues that “the American policy of direct rule and attempts to implement the mandate struck at the authority and prestige of the Muslim chiefs and, to some extent unwittingly, at the religion and attitudes of all Muslim Filipinos.”³⁶ He adds that “the American administrators of the Moro Province were either unaware of, or chose to completely ignore, the fact that Muslim Filipinos saw no separation whatever (sic) between the sacred and the secular.”³⁷ The American policy, Gowing continues, “disrupted the socio-political structure and customs by which the Moros had lived for centuries.”³⁸ Thus, the Muslims resented mandates promulgated in Mindanao, such as the parceling of lands to the Christians settlers, licensing of foreign vessels to fish in the Moroland waters, and the establishment of local governments, which deprived them of their primary source of living and altered their traditional practice of owning lands.³⁹

Moshe Yegar writes that “General Leonard Wood, the military-governor of the Moro province from 1903–1906, mounted a campaign against Muslims who did not accept American law, and thousands were killed in the fighting.”⁴⁰ He adds that “ultimately (in 1914), after suffering from heavy losses, the Muslims realized that continued fighting in the face of the modern weapons held by the Americans could only mean the disappearance of the Muslim.”⁴¹ In August 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed Public Act No. 240, the Jones Law, which granted the Philippine Legislature parliamentary control over Mindanao and Sulu.⁴² In February 1920, the Department of Mindanao and Sulu was abolished, marking the end of the American administration in the

³⁵ Gowing and McAmis, *The Muslim Filipinos*, 37.

³⁶ Gowing and McAmis, *The Muslim Filipinos*, 37.

³⁷ Gowing and McAmis, *The Muslim Filipinos*, 37.

³⁸ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 48.

³⁹ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 48.

⁴⁰ Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*, 217.

⁴¹ Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession*, 217.

⁴² “The Jones Law of 1916,” Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/constitutions/the-jones-law-of-1916/>.

region. Through the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes, Filipino Christians took control of the southern islands.⁴³

Bin Che Man claims that despite perceived U.S. transgressions the Moros preferred to be governed by the Americans rather than by Filipinos.⁴⁴ Additionally, he notes that the Moros suspected the Filipino Christians of threatening to eliminate their religion and steal their land.⁴⁵ Bin Che Man further narrates that “the Muslim expressed their discontent through armed resistance.”⁴⁶

Early in 1921, Sulu’s Moro leaders asked President Woodrow Wilson to treat their province as an independent entity; in 1924, they asked Congress to designate Sulu and Mindanao a U.S. territory.⁴⁷ These efforts failed and in May 1934, the U.S. Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Independence Act, which established a Filipino-run Commonwealth spanning the entire Philippine archipelago, to include the southern islands.⁴⁸

Bin Che Man argues that “the Commonwealth regime markedly reduced social and economic programmes specially designed for the Moros.”⁴⁹ This pattern was especially apparent in the government’s handling of several important decisions. In 1934, as the delegates to the Constitutional Convention set to draft the Philippine Constitution, only four of the 202 delegates originated from Mindanao.⁵⁰ During a nationwide election for the 98-member National Assembly, only two members were Moros.⁵¹ Nearly all government appointees at the time were Christians. The Commonwealth government

⁴³ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand*, 52.

⁴⁴ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 53.

⁴⁵ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 53.

⁴⁶ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 53.

⁴⁷ Patricia Horvatic, “The Martyr and the Mayor,” in *Cultural Citizenship in Island Southeast Asia*, ed. Renato Rosaldo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 20, https://books.google.com/books/about/Cultural_Citizenship_in_Island_Southeast.html?id=pphihb0oGJIC.

⁴⁸ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 53.

⁴⁹ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 55.

⁵⁰ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 55.

⁵¹ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 55.

promoted the migration of Filipino Christians to Mindanao, ended the official recognition of the Moro's traditional social system, imposed compulsory military training in a "Christian" army, and interfered with religious traditions, such as plural marriages.⁵²

Moros resorted to armed struggle against the government, primarily in the area of Lanao, beginning in 1936.⁵³ This conflict ceased during the Japanese occupation in 1941 when the Muslims of the southern Philippines supported the government's anti-Japanese war efforts.⁵⁴

E. POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD (1946–PRESENT)

Following World War II, the Philippines gained its independence from the United States on July 4, 1946. Still, Bin Che Man argues that many Muslims continued to assert their identity as distinct from Filipinos.⁵⁵ Luga adds that the Muslims fostered a deepening sense of deprivation from the increasing flow of Christian settlers to Mindanao that gradually displaced them from their ancestral areas and reduced them to a minority in their own lands.⁵⁶ The agricultural competition that the government had created in the Muslim indigenous territories further propelled the unrest between Christian settlers and Muslims over land ownership.⁵⁷ The Christian settlers organized community self-defense units called *Ilaga*, or rats.⁵⁸ By the 1960s, armed clashes between the *Ilaga* on one side and Black Shirts in Central Mindanao and the Barracudas of Lanao on the opposing side escalated in Mindanao.⁵⁹ Gowing argues that the Muslims accused the government forces of being allies of the *Ilagas*.⁶⁰

⁵² Luga, "Muslim Insurgency in Mindanao," 30.

⁵³ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 55.

⁵⁴ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 56.

⁵⁵ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 56.

⁵⁶ Luga, "Muslim Insurgency in Mindanao," 31–32.

⁵⁷ Luga, "Muslim Insurgency in Mindanao," 32.

⁵⁸ Gowing and McAmis, *The Muslim Filipinos*, 46.

⁵⁹ Luga, "Muslim Insurgency in Mindanao," 32.

⁶⁰ Gowing and McAmis, *The Muslim Filipinos*, 47.

In addition, the post-war period saw the resurgence of Islam in the Muslim world and the deepening sense of group consciousness among the Islamic population. According to Bin Che Man, Muslim scholars from across the world, particularly Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Libya, went to the Philippines in the 1950s to strengthen commitment to Islam in the southern Philippines.⁶¹ Foreign Islamic institutions and universities provided scholarships to young Moros, while other organizations invited the Moro leaders to host seminars and conferences of various Muslim bodies.⁶² This international influence strengthened the Moro nationalism and solidarity. Bin Che Man writes:

The revitalization of Islam has helped not only to heighten the religious solidarity of the Moros but also to sharpen the sense of “difference” between them and Christian Filipinos. Moros prefer to be called “Muslim” to emphasize their belonging to a different religion. They refer to the Manila government as “the Christian government” to which no true Muslim owes allegiance.⁶³

Once again, therefore, Islam provided a vehicle through which to consolidate and differentiate identity from the rest of the Philippines.

The conflict in Mindanao gave rise to a full-blown separatist movement in 1968 when the AFP executed 27 Muslim Army recruits in what is now referred to as the Jabidah Massacre.⁶⁴ These recruits were part of a larger force trained by the government in preparation for “Operation Merdeka,” a top-secret plan to invade and reclaim the territory of Sabah from Malaysia during the Marcos Presidential Administration.⁶⁵ The incident resulted to two political consequences: the formation of Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) in 1968 under Datu Udtog Matalam, and an inflamed Philippine relationship with Malaysia. Che Man argues that the Malaysian government of Tunku

⁶¹ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 57.

⁶² Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 57.

⁶³ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 57.

⁶⁴ “The Jabidah Massacre of 1968,” Bantayog ng mga Bayani, October 15, 2015, <http://www.bantayog.org/the-jabidah-massacre-of-1968/>.

⁶⁵ “The Jabidah Massacre of 1968.”

Abdul Rahman provided support, training, and weapons to MIM followers.⁶⁶ When Datu Matalam surrendered to the government in 1972, the MIM disintegrated.

In 1970, then Congressman Rachid Lucman formed the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization, which later became Bangsa Muslimin Islamic Liberation Organization (BMILO).⁶⁷ Buendia describes how several of the BMILO members possessed military training from Sabah, Malaysia, with Hashim Salamat and Nur Misuari as among the first batch of trainees.⁶⁸ In the early 1970s, the key leaders of BMILO negotiated with President Marcos for Mindanao's political autonomy, signaling the end of the organization.

F. MAJOR REBEL GROUPS

Instead of ending the Moro conflict, the collapse of BMILO unsealed a new era of intensified Muslim resistance. From 1972 onward, many anti-government groups have emerged with varying ideologies and goals, which has helped generate the complex conditions seen today.

1. Moro National Liberation Front

In 1972, against the backdrop of the Jabidah Massacre, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was founded in Pulau, Malaysia, with the demand for better treatment of the Moro people and their land, an end to land confiscation, and a quest for regional independence. Nur Misuari was the initial chairman.⁶⁹ Unlike separatist groups established earlier, the MNLF proved to be the best organized and most formidable. It had a parallel political structure that consisted of a central committee, political bureau, a propaganda and intelligence bureau, provincial and community committees, along with military structures that included the Bangsa Moro Army and Home Defense units.⁷⁰ Che

⁶⁶ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 75.

⁶⁷ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 77–78.

⁶⁸ Buendia, "The State-Moro Armed Conflict," 112.

⁶⁹ Lela Garner Noble, "The Moro National Liberation Front in the Philippines," *Pacific Affairs* 49, no. 3 (1976): 409, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2755496>.

⁷⁰ Noble, "The Moro National Liberation Front in the Philippines," 412.

Man notes that, aside from Malaysia, the MNLF received external financial support from Libya (the largest donor), the Islamic Solidarity Fund, and several predominantly Muslim countries in the form of *zakat*.⁷¹

President Marcos' declaration of martial law in September 1972, and the subsequent attempt at nationwide disarmament, drew more Muslims to join the organization in opposition of the government.⁷² From 1972 to 1976, fierce clashes between the AFP and the MNLF ensued, resulting in approximately 100,000 lives lost and over half a million civilians displaced.⁷³

On December 23, 1976, the MNLF and the Philippine government signed the Tripoli Agreement, which established an autonomous region composed of the provinces of Basilan, Davao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, North Cotabato, Palawan, South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sulu, Tawi-tawi, Zamboanga del Norte, and Zamboanga del Sur.⁷⁴ However, only three provinces voted to ratify the agreement largely due to the Christian majority in the other ten provinces.⁷⁵ Subsequently, Misuari abandoned the talks, renewed his call for full independence, and returned to guerilla warfare.⁷⁶

On September 2, 1996, the MNLF and the Philippine government signed the 1996 Government of the Philippines-MNLF Peace Agreement, which led to the election of Nur Misuari, who ran unopposed, as Regional Governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, or ARMM. Misuari, however, was later accused of corruption and mismanagement. His key followers in the MNLF and ARMM, known as the "Council of 15," unseated him as MNLF Chairman, and gave him the symbolic title of "Chairman Emeritus," effectively rendering him powerless. About to forfeit his position as ARMM

⁷¹ Bin Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, 83–84.

⁷² Luga, "Muslim Insurgency in Mindanao," 39.

⁷³ Batalla, "Countering the ISIS Threat to the Philippines," 28.

⁷⁴ "The Tripoli Agreement," Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, accessed May 8, 2018, <https://www.hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-Tripoli-Agreement-1976.pdf>.

⁷⁵ "Moro National Liberation Front," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, August 14, 2015, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/379#cite130>.

⁷⁶ "Moro National Liberation Front." Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University.

governor, Misuari prompted his followers to attack Cabatangan compound in Zamboanga on November 27, 2001, which left 25 guerrillas, one soldier, and one civilian dead along with a number of others wounded.⁷⁷ He escaped to Malaysia but was later extradited back to the Philippines. The Misuari-led MNLF faction, called Rogue MNLF (RMNLF), continued its armed rebellion. On September 9, 2013, the RMNLF attacked Zamboanga in an attempt to thwart a government peace talk with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, or MILF, an MNLF breakaway group.

2. Moro Islamic Liberation Front

When Nur Misuari signed the Tripoli Agreement with President Marcos in 1976, his Vice Chairman, Hashim Salamat, broke away and formed a faction named New MNLF composed mainly of fighters from central Mindanao: Maguindanaons, Maranaoans, and Iranuns.⁷⁸ Salamat rejected the idea of ARMM, choosing instead to fight for an independent “Moro Islamic state” that would consist of provinces of ARMM along with Cotabato, Davao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, and Palawan.⁷⁹

In March 1984, Salamat officially declared his group a separate organization called Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). He defined the MILF’s ultimate objective as “building a Muslim community or *Ummah* in the Bangsamoro which would have a genuine Islamic system of government and a real Islamic way of life.”⁸⁰ Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, a social scientist who has authored numerous books and journal articles focused on Muslims in Mindanao, asserts that the MILF’s active involvement in the anti-Soviet coalition during the Soviet-Afghan War led to financial support from Osama bin Laden

⁷⁷ “Muslim Rebels in Philippines Free Hostages after Battle,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2001, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/28/world/muslim-rebels-in-philippines-free-hostages-after-battle.html>.

⁷⁸ Ariel R. Caculitan, “Negotiating Peace with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Southern Philippines” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2005), 28, https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/1843/05Dec_Caculitan.pdf?sequence=1.

