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Filipino Suicide Bombings: Breaching Another Threshold?

By Jasminder Singh

SYNOPSIS

Suicide attacks in the Southeast Asian region involving jihadist groups have been intermittent and low-scale with the exception of Indonesia over the last two decades. But the June 2019 suicide attack in Sulu, Philippines could affect the security landscape in the country and wider region.

COMMENTARY

ON 28 JUNE 2019, a suicide bombing that targeted an Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) military camp in Indanan town in Sulu province, Mindanao, marked the first known suicide bombing involving a Filipino Islamist terrorist in recent times.

The self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) group claimed the attack, which resulted in eight fatalities, including those of the suicide bombers, and a further 22 others injured, although the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) has been blamed by the government. The Philippine authorities later identified one of the two bombers as a Filipino national known as Norman Lasuca. Local media reports indicated that Lasuca, 23, had joined the ASG some seven years earlier. It is unknown if he was involved in other terrorist activities prior to the Sulu attack.

Suicide attacks the new modus operandi in the Philippines

During the Spanish and American occupations of the Philippines, the country's south was home to the *Mag-Sabil* warriors, who were known to execute kamikaze-style suicide attacks on colonial forces. While these warriors no longer exist, their legacy and historical importance cannot be ignored.

More recently, while jihadist-linked terrorism has taken root in the Philippines, this has largely been through non-suicide attacks. Since 2018, however, the Philippines has experienced three suicide bombings, two of which were perpetrated by foreigners. The first attack in July 2018 occurred in the southern Basilan island, while in January 2019, a Catholic cathedral in Jolo, Mindanao, was bombed.

Many analysts view the recent Sulu attack as a precursor to future suicide attacks involving local jihadi groups. In addition to a relatively sizeable pool of local militants appearing to be sufficiently radicalised to conduct such attacks, the June 2019 bombing also demonstrated the successful transfer of suicide bombing capabilities among jihadist groups operating in Muslim-dominated Mindanao.

The Philippine authorities have previously confirmed that up to seven foreign nationals are believed to have entered the country to train local operatives in suicide attacks since 2018. These trainers are said to be affiliated with either the ASG or Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), an offshoot of the largest militant group operating in the Southern Philippines, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

More to Come?

As various militant cells and groups vie for leadership of the jihadi movement in the country and recognition from foreign sponsors such as Al Qaeda and IS, more such attacks can be expected.

An important group in this regard is the ASG faction led by Hatib Sawajdaan, the father-in-law of Isnon Hapilon, the late Emir of the IS in Philippines and a key leader, who was killed in the 2017 Marawi siege. Hence, revenge attacks involving supporters and relatives of jihadists killed in Marawi could be a powerful incentive for suicide bombings in the coming years.

While, at an operational level, the Philippine government has largely ended the Marawi siege and successfully passed the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), a legislative mechanism that provides for the establishment of an autonomously-governed territory in Muslim Mindanao, its detractors are also likely to use every means to sabotage it. These include groups such as ASG and breakaway factions of the MILF, such as the BIFF, that consider the BOL a sellout to Manila by the MILF leaders.

One option the anti-BOL group has is to aggravate the security situation in the region covered by the BOL, including through the use of suicide bombings. Also, with the lack of opportunities to partake in jihadist activities in the Middle East, some local operatives, like Lasuca, the Sulu bomber, could be persuaded to undertake similar missions at home.

Regional Foreign Fighter Returnees

Over the last few years, several nationals from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore, are reported to have joined IS as foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and travelled to Syria and Iraq. Some also joined the pro-Al Qaeda group formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. In the immediate region, the 2017 Marawi siege also saw

the involvement of Southeast Asian FTFs, some of whom were killed. Others managed to escape and return home.

Following the collapse of IS' self-declared caliphate in Syria, regional authorities are bracing for the prospect of some FTFs seeking to return home. The battle field experience gained, training in weapon handling and access to overseas radical networks are factors that may enhance the possibility of suicide attacks involving some of these returnees in their respective countries or elsewhere in the region going forward.

To this effect, the Malaysian authorities have recently expressed their concern of FTF returnees undertaking suicide attacks. In the same vein, Indonesian authorities have confirmed that the Jolo church bombing in the Philippines was conducted by an Indonesian couple who were previously arrested for attempting to travel to Syria.

Security Outlook

While Indonesian jihadists were pioneers of suicide bombings in the region, since 2014 in the context of IS' rise, there have been Malaysian suicide bombers in Iraq and Syria. For Southeast Asians who have fought in the Middle East, either for IS or pro-AQ groups, suicide attacks may in future be a weapon of choice, as was demonstrated by Lasuca, the Filipino bomber.

There is also the danger of many of them who could not make their way to the Middle East conflict theatre, deciding to undertake martyrdom missions in their home states in Southeast Asia.

Many factors are involved in the transformation of an individual into a suicide bomber. The role of IS' violent ideology in inspiring such attacks is pertinent. Suicide attacks are also cost-effective, with only one or two attackers needed to inflict large casualties, and are also difficult to pre-empt. Additionally, they have a shock factor, are high profile, inspire new recruits and create competition among terrorist groups in the country.

With such groups setting their sights on turning the region into the next security hotspot, as well as the prospect of several hundred Southeast Asian fighters possibly seeking to return home in the near future, policy makers are likely to anticipate similar attacks in the region.

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