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2019 Jolo Bombing: Bid to Derail BOL Peace Deal?

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SYNOPSIS

The 27 January attack by the Abu Sayyaf Group on a Catholic church in Jolo seemed to signal that not all groups in the southern Philippines support the Bangsamoro Organic Law peace deal.

COMMENTARY

PEACE DEAL or not in Mindanao, the Jolo attack of 27 January 2019 on a Catholic church came some 25 months after the Marawi siege, sending a clear sign that the southern Philippines will remain a zone of conflict and violence for some time to come. With a long and protracted history of violence, often seen in binary Christian-Muslim antagonisms, the issue of perceived Muslim marginalisation is unlikely to dissipate.

This is all the more as Marawi, despite massive inflows of international assistance, remains a wrecked city with thousands of displaced people still living in camps. This may provide demonstrable evidence of neglect by the Christian-dominated Philippines authorities, leading to a possible pipeline of ready-made recruits for the jihadi groups.

Post-Marawi Attacks

While the Philippines' security forces had successfully ended the Marawi siege, the threat posed by Islamist jihadists has not been eliminated. This was evident by reports of regrouping by the jihadists in Mindanao, especially in Jolo, Basilan and other strongholds of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and its breakaway factions, including the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) led by Abu Turaifie.

While the Islamist terrorists' key preoccupation was on regrouping after the Marawi setback, jihadi attacks have continued such as that by the ASG in Lamitan City in July

2018 and the BIFF in Cotabato in August and September 2018. While the ASG and BIFF are regarded as the key threats, there are also other ASG splinters which pose a security challenge, such as the Tanum group under Hatib Sawadjaan. The latter is the father-in-law of Amin Baco who was involved in the Marawi siege.

Another group which has attracted security notice is a key Tanum sub-unit, the Ajang-Ajang group, with many members whose relatives have been killed by the security forces. Small but dangerous, the Ajang-Ajang group has been involved in robberies and kidnappings. Its leader, Surakah Ingog, was killed by security forces in August 2018.

Both the Tanum and Ajang-Ajang groups have been active in criminal activities in the Jolo region, are violent, and include foreign fighters in their ranks.

January 2019 Jolo Bombings

A twin-bombing occurred on 27 January 2019 at a Catholic cathedral in Muslim-majority Jolo city, Sulu, during mass, killing 20 and injuring more than 80. Seven of those killed were members of the security forces. The high alert maintained by security forces prior to the attack, partly due to martial law imposed since May 2017, indicated that there was high expectation of a possible bombing, later confirmed by police reports.

The IS had claimed responsibility for the attack, stating that two suicide bombers undertook the mission of 'martyrdom'. Initially, the Philippines police had claimed that closed-circuit television cameras showed images of Alias Kamah, the brother of Surakah Ingog, being at the church prior to the bombing even though this was challenged by others.

The latest claim by the authorities is that this was a suicide bombing conducted by an Indonesian couple. However, this has been disputed by the Indonesian government on the basis that there was no credible evidence backing the claim.

Probable Motivations and BOL

While the guessing game remains, there were always fears that ASG elements, especially the Ajang-Ajang faction, would undertake revenge killing, partly to retaliate against the death of Surakah Ingog. As the security forces have been hunting Ajang-Ajang elements, the attack could have been a retaliation against the security apparatus, and to avenge the large-scale deaths of ASG fighters at Marawi.

The Jolo attack could also be linked strategically to IS' defiant response to its current predicament. Despite suffering serious setbacks in Iraq and Syria, IS has continued to claim that its fighters are active and on the offensive in the Philippines, as they are elsewhere in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and parts of Africa and the Middle East.

In this light, the Jolo attacks could well be a major surge by the ASG to signal that the group is alive and combat-active despite losing key leaders such as Isnilon Hapilon and Amin Baco as well as hundreds of fighters.

Finally, the key event that could have triggered the attack was the recent referendum in Muslim-majority Mindanao for greater self-rule and autonomy, known as the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL). Interestingly, the ASG and its breakaway factions have opposed the vote. In the self-rule vote, Sulu was the only province that voted against it by a margin of 54% to 46%. A successful vote for the BOL would have meant demobilisation of weapons and neutralisation of terror groups such as the ASG and its various sub-groups.

The Jolo attack could be to punish the Christians who were believed to have supported the peace deal, with the church violence being a targeted warning to others of what to expect if the peace deal is carried out. In short, the victory vote for self-rule could augur trouble and more attacks in future, especially if the MILF-led local government implements the deal in cooperation with Manila and the security forces.

Ramifications of Attack

While not all jihadi groups in southern Philippines are pro-IS, the continued military operations against all jihadi groups will provide IS with a much-needed theatre to operate in the region. This has added ramifications for the region given the connections between jihadists from Malaysia and Indonesia with terror groups in the Philippines, especially the ASG.

Whether any foreign fighters were involved remains to be confirmed but the professional use of IEDs, especially the two-phase attack in Jolo, may well signal foreign involvement in the attack. Despite their failure in Marawi, the overall mission of the jihadists has endured, possibly aided by skilled foreign fighters.

This is all the more plausible as the whereabouts of many Southeast Asian returnees remain unknown. Many could well infiltrate into southern Philippines to join existing terrorist groups, especially with pro-IS groups, to aggravate the security threat in the region.

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