⁷⁹ Zachary Abuza, “The Moro Islamic Liberation Front at 20: State of the Revolution,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 6 (August 23, 2006): 454, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500236881>.

⁸⁰ Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, “Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 3, no. 1 (April 2016): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797015626046>.

and Middle Eastern countries as well as the training of hundreds of Moro *mujahideen* in Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁸¹

By the mid-1990s, the MILF became the Philippines' largest Moro rebel group and its armed wing, Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, reached upwards of 15,000 fighters.⁸² The group also allied with ASG, Al Qaeda (AQ), and JI. The MILF established a parallel government within its controlled area (Maguindanao, Lanao del Norte, North Cotabato, and Basilan) covering roughly 10 percent of Mindanao.⁸³ When the MILF invaded Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte, President Joseph Estrada ordered an "all-out war" on March 21, 2000. The conflict ended with the capture of Camp Abubakar, MILF's headquarters.

On January 20, 2001, President Estrada left office in the midst of impeachment proceedings, and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo assumed the presidency. Arroyo negotiated with the MILF and proposed the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), which established a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE), described as a "state within a state" in an "associative relationship" with the Philippines.⁸⁴ Deemed unconstitutional by the Philippine Supreme Court, President Arroyo's successor, President Benigno Aquino III, made another proposal called the Bangsamoro Basic Law. When this law was on the cusp of ratification, the Special Action Force (SAF) of the Philippine National Police (PNP) clashed with the forces of MILF and BIFF at Mamasapano, Maguindanao on January 25, 2015. Forty-four SAF operatives served a warrant for the arrest of Malaysian JI terrorist and bomb-maker Zulkifli Abdir, also known as Marwan, who was in hiding within MILF territory. Marwan was a notorious militant who was also listed as one of the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists. The clash left the 44 SAF operatives dead, along with 18 MILF fighters and Marwan. The Bangsamoro Basic Law was nullified immediately after the bloodshed.

⁸¹ Quimpo, "Mindanao," 68.

⁸² Quimpo, "Mindanao," 79.

⁸³ Abuza, "The Moro Islamic Liberation Front at 20," 455.

⁸⁴ Elmelyn S. Hayudini and Judith De Guzman, "Learning From the MOA-AD," *Meaning Making in Mindanao: Everyday Violence, Ordinary People, Finding Peace (2013)*, 26, accessed May 8, 2018, http://m.ateneo.edu/sites/default/files/attached-files/5LearningFromMOAAD_0.pdf.

3. Abu Sayyaf Group

In 1991, Ustadz Abdurajak Janjalani founded the ASG, whose objective is to create “an Islamic state — not autonomy, not independence, not a revolution.”⁸⁵ Janjalani studied in Libya and Saudi Arabia from 1980 to 1984 under the scholarship of a conservative Islamic organization, Al Islamic Tabligh.⁸⁶ Although originally a member of the MNLF, he was sent to Afghanistan to fight alongside the International Islamic Brigade during the Soviet-Afghan War. Rommel Banlaoi, Chairman of the Board of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research, claims that while in Peshawar, Pakistan, Janjalani met Osama bin Laden and established close ties with AQ.⁸⁷

Upon his return to the Philippines in 1990, Janjalani broke away from the MNLF following the organization’s decision to negotiate with the government. He then built ASG with disgruntled members of MNLF and MILF. Since its founding, ASG has perpetrated a number of terrorist attacks, including bombings of civil and military establishments, airports, wharves, and ferries. The group was responsible for the bombing of the Christian missionary ship, *M/V Doulos*, while docked on Zamboanga City in August 1991 that left two dead; Davao Airport on March 4, 2003, killing 21 people; M/V Super Ferry 14 on February 27, 2004, killing 94 people and leaving 24 others missing; and the attacks on several establishments in General Santos, Makati City, and Davao City on February 14, 2005.⁸⁸ On April 3, 1993, ASG also raided Ipil City in Zamboanga del Sur where they killed more than 50 civilians, injured close to 50, and robbed banks of approximately Php1B (\$25 million).⁸⁹ The group is also known for their terror tactics

⁸⁵ Zack Fellman, “Abu Sayyaf Group,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 2011, 3, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/111128_Fellman_ASG_AQAMCaseStudy5.pdf.

⁸⁶ Fellman, “Abu Sayyaf Group,” 2–3.

⁸⁷ Rommel C. Banlaoi, “Radical Muslim Terrorism in the Philippines,” in *A Handbook of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia*, ed. Andrew TH Tan (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2009), 206.

⁸⁸ GMA News Online, “Abu Sayyaf Kidnappings, Bombings and Other Attacks,” August 23, 2007, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/154797/news/abu-sayyaf-kidnappings-bombings-and-other-attacks/>.

⁸⁹ Victor Taylor, “Terrorist Activities of the Abu Sayyaf,” Mackenzie Institute, March 14, 2017, <http://mackenzieinstitute.com/terrorist-activities-abu-sayyaf/>.

including kidnappings for ransom, assassinations, beheadings, and extortion.⁹⁰ ASG continues to be the most violent and notorious group in the Philippines.

In a CRS Report for Congress, Specialist in Asian Affairs Larry Nicksch wrote that ASG received support and funding from AQ in the early 1990s.⁹¹ Furthermore, Banlaoi claims that Ramzi Yousef, one of the key perpetrators of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the 1994 Philippine Airlines flight 434 bombing, operated in Basilan and trained Abu Sayyaf fighters.⁹² Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, a wealthy businessman and brother-in-law of bin Laden, strengthened further the affiliation through financial and logistic support to ASG.⁹³ The extent of the relationship between AQ and ASG after the mid-1990s remains unclear. It is also unknown whether the ASG Hapilon faction that pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2014 affected the overall relationship of ASG and AQ.

4. Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, or BIFF, is a splinter group of the MILF. Ameril Umbra Kato founded the group in December 2010 when the MILF adopted the government's proposal of autonomy instead of independence.⁹⁴ Kato, who embraces an extreme version of Islam, studied in Saudi Arabia as a member of MNLF prior to joining the MILF.

BIFF operates in the provinces of Maguindanao and Cotabato with a goal of complete independence as opposed to autonomy.⁹⁵ The group has carried out attacks

⁹⁰ "Security Council Committee Pursuant To Resolutions 1267 (1999) 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning ISIL (DA'ESH) AL-QAIDA and Associated Individuals Groups Undertakings and Entities," United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs, last modified January 18, 2018. https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/abu-sayyaf-group.

⁹¹ *Larry Nicksch, Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation*, CRS Report No. RL31265 (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2007), <http://www.au.af.mil/AU/AWC/AWCGATE/crs/rl31265.pdf>.

⁹² Banlaoi, "Radical Muslim Terrorism," 207.

⁹³ "Abu Sayyaf Group," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, accessed March 8, 2018, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/152#note79>.

⁹⁴ "Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, accessed August 27, 2015, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/601?highlight=ASG>.

⁹⁵ "Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University.

against government forces in order to undermine peace talks between MILF and the Philippine government and against the MILF's armed wing over control of territory in Maguindanao.⁹⁶ BIFF is most notorious for its operation that resulted in the death of 44 Special Action Force personnel from the PNP in January 25, 2015, as previously mentioned. The group declared its allegiance to ISIS in a YouTube video in 2014.⁹⁷

5. Maute Group

The Maute Group, also known as the Islamic State of Lanao, was founded by the Omar and Abdullah Maute. The brothers studied at Al Azhar University in Cairo, and in Jordan, where they became fluent in Arabic.⁹⁸ They are cousins of the second wife of Alim Abdulaziz Mimbantas, the MILF Vice Chairman for Military Affairs.⁹⁹ Military intelligence links the Maute brothers to well-known militants—Indonesian Ustadz Sanusi and the Malaysian bomb maker Marwan, who was killed in 2015.¹⁰⁰ Articulate, educated, and idealistic, the brothers had been very active online and on social media, particularly on Youtube.¹⁰¹ Regional security expert Sidney Jones argued that the group is believed to be the “smartest, best educated and most sophisticated members of all of the pro-ISIS groups in the Philippines.”¹⁰² The group is composed mostly of young students, professionals, and disgruntled MILF and MNLF members. According to Banlaoi, the group is allied with factions of the ASG and BIFF, along with remnants of AKP and Khilafa Islamiyah Mindanao (KIM).¹⁰³ (See the following subsection, “Other Rebel Groups.”)

⁹⁶ “Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters,” Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University.

⁹⁷ “Senior Abu Sayyaf Leader Swears Oath to ISIS”, YouTube Video, 01:41, a news segment on August 4, 2014, posted by Rappler, May 30, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u22VCrXSxmw>.

⁹⁸ “Who Are the Maute Brothers?” TRTWorld, June 12, 2017, <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/who-are-the-maute-brothers-leading-the-siege-on-philippines-marawi-377774>.

⁹⁹ Manuel Mogato, “Little-Known Maute Militants Becoming Formidable Force in Philippines,” Reuters, May 24, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-militants-maute/little-known-maute-militants-becoming-formidable-force-in-philippines-idUSKBN18K16W>.

¹⁰⁰ Mogato, “Little-Known Maute Militants.”

¹⁰¹ Mogato, “Little-Known Maute Militants.”

¹⁰² TRTWorld, “Who Are the Maute Brothers?”

¹⁰³ Rommel C. Banlaoi, “The Maute Group and Rise of Family Terrorism,” *Rappler*, June 15, 2017, <http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/173037-maute-group-rise-family-terrorism>.

On May 23, 2017, the combined forces of the Maute Group and the Isnilon Hapilon faction of ASG laid siege to Marawi City when the government forces attempted to arrest Hapilon, the leader of ASG operating in Basilan Province. At the time of the attack, the Maute Group and Hapilon's Abu Sayyaf faction had pledged their allegiance to ISIS, and Hapilon was designated as the Emir of all Islamic State forces in the Philippines.¹⁰⁴

6. Other Rebel Groups

Though the scope of this thesis is focused on ISIS-affiliated groups in the southern Philippines, several other groups exist that are radical in nature and must be highlighted to further illuminate the complexity of the region.

Al Khobar (AK) is a MILF splinter group with an allegiance to ASG. Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium (TRAC) reports that "key members come from MILF's Special Operations Group (MILF-SOG) known for extorting bus companies and working with JI on a series of bombings in Manila (Rizal Day Bombings)."¹⁰⁵

Ansar al-Khilafah Philippines, or AKP, is a jihadist group established in 2013 by a combination of local and foreign terrorists. The AKP is a merged splinter group of the MILF, Southeast Asia jihadist network, and local gangs based in southern Mindanao.¹⁰⁶ The group swore allegiance to ISIS in August 2014, supporting the goal to establish an Islamic caliphate through violent jihad and implementation of Sharia Law. The group sought to attain this objective by securing external support and recruiting from other terrorist groups in Mindanao.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Dempsey Reyes, "Islamic Freedom Fighters, Abu Sayyaf next after Maute 'Wipeout' - Defense Chief," *Manila Times Online*, October 24, 2017, <http://www.manilatimes.net/islamic-freedom-fighters-abu-sayyaf-next-maute-wipeout-defense-chief/358410/>.

¹⁰⁵ "Al Khobar," Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/al-khobar>.

¹⁰⁶ "Ansar Al-Khilafah Philipines (AKP) / Islamic State Philippines (ISPH, ISISPH) Terrorist Groups," Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, accessed May 10, 2018, <https://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/ansar-al-khilafah-philippines-akp-islamic-state-philippines-isph-isisph>.

¹⁰⁷ Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, "Ansar Al-Khilafah Philipines (AKP)."

Jemaah Islamiyah Philippines (JI-P) is the local chapter of the wider JI, an AQ-linked terrorist group responsible for the 2002 Bali bombing and the 2003 bombing of the Marriot Hotel and Australian Embassy in Jakarta. The group's objective is to establish an Islamic State in the Philippines, part of the larger international JI mission of establishing "a pan-Islamic republic incorporating Malaysia, Indonesia, southern Thailand and southern Philippines."¹⁰⁸

Khalifa Islamiyah Mindanao (KIM) is another group that pursues for an independent religious state in Mindanao. Though it is said to be founded by an AQ-linked Islamist and an Afghan-trained Islamic cleric, Ustadz Humam Abdul Najid (alias Wai), TRAC reports that it was actually founded by the Maute brothers, Abdullah and Omar.¹⁰⁹ The KIM was originally an "umbrella organization" of local operatives of JI, BIFF, and ASG.¹¹⁰

The Communist Party of the Philippines—New People's Army—National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF), which is the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, Marxist-Leninist (CPP-ML), was founded by Jose Maria Sison in 1969.¹¹¹ The group's objective is to overthrow the Philippine government and establish a national democratic state through the employment of guerrilla warfare in a protracted war. Until 1992, the Philippine government treated the NPA and CPP as illicit organizations. The government and the NPA attempted peace negotiations that failed, and the group was later designated a terrorist organization in 2017.¹¹² Though its members were mostly Christians, the NPA formed a tactical alliance with the MILF to oppose the central government and press for independence.¹¹³ Military intelligence also reports that

¹⁰⁸ "Jemaah Islamiya (JI)," Global Security, accessed May 9, 2018, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ji.htm>.

