

The Marawi Siege and Its Aftermath

The Marawi Siege and Its Aftermath:

The Continuing Terrorist Threat

Edited by

Rommel C. Banlaoi

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For my loving and caring wife Grace,
and children
Rome Melchizedek (Zed),
Ronaiah Gail (Zoe), and
Rommel Gian (Zac)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Contributors.....	xiii
Introduction	1
Chapter One.....	5
The “East Asia Wilayah” of ISIS and the Marawi City Siege: A Long Time in the Making <i>Kumar Ramakrishna</i>	
Chapter Two.....	47
The Abu Sayyaf Group’s Persistence and the Marawi City Siege: A Chronological Analysis of the Crime-Terror Nexus in the Philippines and the ISIS Connection in Southeast Asia <i>Rommel Banlaoi</i>	
Chapter Three.....	73
Financing Terrorism: Following the Money Trail in the Marawi City Siege <i>Amparo Pamela Fabe</i>	
Chapter Four.....	89
Dreams, Hopes, and the Future: Trauma Counselling and Human Capacity Building Among the Maranaw Muslim Women and Children of the Marawi City Siege <i>Amparo Pamela H. Fabe</i>	
Chapter Five.....	105
ISIS Threats After Marawi Liberation: Continuing Terrorist Threats and Emerging Security Challenges of Violent Extremism in the Philippines <i>Rommel Banlaoi</i>	
Bibliography.....	127

FOREWORD

Southeast Asia faces an unprecedented threat from terrorism, extremism, and exclusivism. Southeast Asian extremists and potential terrorists have been influenced by the desire of foreign terrorist fighters to turn our region into a theatre of conflict like Mosul and Raqqa in Iraq. The Islamic State (IS) wanted to declare an East Asia Wilayat, or province of the caliphate, in the Philippines. Witness the battle in the southern Philippine Islamic city of Marawi, where IS wanted to replicate what they had previously established in Iraq and Syria.

The siege of Marawi shows that IS can co-opt local groups and undermine the sovereignty of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member states and their bilateral and regional security cooperation. Marawi reminds us of the urgent need to upgrade ASEAN cooperative and collaborative mechanisms to tackle the threat posed by a build-up of IS capabilities in our region as well as other instances of home-grown extremism.

Post-Marawi siege, and with its battlespace in Iraq and Syria shrinking, IS has entered a new phase of global expansion. Despite the gains made by the international coalition in Iraq and Syria, the IS threat has neither plateaued nor declined. IS continues to be the world's deadliest terrorist movement and is expanding its footprint globally by linking up with regional and local groups, networks, and cells. These developments pose a significant security threat to our region and beyond.

Following the siege in Marawi, ASEAN rose to the challenge. However, the ten member states of ASEAN need to sustain these efforts. In particular, more trust amongst them must be built at every level, and inter-agency coordination and joint operations must be broadened and deepened. Capacity building for the counter-terrorism agencies must be expanded and institutionalized. Partnerships with government and non-government actors must be developed and sustained. The respective local communities must be mobilized to work together, and with the state, to contain, isolate, and eliminate the hostile forces.

In the Sulu waters of the Southern Philippines, eastern Malaysia, and northeastern Indonesia, enhanced collaboration among the region's maritime, air, and land forces has contained an emerging security threat. Similarly, the "Our Eyes Initiative," a regional intelligence-sharing platform, has supported the efforts to fight terrorism. Such joint efforts have activated a momentum for collective action, and the challenge for ASEAN is to effectively implement the agreed plans.

Having closely followed developments in the Philippines since 2002, it was evident to me that al-Qaeda and IS will take root in Mindanao, a conflict-ridden province in the south of the country. However, many argued that due to the deep-rooted culture and tribal differences, foreign ideologies would not take root, uniting the different groups and mounting a collective assault that would overwhelm the government. They were proved wrong.

I encourage those interested in the future security landscape of Southeast Asia to study these essays on the battle in Marawi and the fight against terrorism edited by Rommel Banlaoi, one of the foremost experts on terrorism in the Philippines. To counter IS' global expansion, the Marawi siege and its aftermath should be studied by all policy officials and scholars. The lay readers must also be inspired and reassured by the lessons learned.

