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## **Basilan Island Suicide Attack: IS Tapping into ASG's Strength?**

*By Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff*

### **Synopsis**

*The recent suicide bombing in Lamitan City in Basilan Island and attack on a military base in Sulu Island in Southern Philippines highlight the persistent security threat posed by Islamic State (IS) in this region. The incidents show that with the right alliances, IS will be able to entrench its position in the region for a long time.*

### **Commentary**

ON 31 JULY 2018, a few days after the passing of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), creating the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, a military checkpoint in Basilan was struck by a suicide attack killing at least 11 people. The attack was immediately claimed by Islamic State (IS) as a "martyrdom operation". This claim was subsequently dismissed by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), who attributed the attack to Furuji Indama, a notorious leader from the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

More than a week later, on 9 August 2018, IS would lay claim to another attack in the Southern Philippines that involved launching mortar shells on a military base in Sulu island. These attacks in Sulu and Basilan highlight the on-going threat that the Philippines is facing from IS in the post-Marawi era. The local jihadist groups are supported by foreign fighters and groups. Collectively, they support IS' aim to establish a pseudo-Islamic state in the region.

### **Tapping into ASG**

The IS maintains a presence in the Philippines through links with several local militant and jihadist groups such as the Maute Brothers group (also known as IS Lanao),

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Ansar Khilafah Philippines and the Abu Sayyaf group (ASG).

The ASG has existed since the early 1990s and has overcome the deaths of key leaders to remain active. ASG has been able to retain a substantial presence and operational capability through the years by forming strategic partnerships with other jihadist and militant groups in the Southern Philippines. These groups are aligned by their mutual aim to establish an independent Islamic state. This has kept alive IS' influence in the region.

Presently, the threat groups, are divided into two major factions: the IS-linked faction and the Sulu-based faction. The IS-linked faction is based in Basilan, which was the stronghold of former IS regional operative Isnilon Hapilon, who died last year in Marawi. During the Marawi siege, the Hapilon faction was heavily involved in the military operation. Another Basilan-ASG faction is led by Furuji Indama, who was not involved in Marawi.

The partnership between ASG and IS is unique as the ASG has maintained its localised structure, outlook and objectives despite supporting IS' vision of a global caliphate. This localisation, despite its global links, is vital for the group to retain ground support as it is situated within deeply divided communities that are run along family or clan lines. However, ASG still needs IS to give credence to its objective of establishing an independent Islamic state and to be able to expand and recruit through IS' large networks.

Conversely, IS relies on the strength and resilience of ASG to advance its influence in the region. The densely forested islands of Basilan and Sulu have proved ideal for ASG to launch attacks as well as act as hideouts. The ASG has also proven its resilience by surviving repeated military offensives for more than three decades. The ability to access ASG's vast local and global jihadi networks, makes the ASG a perfect partner for IS in the Philippines.

### **Continued Threat from Foreign Fighters**

The ASG has been providing safe haven to foreign fighters since being associated with Al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in the 1980s. Thus, it is not surprising that IS' foreign fighters who were unable to return to their home countries after being forced out of Syria and Iraq, subsequently appeared in the Southern Philippines. Though their numbers may not be large, the presence of foreign fighters is having an impact on the overall jihadist landscape in the Southeast Asian region.

The ASG, for example, has received training in bomb-making and handling of sophisticated weapons from foreign militants. The recent suicide attack in Basilan involving a Moroccan suicide bomber suggests foreign fighters or returnees from Syria and Iraq are now involving themselves in conflicts elsewhere in the world where pro-IS groups operate. These foreign operatives are not only trainers, but are also involved in executing and carrying out attacks.

### **Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) versus Islamic Law**

The passing of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) by the Philippines government in July 2018 created an autonomously-governed region for Muslim majority areas in Mindanao. But this has not stopped jihadists in the south of the country from continuing to pursue their goal of an independent Islamic state.

The BBL is important for long term peace prospects in the Philippines, and bring to an end the armed rebellion in the resource-rich Mindanao. Through the law, the Duterte government is trying to address grievances among the Muslim population, by empowering local Muslims politically and economically. The BBL guarantees self-governance and the flow of development funds to the region to stimulate economic growth.

However, jihadists view the BBL as not being divinely mandated vis-à-vis the caliphate and Islamic law. They continue to pursue the idea of an independent Islamic state that upholds sharia law, including hudud laws, among others. This ideology is also conflated with the skewed ideology of transnational jihadists and the brutal operational tactics, which is the hallmark of IS.

The idea of establishing an Islamic Caliphate will continue to permeate societies in this region. IS has been effective in articulating a utopian and apocalyptic vision of an alternative society of the future and has gained support for the idea via its propaganda and messaging.

### **Moving Forward**

Given the inadequate ability of the Philippine government to address the jihadist challenge, including the failure to stop the movement of IS foreign fighters from entering the country as well as IS' ideological influence, violence is likely to persist, if not intensify. More claims of attacks by IS can be expected in future.

At the same time, while these attacks have so far taken place in the Philippines, neighbouring Malaysia, Indonesia and even Singapore will continue to remain vigilant and ensure that their citizens do not support or participate in them.

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