¹⁰⁹ "Khalifa Islamic Mindanao (KIM)," Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, accessed May 10, 2018, <https://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/khalifa-islamic-mindanao-kim>.

¹¹⁰ Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, "Khalifa Islamic Mindanao (KIM)."

¹¹¹ "Communist Party of the Philippines—New People's Army," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, August 24, 2015, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/149>.

¹¹² Dharel Placido, "Duterte Declares CPP-NPA as Terror Group," *ABS-CBN News*, December 5, 2017, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/news/12/05/17/duterte-declares-cpp-npa-as-terror-group>.

¹¹³ Tan, *A Handbook of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia*, 204.

the NPA has links to JI and AQ.¹¹⁴ Table 1 summarizes the different militant groups operating in Mindanao.

Table 1. Key Militant Groups in Mindanao.

Threat Group	Leader	Pledge to ISIS	Objective
MNLF	Nur Misuari	No	Autonomy
MILF	Hashim Salamat	No	Autonomy
ASG (Hapilon faction)	Isnilon Hapilon (d.)	2014	The “purge of all Christian influence in the southern Philippines and the establishment of an independent Islamic State of Mindanao.” ¹¹⁵
BIFF (faction)	Imam Bangos	August 2014	Create an Independent State
Maute Group	Omar and Abdullah Maute (both deceased)	2015	Create Independent Islamic State
AK	Unknown	Unknown	Create Independent Islamic State
AKP	Commander Tokboy (d.)	July 2016	Create Independent Islamic State
KIM	Ustadz Humam Abdul Najid	Unknown	Create Independent Islamic State
CPP-NPA-NDF	Jose Maria Sison	No	Overthrow the government and pursue Communist Ideology

G. CONCLUSION

The conflict in Mindanao is deeply rooted in the historical development of the Philippines. The Muslims’ struggle for self-determination, which began during the

¹¹⁴ Tan, *A Handbook of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia*, 240.

¹¹⁵ Chalk, “The Islamic State.”

colonial period, is still prominent almost 500 years later. Different organizations representing the Muslim populace have emerged to find solutions to the Moro problem; however, efforts to end the conflict and reach a compromise with the government have resulted in splinter groups and new factions. Some of these groups, in turn, have aligned with foreign entities, including AQ and ISIS, adding layers of complexity to the problem. The next chapter looks at the conditions that allowed the merger of BIFF, ASG, AKP, and the Maute Group to form IS-Philippines.

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III. THE RISE OF ISIS IN THE PHILIPPINES AND HOW IS-P IS CONNECTED

A. INTRODUCTION

Several events created the conditions for IS-P to emerge in Mindanao, including the success of ISIS in declaring the caliphate in Syria; the stalled peace negotiations in the Philippines following the Mamasapano Massacre; newly elected President Rodrigo Duterte’s shift from a focus on Islamist separatist groups in Mindanao to countering the drug trade in Luzon; and the security vacuum left in the region following the dissolution of the Joint Special Operations Task Force—Philippines (JSOTF-P) in 2015. These conditions created a window of opportunity for already established Islamist groups to pledge the *bayat*—the oath of loyalty—to ISIS, and for ISIS to gain a foothold in the region.

This chapter begins by describing how the combination of these four conditions created an opportunity for Islamist groups in the region to align with ISIS, and for the emergence of IS-P in Mindanao. The chapter then deploys visual analytics to demonstrate which terrorist groups joined ISIS, how they aligned to form IS-P, and where they are known to operate within Mindanao.

This investigation finds that the aforementioned conditions coupled with the opportunity to align with ISIS enabled once-rival groups in Mindanao to set aside longstanding differences and unite to become IS-P. In other words, ISIS created an overarching framework that allowed groups historically at odds to work together. This newly formed alliance under the banner of ISIS, which was further facilitated through social relationships and shared operational areas, allowed for these groups to combine their skills and fighters to mount an aggressive offensive in Marawi in 2017 that caught Philippine security forces off guard and required considerable effort to put down.

B. THE RISE OF ISIS IN MINDANAO

The rapid expansion of ISIS in Syria and its successful capture of major cities in Iraq, followed by Al Baghdadi’s declaration of the caliphate in 2014, became important

events for Islamist groups around the globe, including in Mindanao. As early as 2014, Islamist groups in Mindanao began pledging the bayat to ISIS. U.S. Army Colonel Dave Maxwell, a former commander of JSOTF-P, argues that these groups were drawn to ISIS' ideology to "enhance their legitimacy and gain recruits, resources, and respect."¹¹⁶ Specifically, he argues, these groups were attracted to the social media recognition, radical ideology, and global attention that ISIS maintained. ISIS reciprocated this attraction to "keep its ideology alive by spreading to other countries where it could capitalize on conditions of political resistance that weaken governments and provide safe havens for training, recruiting, and eventual resurrection of its quest for the Caliphate."¹¹⁷ The October 25, 2016 report on Mindanao by the Institute for Policy Analysis and Conflict echo these comments. It describes this popular new movement, the power of ISIS ideology, and the "appeal of the ISIS brand" to the pre-existing groups operating in Mindanao:

Support for ISIS in Mindanao has meant more than a repackaging of old kidnapping-for-ransom groups. It has facilitated cooperation across clan and ethnic lines, widened the extremist recruitment pool to include computer-savvy university students and opened new international communication and possibly funding channels. It means that more deadly violence in the Philippines involving alliances of pro-ISIS groups is a matter of when, not if.¹¹⁸

Perhaps the most significant group to pledge the bayat in the summer of 2014 was ASG, through its leader Isnilon Hapilon. ASG's pledge of allegiance was followed by BIFF in August 2014, the Maute Group in 2015, and AKP pledged in July 2016. Analysts, political leaders, and even former President Fidel Valdez Ramos raised concerns over the emerging threat posed by this pledge of allegiance.¹¹⁹ On August 19, 2014, Ramos, who had also served in the Philippine Constabulary in Mindanao, cited an

¹¹⁶ David Maxwell, "ISIS in Mindanao: A Threat to the U.S.?" Hoover Institute, September 27, 2017, <https://www.hoover.org/research/isis-mindanao-threat-us>.

¹¹⁷ Maxwell, "ISIS in Mindanao."

¹¹⁸ "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict Report* 33, (October 26, 2016), 28.

¹¹⁹ "Abu Sayyaf Group," Counter Terrorism Project, accessed May 9, 2018, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Abu%20Sayyaf%20Group%20%28ASG%29-01032018.pdf.

intelligence report that at least 100 Filipino Muslims had already infiltrated into Iraq to undergo training so they could return to the Philippines as jihadists.¹²⁰ The *Philippine Inquirer* reported on August 25, 2014, that then Mayor of Davao, Rodrigo Duterte, claimed that ISIS had recruited several Davao residents.¹²¹

Nonetheless, then President Aquino downplayed the threat posed by the extremist group, claiming that “it is [just] an attempt to enhance their own status, especially for those that are increasingly being marginalized.”¹²² Lt. Gen. Rustico O. Guerrero also discounted the group’s pledges to ISIS, stating that there was no “direct linkage” between the groups and ISIS.¹²³ The Philippine government continued to underestimate ASG, and President Aquino insisted that, up until April 2016, there was no credible ISIS terror threat in the Philippines.¹²⁴

The second condition that helped fuel the rise of ISIS in the Philippines occurred in 2015, when the Philippine government suspended the deliberation of Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL). The BBL was the product of a peace treaty forged between the Philippine government and MILF during the incumbency of President Benigno Aquino III in October 2012.¹²⁵ President Aquino proposed the BBL to the Philippine Congress in September 2014 to be the basic law of the new Bangsamoro (Moro state), which would replace the ARMM.¹²⁶ When approved into law, the proposed BBL would implement the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB), which was negotiated between the

¹²⁰ Carmela Fonbuena, “FVR: Raw Intel Says 100 Filipinos Training with ISIS,” *Rappler*, August 20, 2014, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/66758-fvr-ramos-isis-filipinos>.

¹²¹ Aries Joseph Hegina, “Duterte Confirms ISIS Recruited Filipino Rebels,” *Inquirer.net*, August 25, 2014, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/109883/duterte-confirms-isis-recruited-filipino-rebels>.

¹²² Christian V. Esguerra, “Aquino Downplays ISIS Threat in PH,” *Inquirer.net*, September 21, 2014, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/111463/aquino-downplays-isis-threat-in-ph>.

¹²³ Linda Robinson, Patrick B. Johnston, and Gillian S. Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2016), 104.

¹²⁴ Greg Cahiles, “Aquino: No Credible Terror Threat in PH,” *CNN Philippines*, April 14, 2016, <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2016/01/15/ISIS-threat-Jakarta-bombings.html>.

¹²⁵ Andreo Calonzo, “Govt, MILF Agree to Create ‘Bangsamoro’ to Replace ARMM,” *GMA News Online*, October 7, 2012, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/277218/govt-milf-agree-to-create-bangsamoro-to-replace-armm/story/>.

¹²⁶ “Primer on the Proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law,” Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, accessed May 9, 2018, <https://www.hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Primer-on-the-proposed-Bangsamoro-Basic-Law-December-2014.pdf>.

MILF and the Government of the Philippines.¹²⁷ This peace treaty was the culmination of an 18-year peace negotiation between the MILF and the Government of the Philippines following protracted conflict that claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced millions of people.¹²⁸

The Philippine Congress received the proposed bill on September 10, 2014 for deliberation, with Senate President Franklin Drilon and House Speaker Feliciano Belmonte, Jr. agreeing to pass the BBL by the year's end.¹²⁹ However, on January 26, 2015, Senator Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. suspended the deliberation following the Mamasapano clash a day earlier, in which Philippine forces arrested and killed a high-ranking JI-affiliated terrorist, Zulkifli Adhir, known by his alias "Marwan." MILF elements engaged government troops, which resulted in the death of 44 SAF personnel, 18 MILF fighters, and five civilians.¹³⁰ The incident created a nationwide furor that dominated headlines for months, and Congress ultimately suspended consideration for the proposed law.

Sources suggest that the Maute Group took advantage of the suspension of the BBL to recruit militants. The *CNN Philippines*, for example, reported on March 3, 2016, that Colonel Roseller Murillo, commander of the 103rd Infantry Brigade operating on Lanao del Sur, claimed "the armed group may be using the government's non-passage of BBL to encourage locals to join them."¹³¹ The collapse of this peace agreement exacerbated the already fragile territorial and political climate, possibly further driving

¹²⁷ Bangsamoro Transition Commission, "Primer."

¹²⁸ "A Peace Agreement in Mindanao: A Fragile Peace," *Economist*, February 1, 2014, <https://www.economist.com/news/asia/21595500-long-running-insurgency-may-last-be-coming-end-fragile-peace>.

¹²⁹ Reynaldo Santos Jr. and Michael Bueza, "Timeline: The Long Road to the Bangsamoro Region," *Rappler*, May 29, 2015, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/48841-timeline-bangsamoro>.

¹³⁰ Steven Rood, "2016 Philippines Election Politics Causes Hiatus in Bangsamoro Law Process," Asia Foundation, October 14, 2015, <https://asiafoundation.org/2015/10/14/2016-philippines-election-politics-causes-hiatus-in-bangsamoro-law-process/>.

¹³¹ Jerson Abad, "Butig Clashes: What We Know So Far," *CNN Philippines*, March 3, 2016, <http://cnnphilippines.com/regional/2016/03/02/Butig-Lanao-del-Sur-clashes-Maute-group.html>.

militants to turn to more radical ISIS-linked organizations.¹³² Southeast Asian security expert Zachary M. Abuza argues, “it was not the spread of ISIS in Iraq and Syria that fueled ISIS cells in the Philippines, but the collapse of the peace process.”¹³³ Sheena Greitens of the Center for East Asia Policy Studies concurs that “the collapse of the peace agreement and the resultant failure to create the Bangsamoro region, have contributed to the splintering” of MILF and breakaway groups moving toward more radical options such as ISIS.¹³⁴

The third factor that led to the alliance between Islamist groups in Mindanao and ISIS was President Duterte’s focus on his war on drugs, the cornerstone of his domestic policy, at the expense of countering militants in Mindanao. On his first day in office in 2016, President Duterte “demonstrated a significant degree of political will to curb the proliferation of illegal drugs in the country.”¹³⁵ As a result, there was a significant increase in the number of those who were killed in anti-illegal drugs operations. The government claimed that a total of 3,151 people had been killed from July 1, 2016 to June 13, 2017,¹³⁶ which is an exponential upswing from the six-month period between January and June 2016 when 68 people were killed in police anti-drug operations.¹³⁷

The Economist has reported that the anti-drug campaign underscored the new president’s first eight months in office, and his “anti-drug crusade risks becoming a

¹³² Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Terrorism in the Philippines and U.S.-Philippine Security Cooperation,” Brookings, November 30, 2001, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/terrorism-in-the-philippines-and-u-s-philippine-security-cooperation/>.

¹³³ Richard C. Paddock, “Duterte, Focused on Drug Users in Philippines, Ignored Rise of ISIS,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/10/world/asia/duterte-philippines-isis-marawi.html>.

¹³⁴ Greitens, “Terrorism in the Philippines and U.S.-Philippine Security Cooperation.”

¹³⁵ Ronald U. Mendoza, Ivyrose S. Baysic, and Eunice A Lalic, “Anti-Illegal Drugs Campaigns: What Works And What Doesn’t Work,” in *Policy Dialogue Report* (Loyola Heights, Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila, November 2016), 2, http://ateneo.edu/sites/default/files/attached-files/PDR_Anti-Drug%20Campaigns.pdf.

¹³⁶ Cecille Suerte Felipe et al., “9 Drug Offenders Killed Daily — PNP,” *Philstar*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/06/29/1714924/9-drug-offenders-killed-daily-ppnp>.

¹³⁷ Phelim Kine, “Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs,’” Human Rights Watch, September 7, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/07/philippine-president-rodriago-dutertes-war-drugs>.

distraction from the many more constructive items on his agenda.”¹³⁸ While President Duterte was heavily consumed with Oplan Tokhang, a government initiative aimed at eradicating illegal drug trafficking, ISIS was gaining traction in Mindanao. Sidney Jones, director of the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict in Jakarta, Indonesia, asserts,

While President Rodrigo Duterte focused his energies during his first year in office on waging a brutal campaign against suspected drug dealers and users, a motley coalition supporting the Islamic State — former guerrillas, university students, scions of political families, Christian converts to Islam— grew into a fighting force with surprising staying power.¹³⁹

Similarly, Santiago J Arnaiz, a journalist with *Rappler*, who covered the siege of Marawi, observed that “the rising threat of ISIS command moving into the country remains largely unchecked.”¹⁴⁰ Duterte’s war on drugs, therefore, took government attention away from Mindanao and the growing presence of ISIS in the region.

Duterte’s war on drugs also came with international consequences. Thirty-nine countries “expressed concern over the rising number of drug-related killings” in the Philippines and called on the government to end and investigate these deaths.¹⁴¹ Former U.S. President Obama, U.N. Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Killings Agnes Callamard, former Philippine Human Rights Commissioner and Senator Leila de Lima, condemned the anti-illegal drug campaign and accused President Duterte of using extra judicial killings to counter drug dealers.¹⁴²

Fourth, the dissolution of JSOTF-P helped contribute to the emergence of ISIS in Mindanao. Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines’ (OEF-P) mission officially ended

¹³⁸ “Rodrigo Duterte’s Bloody War on Drugs is Impeding the Sensible Bits of His Agenda,” *Economist*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/asia/21717830-vendetta-against-users-and-pushers-blocking-economic-reform-rodrigo-dutertes-bloody-war>.

¹³⁹ Sydney Jones, “How ISIS Got a Foothold in the Philippines,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/04/opinion/isis-philippines-rodrigo-duterte.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Santiago J. Arnaiz, “Duterte’s Drug War Blinding PH from Rising ISIS Threat, Analysts Say,” *Rappler*, April 9, 2017, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/166457-duterte-drug-war-isis-threat>.

¹⁴¹ Audrey Morallo, “39 Countries Worry about Killings, Climate of Impunity in Philippines,” *Philstar*, September 28, 2017, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/09/28/1743809/39-countries-worry-about-killings-climate-impunity-philippines>.

¹⁴² “World Report 2018: Philippines Events of 2017,” Human Rights Watch, December 20, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/philippines>.

in March 2015. Following the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the U.S. government became concerned with the spread of AQ around the globe. A rise in terrorist activity in Mindanao around the same time as the 9/11 attacks prompted the Philippine government to accept U.S. outreach for support in reducing Islamist activism. In 2002, the United States established JSOTF-P to support the AFP in combating these threats. Approximately 1,300 U.S. forces deployed to the southern Philippines in 2002 and, thereafter, support averaged between 500 to 600 troops at any given time.¹⁴³ JSOTF-P's efforts included providing operational support and assistance to AFP operations against insurgent groups; helping improve the capabilities of the Philippine forces; and executing information operations and civil–military operations with Philippine forces.

RAND's 2016 comprehensive study on JSOTF-P, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001–2014*, identified several contributions that U.S. SOF activities in the Philippines made to their counterinsurgency efforts. First, their presence reduced the transnational terrorist threat and support for terrorist groups. Second, a U.S. presence increased Philippine Special Forces capabilities at the tactical, operational, and institutional levels.¹⁴⁴ And third, JSOTF-P effectively facilitated Philippine forces' combat operations, increased the popular support for the government, and reduced safe havens relished by the terrorist groups.¹⁴⁵ According to the findings in the report, ASG initiated attacks declined by 56 percent from 2000 to 2012, the strength of ASG insurgents decreased from an estimated 2,200 to 400 fighters, and popular support increased for government forces and decreased for ASG overall.¹⁴⁶ With support from the United States, the AFP was able to improve its operations against ASG, disrupting operations, gaining control of significant locations, and denying the group use of various safe havens.¹⁴⁷ These OEF-P efforts helped to eliminate numerous high-value targets, facilitators, and sympathizers. The support and safe-haven afforded to ASG and JI

¹⁴³ Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, xv.

¹⁴⁴ Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, xvii.

¹⁴⁵ Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, xiii.

¹⁴⁶ Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, xviii.

¹⁴⁷ Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, 114.

diminished after civil-military operations, combat operations, and conflict-resolution activities undertaken by the Philippine government.¹⁴⁸

Although plans were put in place to enable a seamless transition of support from U.S. forces to Philippine forces, the study notes that Philippine and U.S. officials also expressed concern that the withdrawal of U.S. troops and resources could “lead to a resurgence of a renewed terrorist threat, possibly sparked by aggressive propaganda and recruitment by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).”¹⁴⁹ In order to mitigate these risks, JSOTF-P instilled a phased and gradual downsizing of efforts before transitioning oversight of the mission to the U.S. Pacific Command Augmentation Team based out of the U.S. Embassy in February 2015.

The RAND report further details that, at the time of the dissolution of JSOTF-P in 2015, both the U.S. and AFP commands “characterized the transnational terrorist threat as reduced to a largely criminal phenomenon,” although some of the groups’ leadership structure remained intact.¹⁵⁰

Specifically, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as a threat with potential global appeal and reach caused some speculation regarding the possibility of a resurgent threat of extremist violence in the southern Philippines. In July and August 2014, the ASG and BIFF (a splinter group of the MILF) both released videos declaring their support for ISIL, but Lt. Gen. Rustico O. Guerrero stated that there was no indication of a “direct linkage” between the groups and ISIL.¹⁵¹

Furthermore, neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia remained a potential sanctuary and training grounds for remnants of the groups. Finally, the study notes that both U.S. and Philippine military officials advocated for “continued vigilance to guard against the possibility that a new ideological leader might surface to regenerate violent extremist organizations.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, 114.

¹⁴⁹ Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, xvii.

¹⁵⁰ Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, 117.

¹⁵¹ Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, 104.

¹⁵² Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, 117.

The dissolution of JSOTF-P reduced the Philippines' access to intelligence assets, including Intelligence, Reconnaissance, and Surveillance (ISR) platforms and intelligence fusion departments, along with Civil Military Operations (CMO) and Civil Affairs (CA) support to the underdeveloped areas of Mindanao and a lessened security footprint in the region. The withdrawal of these assets put Philippines forces at a tactical and operational disadvantage for the upcoming confrontation with ISIS aligned Mindanao groups.

In sum, ISIS' declaration of the caliphate in Syria; the stalled peace negotiations in the Philippines following the Mamasapano Massacre; President Duterte's shift from Islamist separatist groups to counter drug operations; and the security vacuum left when JSOTF-P withdrew helped pave the way for ISIS to gain a foothold in Mindanao and facilitated collaboration between preexisting militant groups in region.

C. VISUAL AND RELATIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE GROUPS THAT MAKE UP IS-P

As discussed in Chapter II, there were several known groups operating in Mindanao beginning around the year 2000. These groups, which had established leadership, built skills and accumulated materiel that became important resources for ISIS as it began to reach out to insurgent groups around the globe. In 2014, just after ISIS established the caliphate, ASG, the Maute Group, BIFF, and AKP, perhaps the most capable and formidable groups in Mindanao, pledged allegiance to ISIS and began to collaborate. These groups, which once were rivals and occasionally fought each other, joined forces to create IS-P. Together, these groups carried out the siege of Marawi, which is discussed further in Chapter IV.

To better understand the connections formed among these groups, this section uses relational analysis and visual analytics to create depictions of their social network along with geographic visualizations to show their proximity and placement to one

another, other prominent groups, and among Muslim populations.¹⁵³ Drawing from data gathered by the Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, or TRAC, and the Global Terrorism Database, or GTD,¹⁵⁴ this analysis aims to better understand the geographic and resource benefits created by the IS-P alliance.

The groups that made up IS-P established strongholds among Muslim populations in Mindanao. Figure 2, a map from Reuters, shows the four main groups that make up IS-P and their distinct areas of operation in Mindanao, broken down by province. The Maute Group, shown in orange, is known to operate primarily in Lanao del Sur (LDS) province, the province that includes Marawi. The BIFF, shown in pink, is known to operate primarily in Maguindanao. AKP, shown in purple, operates primarily in Sultan Kudarat, and ASG, shown in blue, operations on the islands of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi Tawi.

As described in Chapter II, these groups formed along tribal lines that are regularly in conflict with one another. The ASG (Basilan faction) almost entirely originated from the Yakan tribe, the BIFF is ethnically Maguindanaoan, while the Maute Group is Maranao. ISIS provided an ideological bond that allowed these diverse and otherwise rival tribal groups to work together against a common enemy, the Philippine Government. Although ASG, BIFF, Maute Group, and AKP pledged the bayat to ISIS, there are seven other groups that did not pledge the bayat but still operate in the southern Philippines, including the NPA, MNLF, MILF, Al Khobar, JI-P, KIM, and Marakat al-Ansar.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ This analysis utilizes visualizations depicting sociograms using social network analysis software (e.g., ORA), but it is largely limited to visual, descriptive analysis much more in line with link analysis. The former, or SNA, is defined as a set of theories and techniques to understand social structures, and it often incorporates statistical techniques to describe and test theories about social networks (for more information see, Cunningham et al. (2016)). The latter, or link analysis, is simply the visual depiction of relational data

¹⁵⁴ Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium (TRAC), see <https://www.trackingterrorism.org/region/philippines>; and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), see <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?chart=country&search=philippines>

¹⁵⁵ See Chapter II for more details on these groups.

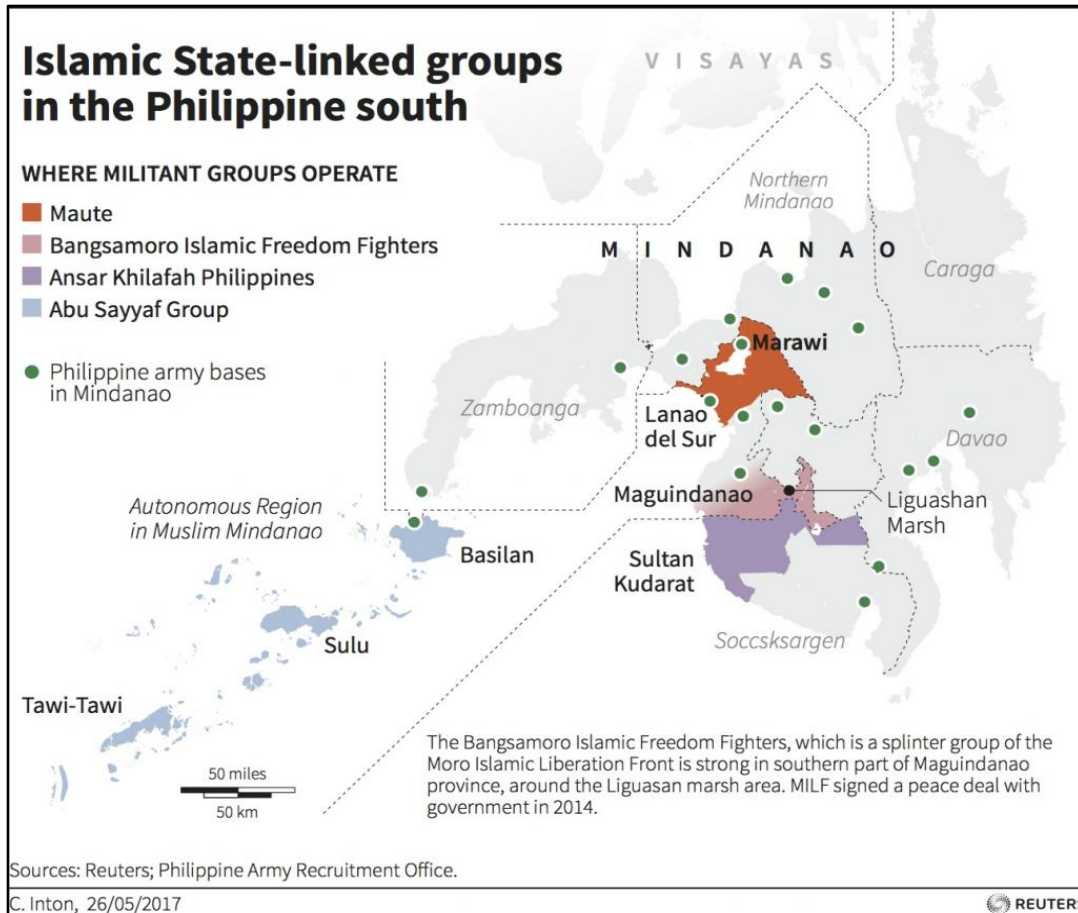


Figure 2. The ISIS-Linked Groups and Their Territory in Mindanao.¹⁵⁶

Figure 3 shows 11 of the most prevalent groups displayed in a sociogram; a visual depiction of the groups and their connections to one another. Each labeled square, or node, represents one of the ISIS-linked groups, and the line connecting the nodes indicates a relational tie, or connection, between the groups. The relational ties depicted include three types of connections: collaboration ties through terrorist or insurgent activity, shared interests, and shared ISIS affiliation. The cluster of nodes circled represents the groups interconnected through their affiliation with ISIS: specifically, ASG, BIFF, Maute Group, and AKP.