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I also thank my wife and children for their untiring support for my academic endeavours. I am truly blessed with a caring and loving wife, Grace, who helped me in many logistical concerns associated with the production of this book. I am also blessed with three kids: Rome Melchizedek (Zed), Ronaiah Gail (Zoe), and Rommel Gian (Zac), who understand my work as a scholar who needs my own time to research, teach, and write.

I also sincerely appreciate the assistance of Lieutenant Colonel Gerry Besana, who supported and even accompanied me in my research missions in Mindanao, particularly in the main battle area of Marawi City. Our chats and briefings with government security and intelligence officials in Cagayan de Oro City, Iligan City, Marawi City, and Cotabato City gave me a broader understanding of terrorist-threat situations in the Philippines. Tons of thanks are also due to Police Director Gregorio Pimentel, Police Chief Superintendent Albert Ignatius Ferro, and Police Senior Superintendent Celso Bael for the continuing exchange of views on the problems of terrorism and violent extremism in the country.

I also value my continuing engagements with Father Eliseo “Jun” Mercado, who helped me deepen my knowledge of the challenges of violent extremism in Mindanao. I also wish to thank Dr Rohan Gunaratna for the continuing friendship and support to the research activities of PIPVTR. Since 2008, Dr Gunaratna has believed in the work of PIPVTR, and we are truly grateful for his assistance.

More importantly, I thank my closest friend and mentor, the late Rodolfo “Boogie” Mendoza Jr., for sharpening my skills in counter-terrorism

research and investigation. This book has benefited from his passion to pursue counter-terrorism investigations. Maraming Salamat Ka Boogie!

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Terrorist and Insurgent Groups: a Global Survey of Threats, Tactics, and Characteristics (2019). She has written extensively for *Asian Conflict Reports* and the *Philippine Sociological Review*.

Kumar Ramakrishna is a tenured associate professor and head of policy studies, as well as coordinator of the National Security Studies Programme, at the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He was previously the head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at RSIS from 2006–15. As a historian, Ramakrishna has been a frequent speaker on counter-terrorism before local and international audiences, a regular media commentator on counter-terrorism, and an established author in numerous internationally refereed journals. His first book, *Emergency Propaganda: the Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds 1948–1958* (2002) was described by the *International History Review* as “required reading for historians of Malaya, and for those whose task is to counter insurgents, guerrillas, and terrorists.” His second major book, *Radical Pathways: Understanding Muslim Radicalisation in Indonesia* (2009), was featured as one of the top 150 books on terrorism and counterterrorism in the respected journal *Perspectives on Terrorism*, which identified Ramakrishna as “one of Southeast Asia’s leading counterterrorism experts.” His most recent books are *Islamist Terrorism and Militancy in Indonesia: the Power of the Manichean Mindset* (2015), *Original Sin? Revising the Revisionist Critique of the 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore* (2015), and *Singapore Chronicles: Emergency* (2016).

INTRODUCTION

ROMMEL C. BANLAOI

As a country with a long history of Muslim rebellion, the Philippines is highly vulnerable to various threats of terrorism emanating from violent Islamic extremism. The Marawi Siege, which lasted from May 17, 2017 to October 23, 2017, was just one of the many indications of these threats.

Though the vast majority of Muslims in the Philippines are secular in outlook, moderate in perspective, and syncretic in religious practices, a miniscule element of the population has succumbed to the temptations of violent extremism and terrorism for a wide array of reasons: personal, financial, socio-political, ideological, and spiritual. In the early 1990s, al-Qaeda, with its Southeast Asian affiliate Jemaah Islamiya (JI), was the dominant international terrorist group that promoted violent extremism in the Philippines. Al-Qaeda, through Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, supported JI activities in the Philippines by building the capability of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), lawless elements of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and even rogue factions of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in bomb making, weapons handling, and Islamic propagation. Khalifa also founded in Marawi City an Islamic school called Darul Imam Shafee, where some key commanders of the ASG and the MILF finished their Islamic education, including those commanders who joined the 2017 Marawi City siege in order to establish the "East Asia Wilayah" of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In other words, the Marawi City siege was a long time in the making, going back to the 1990s. Many of the key players of the siege came from the same network that Khalifa established for al-Qaeda through the infrastructure initially set-up by JI that ISIS eventually utilized. As discussed by Kumar Ramakrishna in chapter one of this volume, the soil for the virulent ideological seeds of ISIS to germinate has been a long time in the making. Tracing the issue as far back as the fourteenth century during the gradual "Islamization" of the Southern Philippines, Ramakrishna contends that Islam has become the cornerstone of a national

identity that is now known as Moro. Bitter colonial experiences from Spain, the United States, and even “Imperial Manila” have created a panoply of deep grievances that have provided fertile ground for the current spread of violent extremism to the Moro people in Muslim Mindanao. These grievances have also arguably created a “gun culture” within the larger canvas of poor governance that results in corruption, mismanagement, and even predatory politics in Mindanao. All these factors serve as continuing drivers of violent Islamist radicalization in the Philippines that pro-ISIS elements have exploited in order to sustainably recruit members and persistently regroup their forces.

On the persistence of terrorist threats in the Philippines and its complex nexus with crimes, Rommel Banlaoi provides in chapter two a chronological analysis of the ASG by focusing on its evolution as an armed group involved in both acts of terrorism and banditry. This chapter describes the ASG as a group that has mutated into a Janus-faced entity that exhibits a complex feature wherein crime and terrorism become two sides of the same coin. Its persistence and staying power come from its ability to adapt to a changing security situation in the Philippines, from al-Qaeda to ISIS. The ASG has become a flexible and resilient group whose major factions originally worked for al-Qaeda and eventually for ISIS. Since its birth in the late 1980s, the ASG has been involved in both crime and terrorism in its attempts to advance an Islamist agenda. But its inherent heterogeneous characteristic makes the ASG unable to really purify its membership to become Islamist, as most of its members have been motivated by secular objectives: personal, economic, political, social, and cultural. These characteristics enable the ASG to blend with al-Qaeda, ISIS, local warlords, criminal groups, and other armed groups in its areas of operations. The ASG’s nexus with crime and terrorism has allowed it to regenerate through the years and persist until now. Its deep involvement in the Marawi City siege has demonstrated its superb ability to navigate between crime and terrorism.

The nexus of crime and terrorism is clearly exhibited in the financing of the Marawi City siege. Amparo Pamela Fabe discusses in chapter three the money trail leading to the financing of the siege, with the clear assertion that money is the lifeblood of terrorist organizations. While the ASG has accumulated a great amount of money through its kidnap-for-ransom activities, pro-ISIS elements of the ASG also received funding from ISIS Central to mount the Marawi siege. Fabe identifies five means of financing the Marawi siege: (1) wire transfers from overseas, (2) cash couriers who entered the battle zone, Lanao de Norte, and Lanao del Sur; (3) the use of

private remittance centres authorized by the Central Bank of the Philippines; (4) the hawala system; and (5) anonymous mobile payments. Fabe argues that crucial to the fight against terrorism is a counter-measure against terrorist financing. She laments that, despite the existence of the Anti-Money Laundering Law, the Philippines does not yet have a comprehensive strategy to counter the financing of terrorism. Fabe recommends the creation of a financial intelligence unit in the Philippine government that will track down the financing of terrorist groups and their enablers.

To address the trauma to communities caused by the siege, Fabe discusses in chapter four the psychosocial counselling of Maranaw Muslim women and children. She underscores the importance of psychosocial support in order to carefully address the emotional, social, mental, and spiritual needs of women and children affected by armed conflict in Marawi City. Learning lessons from psychosocial responses to natural disasters in the Philippines, Fabe stresses the need to: (1) tailor the psychosocial response to the specific disaster, (2) provide multi-dimensional psychosocial care, (3) target at-risk population groups, (4) proactively address barriers in access to care, (5) recognize the social dimensions and sources of resilience, (6) extend the roles for mental-health professionals, (7) efficiently coordinate and integrate disaster-response services, and (8) integrate research and evaluation into disaster response planning.

With the support of process-work expert Jennifer Kleskie, Fabe organized a psychosocial team to look into the psychosocial needs of victims of the Marawi Siege. The team provided short-term interventions and training methods to one hundred evacuees of the Marawi Siege initially in order to identify and increase the resilience of affected individuals and to help them deal with post-conflict stress and trauma, with the main goal of enhancing the individuals' long-term coping mechanisms. The psychosocial team has the long-term objective of achieving a strong vision towards community development and capacity building, which can be accomplished through capitalizing on leadership capacity with a decisive implementation of conflict transformation and community-forum skills training among the Maranaw Muslim women and children.

