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One Year After Marawi: Has The Threat Gone?

By Jasminder Singh

Synopsis

A year after the Marawi seizure by militants, the rest of Southeast Asia is still reeling from its implications. Islamic State militant groups in the Philippines are regrouping and engaging in clashes with government security forces. Is the long-term solution a political one?

Commentary

IN JUNE last year, the pro-Islamic State coalition of militant groups tried to replicate the capture of Mosul and Raqqa in Iraq and Syria by occupying the Muslim city of Marawi in southern Philippines. The Marawi seizure ended after five months, at great cost to lives, property and more importantly, the image of the Philippines' security forces.

A year later, the Philippines and the rest of Southeast Asia are still reeling from the consequences of the Marawi incident. Indeed, the question could be asked whether the threat is really gone. If not, could the long-term solution be a broader political one?

Regrouping With New Leaders

Despite the death of key pro-IS leaders such as Isnilon Hapilon and Omarkhayam Maute, many other pro-IS leaders are still at large. They include Abu Turaifie and Abu Dar who are believed to have taken over the mantle of IS leadership in the Philippines.

Even more significant has been the regrouping of IS-affiliated militants in the Philippines, concentrated in Jolo and Maguindanao in south Mindanao. The Abu Sayyaf Group's areas of influence, such as in Basilan, have been largely pacified.

Equally significant is the changing character of militant migration within the Philippines. Since the defeat of terrorist forces in Marawi, IS-associated militants have been undertaking a *hijrah* to Jolo and Maguindanao with some foreign terrorists joining them there.

The consequence of this new concentration and regrouping of militants is the emergence of new centres of terrorism in the country. The security situation there is likely to worsen in the face of the success of the Philippine Government and security apparatus in neutralising the pro-IS groups in Marawi; the lessons learnt from Marawi; and more importantly, the financial resources the terrorists acquired, strengthened by their desire for revenge.

Importance of Marawi Narrative

Prior to the Marawi Incident, Southeast Asian pro-IS militants tended to be motivated by narratives of IS successes in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria. While IS has lost most of its territories in Iraq and Syria, the Marawi narrative continues to be a powerful source of inspiration and pride for Filipino and Southeast Asian militants.

Marawi has become a powerful tool for recruitment for terrorist groups in the Philippines and even the rest of Southeast Asia. For those who lost family members and friends – more than 1000 people are believed to have died - anger with the security apparatus can act as a powerful source of recruitment to the IS militant cause.

For those fighters who survived the Marawi Incident, this can act as a powerful motivation to undertake revenge attacks on the Philippine security forces and those who supported the Philippine Government in ending the pro-IS control of the city. The future role of the children and widows of Marawi is something to look out for.

IS Presence Post-Marawi

Until their defeat, the five months of control of Marawi brought a huge largesse to the terrorists. While many of those who were involved in securing financial support for the Marawi operation are believed to be dead, such as Dr Mahmud Ahmad, many others are still alive.

In this case, the role of Abu Dar, the new Maute group leader, is important. There is also the illusive figure of Myrna Mabanza who is believed to have facilitated financial support for the Marawi operation from abroad. With this financial largesse still in the possession of the terrorists who survived Marawi, there is immense potential to fund future attacks and support militant groups in the Philippines.

The defeat of the Marawi capture by the pro-IS militants has not ended pro-IS operations in the region. Pro-IS groups have continued not only their presence but also their operations, including in the Philippines. For the Malay-speaking world, pro-IS groups have relaunched their online magazine, *Al-Fatihin*.

In addition to continued skirmishes in the Philippines, as has been reported by IS' mouthpiece, *An Naba*, Indonesia has borne the brunt of terrorist attacks affiliated with

IS. This was illustrated this month by a string of attacks on a mobile police headquarters in West Java to church bombings in Surabaya. This shows the continued IS threat to the region.

Post-Marawi Southeast Asia

An important question following the collapse of Mosul and Raqqa is the status of Southeast Asian foreign fighters in the Middle East. While Katibah Nusantara leader Bahrumsyah has been reportedly killed, the threat posed by Southeast Asians who have fought or been deported from Turkey back home remains.

For Southeast Asia, there are three groups of IS-linked operatives that need to be factored: first, those who were involved in military operations in the Middle East, having migrated to 'Islamic State' and lived there, absorbing not only the propaganda but its lifestyle; second, those who tried to go there but failed, namely, the deportees; and finally, those who were inspired by IS in the region.

One-year after Marawi, it is useful to review the situation and its implications to signpost the threat to come in the months and years ahead for the Southeast Asian region. Abu Sayyaf, which formed the core group behind the Marawi Incident, remains largely intact with many of its operatives reverting to kidnapping for financial support.

As long as the Philippine Government does not legally endorse the Bangsamoro Basic Law, Muslims in Mindanao will continue to distrust Manila, in turn, providing a ready supply of recruits to IS-affiliated militant groups.

As long as Marawi City is not rehabilitated and thousands of Muslim Filipinos remain lodged in refugee camps, the government stands to lose the battle of 'hearts and minds' to the militants. Additionally, the power of the social media continues to draw recruits and provide an alternative narrative of the 'evils' of the Philippine Government, while in turn, strengthening and legitimising militant groups in Philippines.

With the security situation worsening in the Philippine neighbourhood, including Malaysia and Indonesia where pro-IS militants continue to operate, the threat posed by pro-IS militants in the post-Marawi setting will thrive in the foreseeable future.

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