¹⁵⁶ “Battle for Marawi,” Reuters, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://fingfx.thomsonreuters.com/gfx/rngs/PHILIPPINES-ATTACK/010041F032X/index.html>.

This layer of connectivity demonstrates that the network of groups residing in Mindanao is a factor and is more complex than just the four isolated groups that pledged the bayat. Many of the historical events outlined in Chapter II that shaped the formation of individual groups also served as mechanisms for tie formation among them.

The sociogram further depicts that these same four groups have ties to the non-ISIS groups through facilitation-based relationships. For example, the NPA is tied to BIFF because they are known to have a “tactical alliance” against the Philippine government.¹⁵⁷ MNLF, MILF, and ASG are also connected because they are historically related before breaking off to form their own factions; for example, MILF is a splinter of MNLF.

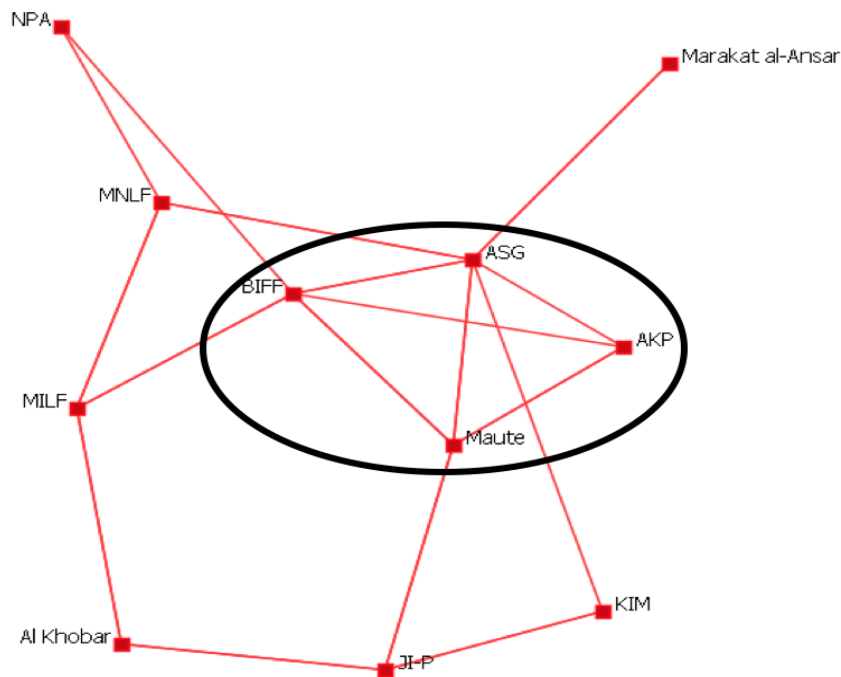


Figure 3. Groups Operating in Mindanao and Groups that Pledged the *Bayat* to ISIS.

¹⁵⁷ Tan, *A Handbook of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia*, 204.

Geographic proximity is also important to understand the ties and resources different groups share, including those among ISIS-linked and non-ISIS groups. The sociogram in Figure 4 shows the geographic proximity of the 11 groups across the provinces in Mindanao and includes where the groups operate, where they are known to gather logistics, and where they conduct training, operations, and recruitment. The 11 groups are shown in green and the locations in Mindanao where these groups operate are shown in orange.

The sociogram in Figure 4 shows the dynamic overlap of all 11 groups that operate in Mindanao. For instance, of the 13 locations depicted in Figure 4, 92 percent serve as operational areas for at least two groups, which highlights substantial, spatial overlap among ISIS-linked and non-ISIS linked groups. An examination of both Figures 3 and 4 suggests that the spatial proximity of these groups increases the probability that two groups have social ties, which corroborates evidence that physical proximity is positively related to social tie formation.¹⁵⁸ In other words, it is more likely for two groups that share an operational area to form a relationship with each other (e.g., tactical alliance) than it is for two groups who do not. One can see how groups with social ties (Figure 3) also often share operational areas (Figure 4), including both ISIS aligned groups (e.g., ASG and BIFF in Lanao del Sur and Cotabato) and combinations of ISIS and non-ISIS groups (e.g., ASG and Marakat al-Ansar in Sulu, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi, and BIFF and MILF in Lanao del Sur and Cotabato).

¹⁵⁸ This is known as the propinquity effect. This well-known effect suggests individuals and groups are more likely to form ties with one another if they are close spatially, and has been observed across many contexts (Festinger et al., *Social Pressures in Informal Groups*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, CA, 1950.)

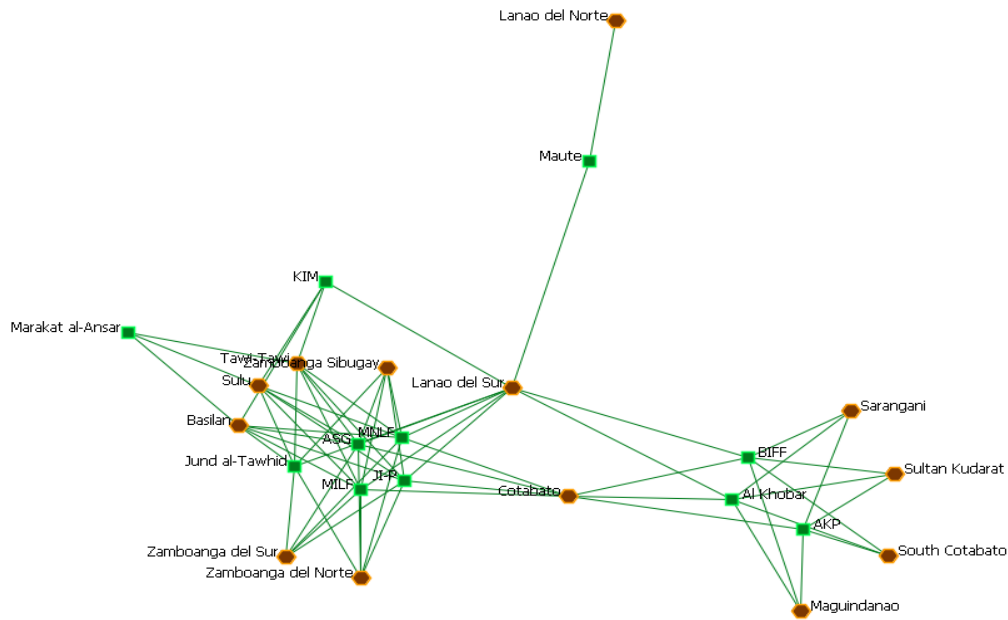


Figure 4. Organization by Location.

By focusing on specific locations, LDS and Cotabato City are the two most central areas of operation for these eleven groups. The city of Marawi is located within LDS and its territory is the operational base of the Maute Group, along with Lanao del Norte (LDN). As described in Chapter IV, the Maute Group formed the backbone of the offensive in the Battle of Marawi. In other words, IS-P took advantage of the Maute Group’s preexisting presence in the city, including its knowledge of the city, logistics lines, and fighters to successfully launch its offensive in 2017.

The remaining groups operate in what are traditionally known as MILF and MNLF controlled areas, including Maguindanao and Sulu provinces. It is unclear from the data gathered whether these MILF and MNLF controlled areas have provided assistance to the IS-P groups, or if some of their militants hold dual membership. However, given that these are Muslim majority areas (see Figure 5), it is possible that IS-P used their areas for recruiting, and possibly as a safe haven during the Battle of Marawi.

All four of the IS-P groups (ASG, BIFF, Maute Group, and AKP) are also known to operate in the provinces in Mindanao that have the highest Muslim population. Figure

5 depicts the percentage of Muslims in Mindanao based on each province. The map illustrates the provinces with the highest Muslim population in dark red, and the lighter the shade of red the less dense the Muslim population. For example, the Maute Group operates in Lanao del Sur, which has the highest Muslim population in Mindanao, and Lanao del Norte. ASG operates primarily in Basilan, Sulu, Tawi Tawi, and Zamboanga provinces, which have the next highest Muslim populated areas in Mindanao. BIFF and AKP operate primarily in Maguindanao, Cotobato, Sultan Kudarat, and Sarangani Provinces, which have significantly fewer Muslims. Although the groups originate from different tribes, they share Islam as a common factor, and it appears that the ideology of ISIS united these groups beginning in 2014. Finally, these groups are geographically close to one another, which, once aligned under ISIS, may have allowed opportunities to work together and collaborate on training, operations, or even recruiting efforts.

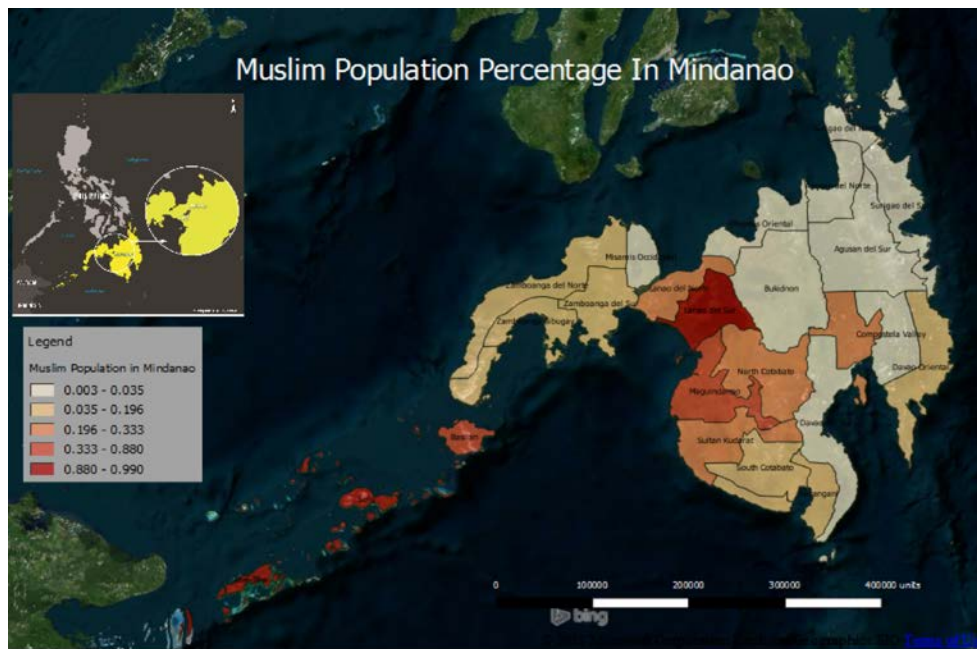


Figure 5. Map of Muslim Population in Mindanao.

D. CONCLUSION

This chapter described the circumstances that allowed ISIS to gain a foothold in Mindanao, including the success of ISIS in declaring the caliphate in Syria; the stalled

peace negotiations in the Philippines following the Mamasapano Massacre; newly elected President Duterte's shift from Islamist separatist groups in Mindanao to countering the drug trade in Luzon; and the security vacuum left in the region following the Joint Special Operations Task Force – Philippines (JSOTF-P) dissolution in 2015. The chapter then used relational analysis and visual analytics to consider the role that geographical proximity played with the groups that allied with ISIS, specifically ASG, Maute Group, BIFF, and AKP, which made up IS-P.

This investigation demonstrates the aforementioned conditions, coupled with the opportunity to align with ISIS, enabled once-rival groups in Mindanao to set aside longstanding differences and unite to become IS-P, and this alliance allowed for these groups to combine their skills and resources to lay siege to Marawi in 2017. The next chapter examines the 2017 Battle of Marawi, and how groups aligned with ISIS used their geographic location and resources to hold the city for months.

