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The Siege of Marawi City: Some Lessons

By Jasminder Singh & Muhammad Haziq Jani

Synopsis

As the Western Mindanao Command (Westmincom) closes in on the dwindling number of IS militants in Marawi, various terrorist tactics learned from the wars in Iraq and Syria are being replicated to worsen the conflict in southern Philippines and spread IS influence in the region.

Commentary

THE ARMED Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has managed to recapture most of Marawi back from the Maute Group and its acolytes despite the military's lack of familiarity with urban warfare and the terrain. Westmincom has made "great advances" addressing the "complicated" issues on the ground even though it missed the deadline for retaking Marawi fully or wiping out terrorism from Mindanao by June 2017.

However, for the Maute Group and other terrorist groups in Mindanao, the eventual loss of Marawi will not be so much of a setback as the beginning of bolder military moves to capture territory, even if briefly, to demonstrate their fighting capability and rally support for the so-called Islamic State (IS) in the region, especially in the wake of IS military defeats in Iraq and Syria.

IS Tactics in the Philippines

Terrorists like the Mautes have different conceptions of victory from professional militaries. The commander of Westmincom measures success in terms of enemy casualties, dwindling enemy resistance, troop advancements and lands recaptured. IS strategists behind the Marawi attack, on the other hand, view success in contrasting terms:

They aim to turn the residents of Marawi against the military, the government, and countrymen; expose the state's inability to protect its citizens; and slowly weaken the state's resolve to secure its peripheral territories.

To achieve these objectives, what has come to be known as IS in the Philippines (ISP) strive to ensnare the military in a prolonged battle, and create a humanitarian crisis with evacuations and displacement of people.

Drawing the Military into Urban Warfare

The Mautes' strategy involves two prongs. Firstly, instead of fighting in the jungles and hills, ISP drew the military into an urban environment which they had prepared for in advance. As they engaged the military, ISP pulled deeper into Marawi. Although they had ceded the advantage to the military which have encircled them, this made fighting the terrorists much harder and forced the military into bombing houses to clear sniping positions and tunnelled strongholds.

The terrorists obviously hope that the security forces would be blamed for the resultant destruction; indeed, much of Marawi has been devastated and the fallout will transpire when the evacuees return.

Secondly, as the defence positions of the Mautes become more compact, the Mautes have resorted to the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) within buildings. Every surviving building has to be cleared by the military, and the Mautes, learning from IS in Syria and Iraq, have turned this to their advantage. As a result, the closer the military gets to a victory, the bloodier the battlefield becomes.

The tactic slowly whittles away at the numerical advantage the Westmincom has until the next siege. In addition, the tactic also targets the morale of the soldiers and their families and communities. Hostages add pressure on the military which is forced to clear houses systematically, enhancing the terrorists' advantage of time.

Game-changer: "Suicidal" Attacks

Thirdly, the Mautes resort to "suicidal" attacks, charging out into clusters of soldiers in order to lob grenades, even if they may lose their lives. Such attacks are termed as *istishhad* (Arabic: martyrdom operations). They are viewed as heroic acts, to gain another narrative advantage against a powerful enemy. The person who carries out such an act will be celebrated by terrorists and their supporters as *shahid* or a martyr.

Istishhad also encompasses suicide bombing, which was suspected to have happened on 13 August 2017 in Marawi City. If confirmed, it would be the first known suicide attack in the Philippines. On 22 July 2017, the Commander of the Western Mindanao Command, Lt. Gen. Carlito Galves had predicted that the terrorists in Marawi City were planning to conduct suicide bombings inside and outside the city.

Should suicide bombing become a trend, it would signal a game-changer not just in the battle for Marawi, where it would certainly delay military victory, but also for terrorism in Mindanao. Continued suicide bombings in Marawi and elsewhere could

demoralise the troops, terrorise the population, create further instability in the state and delegitimise the political leaders.

For IS's strategists, these human 'smart bombs' are cheap, use low-technology, require little training and are difficult to stop. Such bombs can also reach their targets with ease. They also easily compensate for the asymmetry of a powerful enemy and can have the desired negative and disastrous psychological impact on the enemy and its population.

The Marawi Narrative

Lastly, to further complicate hostage rescue and terrorise the society, it was revealed that the Mautes were also considering using hostages not just as human shields but also as suicide human bombs against the military. Former hostages said that the terrorists planned to strap explosive devices on the non-combatants.

While this could be seen as an act of desperation, this tactical innovation, if implemented, would draw out the conflict much longer and make it increasingly bitter for the non-Muslims in Mindanao and the rest of the Philippines. IS's anti-Christian tactics in Marawi – holding them hostage, executing them, destroying their places of worship and schools, and distributing videos of their atrocities – were obviously meant to provoke Christians and sow inter-religious discord, while at the same time win support from extremists.

When the military finally retakes Marawi from the Mautes, it would be necessary to assess the impact of the battle on the security forces, the government, its residents, the Philippine society as well as the region. A military victory in Marawi alone would not ensure the return of peace, security and stability in Mindanao. More needs to be done to neutralise the militants and address the factors that have allowed them to grow into a political and military menace.

IS-aligned terrorists in the region have learnt from their advisers in the Middle East that small numbers are capable of causing considerable physical and social damage, especially when they are committed, even suicidal, to their cause. Marawi may well herald the start of a new IS approach to capture territory opportunistically, sow inter-religious discord and create a volatile environment that would draw fighters from the region and beyond.

Jasminder Singh is a Senior Analyst and Muhammad Haziq Jani a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg