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The 2017 Marawi Attacks: Implications for Regional Security

By Jasminder Singh

Synopsis

The attacks in Marawi are unprecedented in the length of time terrorists have laid siege on an urban area in the region. Marawi City in Mindanao, southern Philippines has been a warzone. The situation would have been far worse had President Duterte not acted resolutely to place the city under martial law.

Commentary

THE MINDANAO region in the southern Philippines has suffered repeated attacks from various groups operating in the region over the years. Yet unlike other terrorist attacks, the present one in Marawi will have serious and far-reaching implications, not just for the Philippines, but also for the entire region.

The attempt to take over Marawi City represents a major game changer as this is the first time groups affiliated with Islamic State (IS) pursue their doctrine of *qital tamkin* - - armed struggle aimed at seizing territories wherein Islamic law is applied – in an urban environment in this part of the world. The fact that the key groups and their leaders have been working beyond the Philippines as soldiers of the Khilafah of East Asia, adds significance to the Marawi City attack.

Whole-of-Terrorist Network

There has been chatter on social media that the East Asia Wilayah includes Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Southern Thailand, Myanmar and Japan and that the citizens of these nations will live under the rule of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi which includes the payment of *jizyah* or tax to Islamic State. Linked to the

holding of territory is the significance of the modus operandi of the Marawi City attack.

The IS-led and inspired coalition under Hapilon and the Maute brothers is able to operate as a whole-of-terrorist group. It included a terrorist grouping of various nationalities from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and possibly Chinese Uighurs, Arabs and Africans.

The whole-of-terrorist network demonstrates the existence of close cooperation between jihadists from Southeast Asia, including the revival of old networks, especially that of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). It highlights the extreme vulnerability of the tri-border region of Southern Philippines, East Malaysia and eastern Indonesia to terrorism in the region.

The multinational presence of terrorists in the Mindanao region is also a reflection of the difficulties jihadists are facing in travelling to Syria and Iraq due to the attacks against IS, and why many are volunteering to participate in regional jihadi flashpoints such as in Marawi City.

IS' Regional Offensive

An important takeaway from the Marawi City attack is the increasingly regional offensive that IS' affiliates are launching in Southeast Asia. From a strategic perspective, the region is being targeted as it constitutes a reservoir of Sunni Muslims. Indonesia, for example, has the largest Muslim population in the world and as the Indonesian military notes matter-of-factly, there are IS cells in nearly all provinces.

This is especially critical for IS at a time when it is decentralising its operations in the face of renewed attacks against its forces in the Middle East. Beyond the pursuit of IS' style of jihadism in the Philippines, there is now the regionalisation of IS in Southeast Asia.

What is going on in Marawi City is something that analysts have been warning in earnest in the past year. The Marawi attacks are likely to motivate other groups to adopt the IS 'business model' of attacking government forces and occupying cities in the region.

Such attacks are likely to prove very costly to the region. They would increase instability, increase sectarianism, negatively affect economic growth and create a negative image for the region. For the terrorists, however, this is a positive zero-sum game to win more recruits, publicity, resources and possibly territory.

Many analysts and media outlets have been referring to Isnlon Hapilon or Abu Abdullah al-Filibini as the leader of IS in the Philippines. The latest edition of the IS magazine *Rumiyah* raises questions on the matter. In it, the Emir of East Asia is identified as one Abu Abdillah Al-Muhajir.

The signification 'Muhajir' when applied to the name typically refers to individuals from Malaysia and Indonesia who have joined IS affiliates in the Philippines.

Whether Abu Abdullah al-Filibini and Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir are the same person is, for now, an open question.

Possible Counter-Measures

Much remains to be done to make the ground infertile for extremism and terrorism in the region. If this siege is not brought to a decisive end soon, it will lead to jihadist ideologues framing religious arguments in their favour. This will result in a long-term threat to the region.

While de-radicalisation and counter-ideology measures are important long-term measures, the short-term measures are critical in neutralising the terrorist threat. To prevent capture of cities and territories by terrorists, a whole-of-government and a whole-of-society approach is imperative.

Through Operation Tinombala, Indonesia demonstrated that it was possible to neutralise terrorist networks through close cooperation among military, police and intelligence agencies. As terrorists have mastered the art of urban warfare, there is a need for counter-terrorist agencies to acquire urban warfare tactics.

Their being adept at urban warfare has been displayed in the widely circulated video of Isnilon Hapilon and the Maute brothers planning the Marawi siege. Beyond collaboration, there is a need for the police and military to cross-train to completely acquire and master the tradecraft and skills of urban warfare in its various dimensions.

For Southeast Asia, while there is much concern about returnees from Iraq and Syria, with the Marawi attack, there is also the need to be concerned with returnees from the southern Philippines who have experienced a new type of jihad.

As many non-Philippines Southeast Asian jihadists were involved in the Marawi attack, greater regional cooperation would be imperative to defeat the threat of terrorism in the region. The announcement on 13 June that joint patrols in the Sulu Sea will begin within a week displays the seriousness with which governments are approaching the issue.

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