IV. THE MARAWI SIEGE: A COMBINED IS-P OPERATION

A. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the summer of 2017, IS-P laid siege to Marawi City, which had a population of over 200,000 people, most of whom were Muslim.¹⁵⁹ This battle was a major operation launched as a combined effort by the groups that pledged the bayat to ISIS: ASG, BIFF, Maute Group, and AKP, and is regarded as the longest and bloodiest Philippine military operation since World War II. The five-month battle between government forces and the ISIS-affiliated fighters ultimately resulted in the death of IS-P leader Hapilon and his deputy, Omar Maute of the Maute Group, along with approximately 165 Filipino soldiers and policemen, 920 militants, and more than 47 civilians.¹⁶⁰ The fighting left almost the entire population displaced and the city in ruins.¹⁶¹

This chapter discusses the Siege of Marawi and analyzes how the different groups operated under the banner of IS-P. The first section presents a brief overview of the battle. The second section offers an analysis of the battle focusing on IS-P's organization and ISIS support to IS-P; new TTPs used by IS-P; and IS-P claimed significant activities (SIGACT) during the siege. The third section offers concluding thoughts.

This analysis reveals that the combined efforts of Maute Group, ASG, BIFF, and AKP created a formidable fighting force that required significant effort to put down. Within the battle IS-P used new TTPs, particularly urban warfare tactics, that presented considerable challenges to AFP. The battle also drew in foreign fighters from nearly a dozen countries. Ultimately, the combined resources of IS-P, coupled with foreign

¹⁵⁹ Joseph Hincks, "The Battle for Marawi City: What the Siege of a Philippine City Reveals About ISIS' Deadly New Front in Asia," *TIME*, May 25, 2017, <http://time.com/marawi-philippines-isis/>.

¹⁶⁰ "Philippines: 'Battle of Marawi' Leaves Trail of Death and Destruction," Amnesty International, accessed April 19, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/philippines-battle-of-marawi-leaves-trail-of-death-and-destruction/>.

¹⁶¹ "Marawi Crisis," United Nations Refugee Agency, accessed April 28, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/ph/marawi-crisis>.

fighters and urban TTPs made it possible for IS-P to fight off government troops for five months before being defeated.

B. OVERVIEW OF THE BATTLE

Following the creation of IS-P around 2016, Isnilon Hapilon, the leader of ASG, along with the Maute brothers, Omar and Abdullah, began planning for the attack of Marawi in April 2017.¹⁶² Their intent was to carry out an attack on the first day of Ramadan, May 26, in order to seize the city and declare it a *wilayat*, or a province of ISIS.¹⁶³ In preparation for the attack, IS-P fighters infiltrated the city under the cover of attending a gathering of Tablighi Jamaat, a transnational Sunni puritanical group that encourages greater piety among its followers.¹⁶⁴

The original IS-P plan was foiled, however, when joint AFP and PNP elements raided Isnilon Hapilon's safe house in Marawi City three days before the planned offensive, on May 23.¹⁶⁵ During the initial raid, Hapilon's guards and armed militants in the neighboring houses launched a substantial counterattack against government forces, which marked the beginning of the battle.¹⁶⁶ At the start of the siege, the Philippine military claimed there were 50–100 fighters from ASG, 250–300 from the Maute Group, and 40 each from BIFF and AKP.¹⁶⁷ There were also around 40 foreign fighters, mostly Indonesians and Malaysians, who fought under the banner of IS-P.¹⁶⁸ Figure 6 depicts the locations of the initial actions of the IS-P fighters on May 23 as they fought off

¹⁶² Lisa Buan, "Calida: Military Knew Marawi Terror Plot as Early as April," *Rappler*, June 13, 2017, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/172777-isis-military-marawi-crisis-martial-law-calida>.

¹⁶³ Carmela Fonbuena, "Where the Marawi War Began: The Safe House in Basak Malutlut," *Rappler*, October 18, 2017, <http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/184915-marawi-war-began-safe-house-basak-malutlut>.

¹⁶⁴ Tom Allard, "Ominous Signs of an Asian Hub for Islamic State in the Philippines," Reuters, May 30, 2017, sec. World News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-militants-foreigners/ominous-signs-of-an-asian-hub-for-islamic-state-in-the-philippines-idUSKBN18Q000>.

¹⁶⁵ Fonbuena, "Where the Marawi War Began."

¹⁶⁶ Fonbuena, "Where the Marawi War Began."

¹⁶⁷ Caleb Weiss, "Islamic State Video Shows Destruction of Church in Marawi," Threat Matrix, June 5, 2017, www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/06/islamic-state-video-shows-destruction-of-church-in-marawi.php.

¹⁶⁸ Rohan Gunaratna, "The Siege of Marawi: A Game Changer in Terrorism in Asia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9, no. 7 (2017), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26351533>.

government forces, and then withdrew to pre-designated strongholds across the city. Carmela Forbunea of *Rappler* reports the events that unfolded next:

[a]rmed Marawi residents rush to the streets, wave the ISIS black flag, and attack strategic points around the city. They occupy Amai Pakpak Medical Center, harass Camp Ranao, and surround the City Hall. They release prisoners at the City Jail, set ablaze the Protestant-run Dansalan College and the Catholic Saint Mary's Parish. They take hostages along the way, move towards Banggolo, the city's commercial district.¹⁶⁹

Within hours, the insurgents controlled the vast majority of Marawi City.¹⁷⁰ They established roadblocks and checkpoints along the roads and gained control of the three critical bridges linking the east and west portions of the city across the Agus River. President Duterte immediately declared martial law throughout Mindanao.¹⁷¹

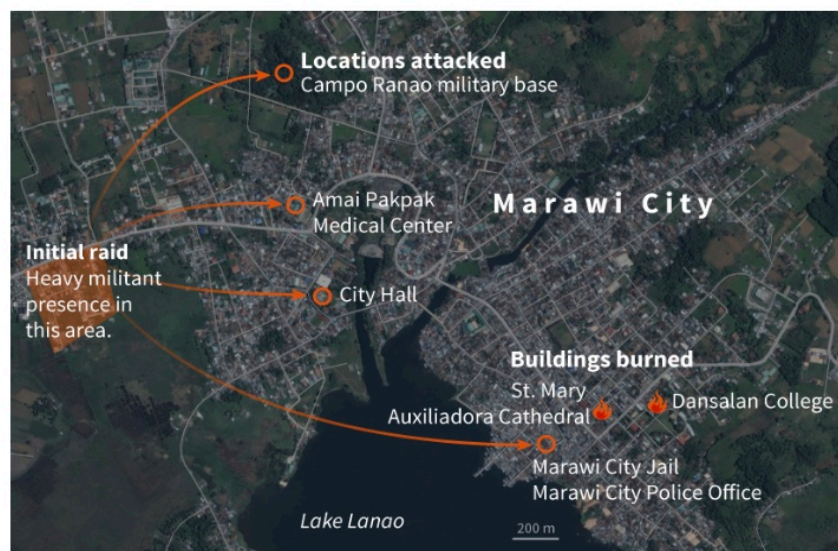


Figure 6. Map of IS-P Attacks on May 23, 2017.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Fonbuena, "Where the Marawi War Began."

¹⁷⁰ Robert Postings, "The Battle of Marawi: A Brief Summary," *International Review*, December 24, 2017, <https://international-review.org/battle-marawi-brief-summary/>.

¹⁷¹ Jason Hanna and Euan McKirdy, "Philippines: Duterte Declares Martial Law in Mindanao amid Clashes," *CNN*, May 24, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/23/asia/philippines-mindanao-clashes-martial-law/index.html>.

¹⁷² "Battle for Marawi," Reuters, accessed April 6, 2018, <http://fingfx.thomsonreuters.com/gfx/rngs/PHILIPPINES-ATTACK/010041F032X/index.html>.

The following day, on May 24, President Duterte suspended habeas corpus, and permitted warrantless arrests for the fighters responsible for the conflict.¹⁷³ Simultaneously, the military launched ground operations and air strikes against the insurgents.¹⁷⁴ Michael Bueza of *Rappler* reports that, one week after the siege began, government forces rescued hundreds of hostages, and arrested more than 100 insurgents, including the surrender of eight fighters.¹⁷⁵ AFP forces also recaptured parts of IS-P held territory in the city.¹⁷⁶ IS-P fighters, however, established strong defensive positions in Marawi City's financial district, and held civilian hostages, whom they used as human shields.¹⁷⁷

Fighting escalated in June.¹⁷⁸ IS-P effectively used snipers to defend their positions against government forces that were primarily trained to fight conventionally and in rural terrain. The insurgents also used improvised explosive devices, Molotov Cocktails, and dug holes and tunnels to dodge government air strikes. Throughout these initial confrontations, insurgents resisted the AFP offensive. The military failed to meet a June 2 and later a June 12 deadline set by the government to recapture the city.¹⁷⁹

Despite its initial successes, IS-P fell into infighting over money and disagreements over decision making. Simultaneously, the groups began to run short on

¹⁷³ Dharel Placido, "Duterte: Privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus Suspended in Mindanao," *ABS-CBN News*, May 24, 2017, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/news/05/24/17/duterte-privilege-of-the-writ-of-habeas-corpus-suspended-in-mindanao>.

¹⁷⁴ Roel Pareño, "Surgical Strikes Launched in Marawi," *Philstar*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/05/25/1703710/surgical-strikes-launched-marawi>.

¹⁷⁵ Michael Bueza, "Timeline: The 'Liberation' of Marawi," *Rappler*, October 25, 2017, <http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/185978-timeline-liberation-marawi-city>.

¹⁷⁶ Postings, "The Battle of Marawi."

¹⁷⁷ Carmela Fonbuena, "13 Marines Killed in Marawi's Bloody Friday," *Rappler*, June 10, 2017, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/172533-marines-bloody-friday>.

¹⁷⁸ Joseph Franco, "The Battle for Marawi: Urban Warfare Lessons for the AFP," *Security Reform Initiative*, (October 4, 2017), <http://www.securityreforminitiative.org/2017/10/04/battle-marawi-urban-warfare-lessons-afp/>.

¹⁷⁹ Frances Mangosing, "AFP Can't Meet June 2 Deadline to Completely Retake Marawi," *Inquirer.net*, June 2, 2017, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/902154/afp-cant-meet-june-2-deadline-to-completely-retake-marawi>.

ammunition and maneuver space as the AFP slowly gained ground in the city.¹⁸⁰ Some of the insurgents attempted to flee the city but were executed by their leaders.¹⁸¹ The AFP recaptured two strategic bridges, the Mapandi Bridge in July and the Bayabao Bridge in September, which further restricted IS-P's flow of resources for sustained operations.¹⁸²

Throughout the summer, air strikes and ground operations began to weaken the IS-P stronghold. On October 16, AFP forces located and killed Isnilon Hapilon and Omar Maute.¹⁸³ That same day, President Duterte declared Marawi City liberated from militant influence and, on October 23, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzo officially terminated combat operations in Marawi.¹⁸⁴

C. ANALYSIS OF THE BATTLE

The initial success of IS-P in holding the city, and their ability to conduct urban warfare and introduce new TTPs requires further analysis. This section focuses on three areas of IS-P in particular: the collaboration of the Maute Group, ASG, BIFF, and AKP to form IS-P, and the resources that ISIS provided to IS-P that enabled them to gain an initial advantage against the government troops; the new TTPs that IS-P adopted; and an analysis of ISIS claimed SIGACTs during the Siege of Marawai, using Visual Analytics.

1. IS-P Collaboration and ISIS Resources in the Battle of Marawi

Perhaps the most significant factor that led to IS-P's initial success in the Battle of Marawi was the new collaboration that ISIS facilitated between the preexisting groups in the region, which allowed them to overcome historical differences and work together. First, IS-P created an organizational structure that allowed it work together more efficiently. Its organization was similar to a military's task force where different units

¹⁸⁰ Dempsey Reyes, "Maute Losing Ground – AFP," *Manila Times Online*, June 27, 2017, <http://www.manilatimes.net/maute-losing-ground-afp/335067/>.

¹⁸¹ Reyes, "Maute Losing Ground."

¹⁸² "Marawi Crisis Enters 100th Day," *ABS-CBN News*, August 30, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WILF197t-RY>.

¹⁸³ "Timeline: The Battle for Marawi," *ABS-CBN News*, accessed April 22, 2018, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/news/10/17/17/timeline-the-battle-for-marawi>.

¹⁸⁴ Bueza, "Timeline."

form together to perform a specific task while still maintaining their independence from one another. For instance, the BIFF and AKP sent 40 fighters each, which was only a portion of their entire forces. Hapilon also brought along with him only 100 fighters and left most of his men in his Basilan base. These fighters augmented the Maute Group to form IS-P but they maintained their respective group identities. Like a task force where one unit takes the major role, the Maute Group was the lead force in IS-P's battle for Marawi. It had the preponderance of forces and the mastery of terrain because Marawi was its home base.

