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‘Liberation’ of Marawi: Implications for Southeast Asia

By Jasminder Singh

Synopsis

Does the liberation of Marawi spell the end of the jihadi threat in Mindanao? Or will the death of the leaders of the pro-ISIS group be a spur for the struggle to establish an Islamic State in the Philippines?

Commentary

ON 17 OCTOBER 2017, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared that Marawi City has been “liberated”, marking the start of its rehabilitation. This followed news of the death of Isnilon Hapilon @ Abu Abdullah al-Filipini and Omar Maute, the pro-ISIS leaders who led the ‘jihadi’ group in the struggle for the establishment of an Islamic State in Mindanao.

This goal was to be achieved, first by fighting through their respective groups and later as part of a pro-ISIS coalition. Does the death of these two leaders mean the end of the jihadi struggle in the Philippines, and the broader ISIS struggle in Southeast Asia as a whole?

Other Jihadi Leaders Remain

Though the deaths of Hapilon and Omar are significant, there are still many other key ‘jihadi’ leaders in Mindanao. A key question is – where is Abu Abdillah al Muhajir, the purported leader of the East Asia Wilayah? Very little is known about him although he has been photographed with Hapilon and others in online publications. Similarly, the whereabouts of Hapilon and Omar’s key confidant, Malaysian Dr. Mahmud Ahmad alias Abu Handzalah, remain unknown.

There are also many foreign fighters, including Amin Bacho from Malaysia, who are still active. This would mean that the 'jihadi' threat is likely to continue with these leaders likely to take over the mantle of leadership of the 'jihadi' movement in south Philippines.

The deaths of Hapilon and Omar have not ended the four-month old Marawi siege. While the morale of the existing fighters will suffer somewhat, it is also likely to inspire the jihadists to fight to their deaths. Already, Hapilon and Omar are being referred to as syahids or martyrs who can be expected to inspire more jihadists to join the cause of the groups Hapilon and Omar represented, and ISIS in general.

Philippine Jihadism Post-Hapilon

The jihadi struggle is unlikely to end with the deaths of Hapilon and Omar, just as jihadism has continued despite the deaths of many previous commanders and leaders of various 'jihadi' and militant groups like Mohammad Jaafar Maguid of the Ansarul Khilafah Philippines and Khaddafy Janjalani of the Abu Sayyaf Group. This is also the case of Al Qaeda in Iraq (e.g. the death of Abu Musab Zarqawi in 2006), the Taliban in Afghanistan (Mullah Umar in 2013) as well as Al-Qaeda (Osama bin Laden in 2011).

Already, ISIS is setting the next stage of struggle by calling for the establishment of an Islamic State in the Philippines rather than just a province as in the past. This was shared by ISIS via its supporters on social media. With ISIS likely to be defeated in Syria soon, the call for hijrah or migration to the Philippines is likely to be stepped up; the possibility of Southeast Asians and other jihadists answering the call for hijrah to the Philippines cannot be ruled out. In short, the ISIS narrative of Marawi remains in place and is likely to be continued and reinforced.

In view of the Marawi experience, jihadists in Southeast Asia are already talking of training the next generation of mujahidins in the region. As a pro-ISIS posting warned, "Marawi is just the beginning" and "new cubs and soldiers" will be trained to fight the "crusader forces". The Marawi experience is seen as part of the jihadists' laboratory to enhance their coming struggle. From this perspective, the survivors of the Marawi siege are likely to continue the struggle in the Philippines and in all probability, the scale of violence may increase markedly.

From the Southeast Asian perspective, the jihadists are likely to eulogise Hapilon and Omar as special martyrs. The fact that Hapilon and Omar died fighting in Marawi will be seen as especially important from the 'jihadi' standpoint as they are being described as martyrs who died for the cause of Islam while fighting against the 'Crusader Army'. The next 'jihadi' leader in the Philippines will be a (battled-hardened individual as such as person has to fill the footsteps left by Hapilon and Omar.

Future Concerns

Going forward, the Philippines government will need to rebuild Marawi City and address the challenging issues faced by thousands of displaced people of Marawi.

This would also include the hundreds of people who fought alongside Hapilon and Omar, and relatives of the dead and injured.

Local 'jihadists' will exploit the resentment of displaced Marawians and those seeking to avenge the death of their relatives. More also needs to be done to ensure that foreign terrorists do not enter the Philippines (or the rest of Southeast Asia) to rebuild and reinvigorate the defeated and demoralized groups.

The militants' brief occupation of Marawi should also spur the authorities in the Philippines into taking resolute action against all the remnant militant groups in Mindanao and its nearby islands; there should be no let up now that the authorities have the upper hand and the militants are on the defensive.

More than that, they also have to act quickly to resolve the outstanding issues that have allowed Islamist militant groups to proliferate and draw supporters to their cause. Failure to address long-standing ground grievances will not only enable militant groups to survive, it can also lead to another 'Marawi'.

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