Though the Philippine government has already liberated Marawi from pro-ISIS elements, the area still confronts many post-conflict security challenges. In chapter five, Banlaoi contends that there are still remnants of ISIS Philippines posing clear and present danger to Philippine security in the post-Marawi period. Armed groups in Mindanao organized before

the Marawi siege still operate with the likeminded groups responsible for the siege. Banlaoi discusses four major pro-ISIS groups in Mindanao that still pose security threats in the post-Marawi period: the ASG, the BIFF, the AKP, and remnants of the Maute Group. These groups are still involved in various acts of terrorism and active in spreading the ideology of violent extremism. The involvements of foreign terrorist fighters from different parts of the Muslim world confound the Philippine security worries. Banlaoi stresses the need for the Philippine government to further pursue preventive measures to counter terrorist threats and address the security challenges of violent extremism in the post-Marawi period.

In summary, the aftermath of the Marawi siege presents a continuing terrorist threat to the Philippines. These threats extend to the Philippines' neighbours in Southeast Asia and beyond. Though the numbers of pro-ISIS elements in the Philippines are now down because of the persistent counter-measures of the Philippine Government, they are not yet fully defeated. Surviving pro-ISIS elements in the Philippines still operate in conflict-affected areas in Mindanao. Though ISIS Philippines is broken, it has not yet been fully dissolved. Thus, the fight against ISIS in the Philippines is not finished. ISIS in the Philippines is not yet spent, and is still a lethal force to win over through continuous preventions and counter-measures.

CHAPTER ONE

THE “EAST ASIA WILAYAH” OF ISIS AND THE MARAWI CITY SIEGE: A LONG TIME IN THE MAKING

KUMAR RAMAKRISHNA

Introduction

In April 2016, reports emerged of the announcement of a *wilayah* [province] of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria being formed in Mindanao in the Southern Philippines. The titular leader of the “Wilayah Al-Filipin,” Isnilon Hapilon, had for years been known to the Philippine security forces as a senior leader of the Abu Sayyaf Group, a violent Islamist network with known links to al-Qaeda.¹

As ISIS came under severe military pressure in its territorial base in Iraq and Syria from the United States and Russian-led coalition, it sought to hit back at its enemies by orchestrating or inspiring attacks by organized cells of returned ISIS “foreign fighters” or self-radicalized “lone wolves” in Western and coalition capitals. In this respect, Southeast Asia, given its strategic location astride critical global sea lanes and, perhaps more importantly, a quarter of the world’s Muslim population, was clearly in the sights of ISIS planners. It has not been lost on observers, for instance, that ISIS committed considerable expenditure on *Bahasa Indonesia* and

¹ Isnilon Hapilon is the leader of the ASG Basilan faction. The overall ASG leader is Radullan Sahiron, based in Sulu. See Rohan Gunaratna, “ISIS in Philippines a Threat to Region,” *The Straits Times*, January 12, 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/isis-in-philippines-a-threat-to-region>.

Malay-language social-media propaganda expressly for the consumption of vulnerable Muslim communities in the region.²

To be sure, some analysts such as Caleb Weiss cast doubt on whether a formal ISIS *wilayat* has actually come about in Mindanao.³ Nevertheless, other observers have demurred. Rohan Gunaratna forthrightly asserted as early as January 2016 that ISIS would seek to declare a formal *wilayat* or “branch” in Mindanao later that same year, threatening not just the Philippines but the entire Southeast Asian region.⁴ Several months later, Joseph Liow opined that the poorly governed Mindanao region, coupled with the organic presence of many violent Islamist networks, renders the possibility of at least a “de facto *wilayat*” of ISIS a possibility.⁵

In any case, on May 23, 2017, several hundred ISIS-linked militants – including the ASG and the newer Maute group (of which more below), as well as a number of foreign fighters – launched a large-scale attack on the city of Marawi in the Southern Philippine province of Mindanao. Despite early assertions by the Philippine military that the situation was under control, the siege of Marawi by violent Islamist elements fighting unequivocally in the name of ISIS took months to lift. Moreover, while ISIS Central itself in Syria appeared careful not to announce the formal declaration of an “East Asia Wilayah,” it did not prevent its fighters on the ground in Marawi from issuing statements in the name of such an entity.⁶ So deeply entrenched were the ISIS fighters that the government of President Rodrigo Duterte had to request an extension of martial law in

² Bilveer Singh and Kumar Ramakrishna, “Islamic State’s Wilayah Philippines: Implications for Southeast Asia,” *RSIS Commentary* CO 16187, July 21, 2016, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co16187-islamic-states-wilayah-philippines-implications-for-southeast-asia/#.WCgYfVfYr-Y>.