Yet, despite the Maute group's knowledge of the battle space, Hapilon of ASG was clearly the commander of IS-P. This is evident in a propaganda video recovered from the battlefield that shows Hapilon making the final decision on plans developed by the Maute brothers.¹⁸⁵ With Hapilon's final decision on a course of action, Abdullah Maute was seen directing the attendees, presumably sub-leaders, to seize their targets. Furthermore, the footage also indicates that the IS-P was well-organized with a structured chain of command. Finally, the fighters in the video were speaking Tagalog as a common language, which allowed for communication amongst the different groups that had their own dialects.

In addition to the collaboration of the groups under IS-P, ISIS also brought important resources to the Battle of Marawi. First, ISIS brought foreign fighters to the area. When the battle broke out in May 2017, ISIS media released a video encouraging its supporters to travel to the Philippines if they could not reach Iraq or Syria.¹⁸⁶ At the conclusion of the Marawi Siege, the bodies of at least 13 foreign fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Chechnya, Yemen, India, Morocco, and Turkey confirmed that foreign support now included actual participation in combat operations.¹⁸⁷ Prior to ISIS, ASG and BIFF had links with transnational groups, such as AQ and JI, but

¹⁸⁵ "Maute/ISIS Meeting & Surveillance Video Before They Attacked Marawi," YouTube Video, 5:36, June 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sfhpie5jn1E>.

¹⁸⁶ Richard Paddock, "In Indonesia and Philippines, Militants Find a Common Bond: ISIS," *New York Times*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/world/asia/indonesia-philippines-isis-jakarta-marawi.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Allard, "Ominous Signs of an Asian Hub for Islamic State in the Philippines."

the extent of support these terrorist organizations provided was limited to mostly training and funding.¹⁸⁸

In addition to providing foreign fighters, ISIS also helped fund the groups and provided social media outlets. Rambo Talabong of *Rappler* claims that IS-P received at least \$1.5 million from ISIS for the Marawi siege.¹⁸⁹ ISIS also assisted IS-P by providing social media platforms like Facebook, Telegram, and Twitter to circulate videos and communicate IS-P messages and other information.¹⁹⁰ TRAC assessed that IS-P may have been able to conduct the siege by themselves, but they would not have been as effective as they were in Marawi without these critical components of ISIS backing.¹⁹¹

2. New TTPs in the Battle of Marawi

IS-P's ability to defend urban terrain, combined with their employment of improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, and highly effective snipers, suggests that ISIS's support of the siege brought resources and new TTPs with foreign fighters that came to fight alongside IS-P. Several of these TTPs deserve further analysis.

First, IS-P made good use of urban terrain to fight AFP. A January 2018 AFP report titled "Operational Assessment on the Participation of Marine Operating Forces in the Joint Operations for the Liberation of Marawi City" describes how the enemy fighters maximized the battlefield terrain and actively employed their snipers in advantageous positions within the high-rise buildings throughout the city.¹⁹² The narrow alleyways between buildings effectively limited AFP troop movements, forcing them to navigate the city in single-file formations, making them vulnerable to these snipers. Snipers first located in a primary position. After engaging their targets, the fighters repositioned to

¹⁸⁸ Niksch, "Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation," *CRS Report for Congress*, n.d., CRS 4-5.

¹⁸⁹ Rambo Talabong, "PH Has Most ISIS-Claimed Attacks Outside Iraq, Syria – Report," *Rappler*, October 25, 2017, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/186299-philippines-country-most-isis-claimed-attacks-outside-iraq-syria-trac-marawi>.

¹⁹⁰ Talabong, "PH Has Most ISIS."

¹⁹¹ Talabong, "PH Has Most ISIS."

¹⁹² Charlie Domingo, *Operational Assessment on the Participation of Marine Operating Forces in the Joint Operations for the Liberation of Marawi City* (Taguig, Philippines: Philippine Marine Corps, January 22, 2018), 43.

alternate positions using tunnels. These locations are referred to as primary and alternate positions in Figure 7. The snipers then reengaged the troops, effectively paralyzing the AFP's progress.



Figure 7. Deployment of IS-P Snipers.¹⁹³

Although the military held a numerically superior force, it proved to be insignificant because the troops did not have adequate space to fire and maneuver. IS-P fighters also used civilians as human shields, which further constrained the AFP's ability to destroy the enemy.¹⁹⁴ AFP troops were forced to conduct house-to-house and building-to-building clearing operations that posed a significant threat to the forces due to effective preparations by the enemy and the difficulty of urban terrain.

¹⁹³ Domingo, *Operational Assessment*, 43.

¹⁹⁴ Carmela Fonbuena, "13 Marines Killed in Marawi's Bloody Friday."

IS-P's success in exploiting the urban environment is evident in the AFP's Operational Assessment Report of the June 9, 2017 ambush, when the Philippine Marines suffered 13 killed and 42 wounded.¹⁹⁵ While attempting to clear a building, the Marines applied their usual TTPs for a jungle and rural environment. IS-P targeted the Marines with rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, and improvised "incendiary bombs," resulting in heavy casualties.¹⁹⁶

3. ISIS Claimed SIGACTS in the Siege of Marawi

Throughout the summer of 2017, ISIS released reports of 103 SIGACTs in their siege of Marawi.¹⁹⁷ These specific IS-P claimed SIGACTs are part of a wider set of more than 200 ISIS attacks that took place from May to September 2017 outside of Iraq and Syria, including in Afghanistan, Egypt, Pakistan, and the Philippines. The SIGACTs were originally released through 99 messages spread across different social media outlets, primarily Telegram and Twitter, and span from May 21 to September 19.¹⁹⁸

TRAC Analysis compiled a specific list of SIGACTS from the Battle of Marawi. It notes that each incident represents "Islamic State operations that received actual printed claims—either Amaq News Agency communiques, or official statements under the Nashir Media House (official media outlet of the Islamic State)."¹⁹⁹ The SIGACTs include small arms, IEDs, sniper, and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG). The SIGACTs also include other types of activities such as kidnappings, destroying property, acts of intimidation, and freeing prisoners. In Figure 8, the SIGACTs have been compiled into categories. The 'Attacks (General)' category includes small arms attacks, RPG attacks, indirect fire (IDF), and ambushes. The 'Other' category includes the freeing of prisoners

¹⁹⁵ Charlie Domingo, *Operational Assessment*, 3.

¹⁹⁶ Charlie Domingo, *Operational Assessment*, 39.

¹⁹⁷ "TRAC Analysis: Summer 2017 Count Down Islamic State Claimed Attacks Outside Ash Sham - May-August 2017," Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, accessed December 5, 2017, <https://www.trackingterrorism.org/chatter/trac-analysis-summer-2017-count-down-islamic-state-claimed-attacks-outside-ash-sham-may-augu>.

¹⁹⁸ It is believed that the claims ended around this date because the AFP severed internet service to Marawi. The data set does not include ISIS reported SIGACTs after September 19, 2017.

¹⁹⁹ Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, "TRAC Analysis: Summer 2017."

and fratricide. TRAC further compiled the SIGACTs by one of three groups: IS-East Asia, BIFF, or the Maute Group, and the SIGACTs are identified as being in either Marawi, Cotobato and Maguindanao areas. The SIGACTs claim a total of 829 killed and 167 wounded from the AFP, along with the destruction of several AFP vehicles.

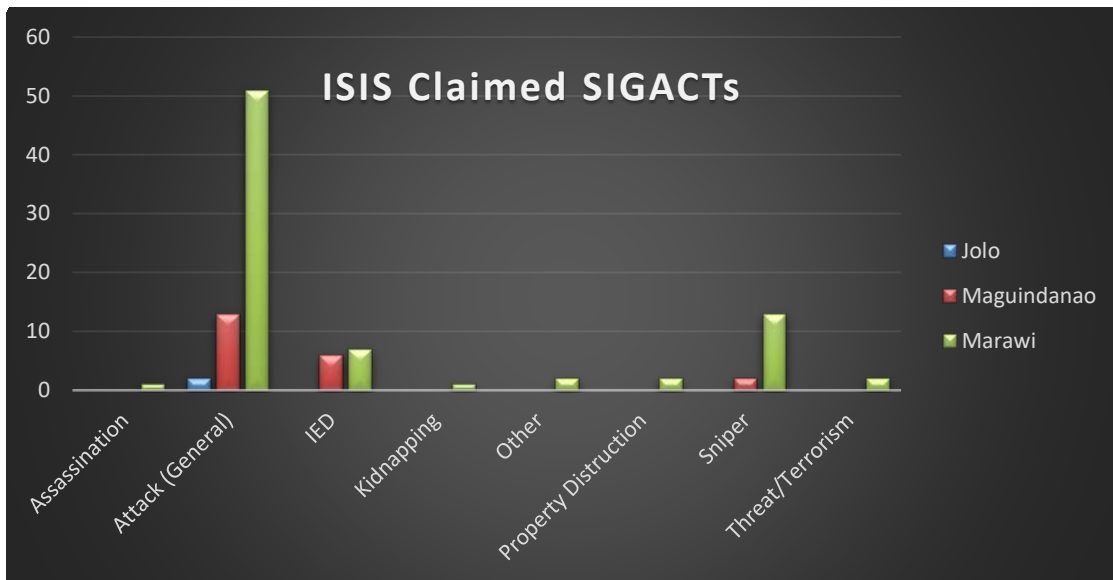


Figure 8. Count of ISIS Claimed SIGACTs by Location and Type.

Although there are a total of 103 activities claimed by ISIS in this data set, it is possible that ISIS only claimed credit for activities that benefited their narrative and degraded that of the AFP. Additionally, as the fighting continued throughout the summer and AFP forces regained ground in the city, ISIS media may have exaggerated their messaging to maintain the appearance of strength in the siege.

Figure 9 depicts locations where the SIGACTs took place, specifically in the main battle area of Marawi City, or in Cotobato and Maguindanao areas. The Maute Group is credited for the activities in Marawi, which was their home base along with the greater province of Lanao del Sur, while the BIFF claimed activities in their territories of Cotobato and Maguindanao.

Overall, these SIGACTs demonstrate how the bayat to ISIS allowed groups to work together in a coordinated effort that included both Marawi and the areas of Cotobato and Maguindanao.



Figure 9. Map of IS-P SIGACTs.

Although IS-P engaged AFP forces in other areas, the main battle area of Marawi is where the majority of fighting took place. The ASG and Maute Group fighters used this operating space to hold out against the AFP. This area was one of the more densely populated areas of the city, full of multi-story and multi-room buildings that provided adequate cover for the fighters. Figure 10 depicts the SIGACTs locations concentrated in the main battle area of Marawi City. The map combines all IS-P TTPs including small arms, sniper, and RPG attacks. This figure demonstrates how the ASG and Maute Group positioned their fighters along several main roadways in the city and employed a combination of attacks to slow the advance of the AFP.

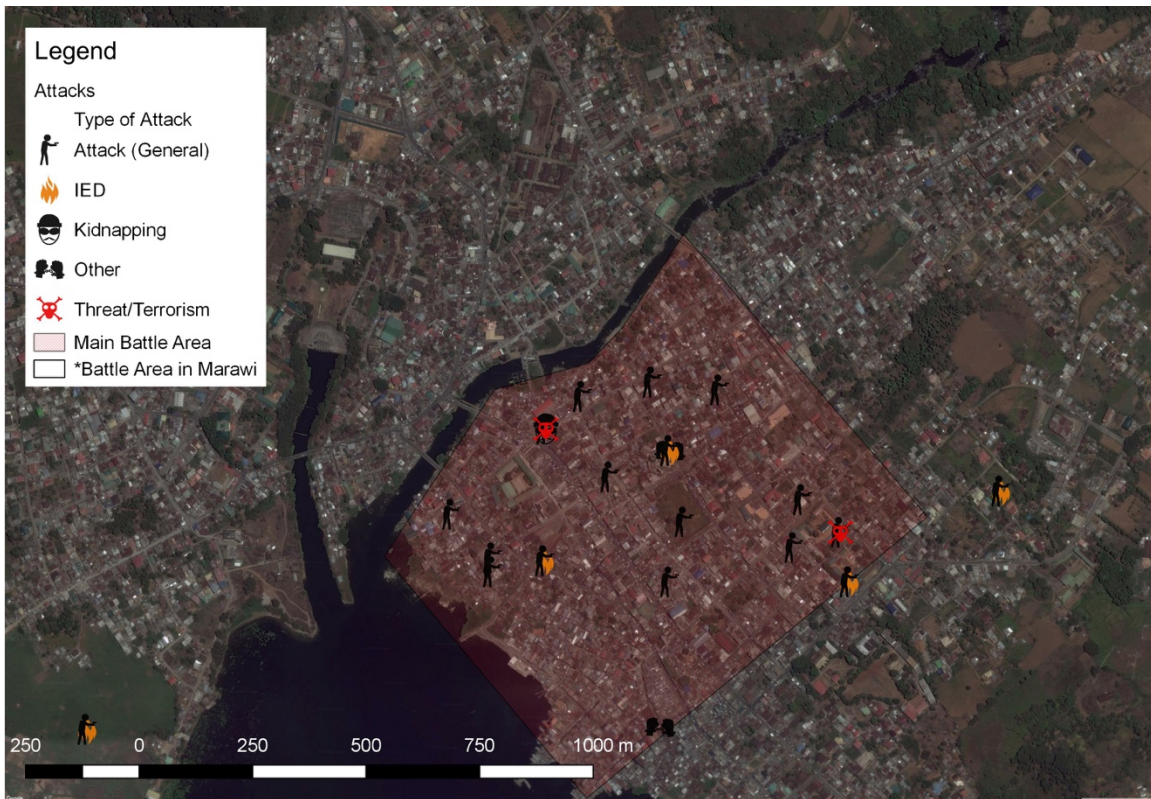


Figure 10. Map of SIGACTs over the Main Battle Area in Marawi City.

Overall, the collaborative efforts of ASG, Maute Group, BIFF, and AKP, combined with new TTPs, especially urban operations, along with foreign fighters and resources, brought a new level of fight to Mindanao that completely caught the AFP off guard.

D. CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the Battle of Marawi and analyzed how the different groups operated under the banner of IS-P. Significantly, the combined efforts of groups that were historic rivals, coupled with new TTPs and financial, materiel and personnel resources from ISIS made the Battle of Marawi fierce, and required months to put down. The battle ended with hundreds dead and the destruction of most of the city.

The next chapter offers summary remarks and proposes lessons learned from the creation of IS-P and the Battle of Marawi.

V. SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

A. SUMMARY

This thesis aimed to investigate the following questions: What were the conditions under which ISIS emerged in Mindanao? How did ISIS come to have such a strong and growing presence in Mindanao? And, what can the Philippine government and the United States learn from the Battle of Marawi and how to counter the presence of ISIS and other potential trans-national Islamist movements in the region? The thesis investigated these questions by using a mixture of qualitative methods and visual analytics to understand the emergence of ISIS in the Philippines.

The thesis explored these questions through three substantive chapters. Chapter II provided a historical overview of Mindanao stressing the core grievances that led to the formation of numerous insurgent groups opposed to the government. These groups existed for decades prior to the rise of ISIS in Mindanao and, together with these historic grievances, provided an opportunity for ISIS to gain a foothold in the region. Chapter III highlighted the near-term conditions that allowed for ISIS to emerge and take root in Mindanao. These conditions created a window of opportunity for already established Islamist groups to pledge the *bayat*—the oath of loyalty—to ISIS, and for ISIS to establish itself in the region. The chapter also used visual analytics to show where key groups that pledged allegiance operated in Mindanao, and how their alliance with ISIS allowed otherwise rival groups to begin to work together. Chapter IV provided an overview of the Battle of Marawi and analyzed how the different groups operated under the banner of IS-P, using visual analytics. This chapter also offered an analysis of IS-P's organization, ISIS support to IS-P, and new TTPs that were introduced in the battle. The chapter concluded with an analysis of ISIS-claimed SIGACTs throughout the battle.

This investigation found that the emergence of ISIS in Mindanao was deeply rooted in the historical development of the Philippines. Specifically, ISIS was able to build on grievances that traced back to 1565, when Spain colonized the Philippines and converted most Filipinos to the Catholic faith. Filipino Muslims in Mindanao, who did

not convert to Christianity, fought the Spaniards in what they believed was a defensive jihad to preserve the Islamic faith and to secure their freedom. When Spain lost the Philippines to the United States in 1898, it left behind a divided Christian and Muslim population.

The divide between Christians and Muslims heightened during the American occupation when some state policies, such as Christian migration to Mindanao and parceling land to Christian settlers, resulted in the socio-economic marginalization of the Filipino Muslims. When the Philippines gained independence in 1946, the government, run mostly by Christians, further alienated the Filipino Muslims. The 1968 Jabidah Massacre that resulted in the death of 38 Filipino Muslims gave rise to a full-blown Muslim independence movement. This separatist movement sparked the founding of several insurgent groups, including the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and, later, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Maute Group, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFF), and Ansar al-Khilafah Philippines (AKP). However, ethnic diversity and regional differences prevented these groups from working together towards a common goal of independence.

The rise of ISIS and its success in declaring the caliphate in Iraq and Syria changed dynamics between groups in Mindanao. Specifically, ISIS provided an overarching framework that allowed ASG, Maute Group, BIFF, and AKP to work together. Several events further facilitated the rise of ISIS in the region and made the alliance of ASG, Maute Group, BIFM, and AKP possible: the stalled Bangsamoro Basic Law, which was part of the peace negotiations between the MILF and the Government of the Philippines; the downplay of ISIS as a threat by two successive presidents; increased attention to the drug war at the expense of counterinsurgency in Mindanao; and the security vacuum left in the region following the dissolution of the Joint Special Operations Task Force – Philippines (JSOTF-P) in 2015. These overarching conditions allowed groups in the region to pledge their allegiance to ISIS and begin to work together relatively unobstructed.

The newly formed IS-P demonstrated its lethality in the Battle of Marawai. On May 23, 2017, the four groups that became known as IS-P, laid siege to the city in an

attempt to make it a caliphate in Southeast Asia. With the support and influence of ISIS, IS-P surprised government troops with urban warfare tactics and new levels of lethality. In the end, the Battle of Marawi lasted for five months and required government forces to destroy almost the entire city in order to defeat the offensive.

B. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

This analysis of the rise of IS-P in Mindanao yielded five key findings that may have wider implications for countering the spread of ISIS through its alliances with local groups.

1. ISIS Builds on Historical Grievances

The grievances in Mindanao were not new, but ISIS was able to capitalize on these grievances for their own agenda. The Muslims' struggle for independence, which began during the colonial period, was still prominent almost 500 years later and remains a core grievance of Muslims in the southern Philippines today. Different organizations representing the Muslim populace emerged beginning in the 1970s with the aim of fighting for independence, including through the use of Islamic ideology.

ISIS capitalized on these grievances for its own gains, and it leveraged these preexisting groups to gain a foothold in the region. While the goal of ISIS was to create a global caliphate, something that is at odds with local ambitions for independent statehood, ISIS was able to draw on common themes to form a bond between groups in Mindanao and with ISIS leadership. These themes include the threat posed by "Christian" governments, the need for shariah to be law of the land, and the importance of jihad for independence and cleansing "Muslim" lands of non-Muslims. These themes allowed preexisting groups in Mindanao to align under the banner of ISIS, to work together, and to gain new resources in their fight for independence.

2. ISIS Provides an Ideological Bridge between Rival Groups

Perhaps most important for Islamist insurgent groups in the region, ISIS was able to shore up groups that had historical differences and unite these groups under its banner. In the Philippine case, preexisting groups and ISIS formed an alliance; this alliance

allowed groups that were otherwise rivals to work together and to provide ISIS with seasoned fighters. Each insurgent group was organized, trained, equipped, experienced and well-structured. For these groups, ISIS presented an opportunity to gain more credibility to further their goals.

For ISIS, its goal of global expansion led to acceptance of the bayat pledged by these groups in Southeast Asia. The Philippines was a credible and useful affiliate mainly because of the existence of like-minded Muslim insurgent groups who fought for independence from a “Christian” government, and for their preexisting capabilities. By pledging the bayat, ASG, BIFF, Maute Group, and AKP were able to receive resources and support from ISIS that caught the AFP off guard.

3. ISIS Brings Important Resources to the Fight

Although groups in Mindanao were established and seasoned, ISIS brought important resources to the fight. Specifically, ISIS encouraged foreign fighters to come to Mindanao. At the conclusion of the Marawi siege, the bodies of at least 13 foreign fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Chechnya, Yemen, India, Morocco, and Turkey confirmed foreign fighter support for the battle. ISIS also provided financing. The groups that comprise IS-P received at least \$1.5 million from ISIS to help in their operations in Marawi. ISIS further assisted IS-P by providing social media platforms like Facebook, Telegram, and Twitter to circulate videos and communicate IS-P messages and other information. The groups in IS-P may have been able to conduct the siege by themselves; however, they would not have been as effective as they were in Marawi without these critical components of ISIS backing.

Critically, ISIS also brought new TTPs to the fight. ISIS facilitated IS-P to defend urban terrain, emplace sophisticated IEDs throughout the city, target AFP with complex attacks that included small arms and RPGs, and employ highly effective snipers. The capability of the IS-P fighters to move out of their traditional jungle settings and fight an urban battle was critical to their lethality and in holding Marawi for such a long duration.

4. IS-P Required a New Response

The Battle of Marawi offers wider implications for governments and regions fighting ISIS. The siege drew the AFP into a new form of fighting, urban warfare. Though the AFP had fought insurgent groups in the past, primarily using their jungle tactics, the combination of greater resources, new TTPs and foreign fighters engaging in urban combat forced AFP to develop new TTPs of their own to win the battle. The resistance posed by ASG, Maute Group, and the foreign fighters was a new level of combat for the AFP. These new TTPs allowed IS-P to gain initial successes before being defeated in Marawi, and allowed it to successfully hold the city for 154 days, costing approximately 165 AFP lives, 920 militant lives, and 47 civilian casualties. The fighting left almost the entire 200,000-person population displaced and the city in ruins.

Furthermore, the rise of ISIS in Mindanao was not only a concern for the Philippines but also for the entire region and required new policies to address this threat. The influx of foreign fighters and resources to Mindanao exposed the need for regional cooperation to combat any further spread of ISIS. For example, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines realized the need for a trilateral effort to secure their porous borders from being exploited by foreign fighters to move.²⁰⁰ Efforts to prevent the transfer of funds from ISIS to regional affiliates also requires the involvement of other international stakeholders. As the Government of the Philippines initially failed to appreciate the threat posed by ISIS, the recognition of the ISIS problem must be taken seriously throughout the region to avoid catastrophic losses like those seen in Marawi.

Lastly, although the United States had ended its JSOTF-P task force and concluded Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines, the rise of IS-P compelled the United States to reinstate its support through Operation Pacific Eagle – Philippines, which began in late 2017. This new Overseas Contingency Operation, OCO, provides funding and authorizations to offer advice and assistance to the Government of the

²⁰⁰ Francis Chan and Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, “Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines Launch Joint Operations in Sulu Sea to Tackle Terrorism, Transnational Crimes,” *Straits Times*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/indonesia-malaysia-and-philippines-launch-joint-operations-in-sulu-sea-to-tackle-terrorism>.

Philippines in combating the ISIS threat. However, this new task force is still struggling with a wider strategy for ending the presence of ISIS in the region.

5. Winning the Battle but Losing the War against ISIS

The Battle of Marawi exemplifies the proverbial statement ‘Won the battle, but lost the war.’ The AFP was successful in ending the siege; however, they did not eradicate the groups responsible for the devastation of the battle. The expulsion of IS-P insurgents from Marawi City following the death of IS-P leaders Isnilon Hapilon and Omar Maute was a tactical victory, but the massive amount of destruction that the military inflicted on the city could be a source for eventual strategic defeat. The almost entirely Muslim population of Marawi is now left with a city in ruins, which is likely to further build resentment in the population. Although the Philippine government is taking measures to rebuild the city, it may not be fast enough or in a way that wins the support of the population. The citizens of Marawi may be ripe for further exploitation from insurgent groups and possibly transnational Islamist movements promising independence from a “Christian” government.

Furthermore, the AFP was successful in eliminating two critical leaders, Isnilon Hapilon and Omar Maute; however, in November 2017, Sabahan Mohammad Amin Baco, an experienced Malaysian operative from Jemaah Islamiyah, assumed the role of ‘Emir.’²⁰¹ IS-P was still conducting lethal attacks in early 2018. In other words, despite the defeat of IS-P in the Battle of Marawi, the surviving Maute Group insurgents could still pose a significant threat.

In addition, the BIFF fighters and the majority of ASG fighters in Basilan have remained strong. With ISIS still in the background, these groups are capable of resurging. They could further exploit IS-P’s five-month stand in Marawi and the military’s destruction of the city as propaganda to draw potential insurgents whose recruiting pool includes children and family members of slain militants and innocent civilians, along

²⁰¹ Raul Dencel, “Malaysian Terrorist Is New ‘emir’ in South-East Asia, Says Philippine Police,” *Straits Times*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-terrorist-is-new-emir-in-south-east-asia-says-philippine-police>.

with dissatisfied citizens who were displaced from the fighting. The complex situation in Mindanao still poses a dangerous environment for the resurgence of IS-P elements.

C. CONCLUSION

The investigation of the conditions that led up to the emergence of IS-P in Mindanao and their successful siege of the city of Marawi in 2017, followed by the almost total destruction of the city by the AFP, demonstrates the dangers posed by transnational Islamist movements like ISIS that can shore up differences between preexisting groups and bring new resources and TTPs to the fight. Although the Government of the Philippines won the Battle of Marawi, it still faces the ongoing threat posed by these preexisting groups and ISIS more broadly.

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