³ Randy Fabi and Manuel Mogato, “Islamic State Unit Being Formed in Southern Philippines – Sources,” *Reuters*, June 24, 2016, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/06/23/16/islamic-state-unit-being-formed-in-southern-philippines-sources>; Caleb Weiss, “The Islamic State Grows in the Philippines,” *Long War Journal*, June 24, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/islamic-state-officially-creates-province-in-the-philippines.php>.

⁴ Gunaratna, “ISIS in Philippines a Threat to Region.”

⁵ Joseph Chinyong Liow, “Escalating ISIS Threat in Southeast Asia: is the Philippines a Weak Link?” *CNN.com*, July 9, 2016, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/07/opinions/isis-southeast-asia-liow>.

⁶ *Marawi, the “East Asia Wilayah” and Indonesia* (Jakarta: Institute for the Policy Analysis of Conflict Report no. 38, July 22, 2017), 2–3.

Mindanao until the end of 2017 to give the armed forces more time to deal with the situation.⁷

This article takes the position that, regardless of whether a formal ISIS *wilayat* in Mindanao is eventually formed, the growing entrenchment of the ISIS influence in that region is incontestable. Moreover, with the elimination by Indonesian security forces of Santoso, the leader of the ISIS-affiliated East Indonesian Mujahidin (MIT) in the jungles of Poso, Central Sulawesi in July 2016, it does appear that the ISIS influence will likely be consolidated and most probably strengthened in Mindanao.⁸

This article seeks to go behind the current headlines and attempt a deeper analysis of the factors behind the growing evidence of ISIS influence in Mindanao. To this end, it asserts that the soil for the virulent ideological seeds for ISIS to germinate is very fertile indeed, and has been a long time in the making. It seeks to explain why this is the case, and to emphasize that the emergence of Wilayah al-Filipin or the East Asia Wilayah, whatever nomenclature is finally decided upon – and whether de facto or otherwise – may well be a significant strategic development in Southeast Asia, warranting greater policy attention.

This article will take the following approach. It will first survey how centuries of political, social, and economic marginalization by the Spanish, American, and then Filipino Catholic central governments created the embattled Muslim “Bangsamoro” identity that has resided at the core of the violent Bangsamoro secessionist movements from the late 1960s onwards, centred on the Moro Independence Movement (MIM), the Moro National Liberation Front, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. It will then show how the Bangsamoro movement further mutated in the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, focusing in particular on the rise of the ASG, and how transnational ideological influences shaped the evolution of the ASG as much as the specific conditions of the struggle for Bangsamoro autonomy in the Philippine context. Third, radicalization processes within the specific ideological ecosystem of the ASG will be examined, based on first-hand testimonies from former and current ASG militants. In this connection, the influence of Wahhabism as a factor in these radicalization

⁷ Felipe Villamor, “Philippine Congress Extends Martial Law in Besieged Region,” *The New York Times*, July 22 (2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/22/world/asia/philippines-martial-law-rodrido-duterte.html>.

⁸ Singh and Ramakrishna, “Islamic State’s Wilayah Philippines.”

processes will be teased out. Fourth, the wider political and sociocultural environment within Mindanao, as well as the generally poor governance of the region, will also be examined to show how prevailing Moro grievances, the “gun culture,” relative ease of access to weapons, and in particular training by foreign militants combine to form an enabling environment for the continuation of violent Bangsamoro militancy and, in more recent times, fertile soil for ISIS to sink its roots into in Mindanao. In short, to reiterate, the nascent ISIS East Asia Wilayah has been a long time in the making.

Islam and the Emergency of the Embattled Bangsamoro Identity

By the end of the fourteenth century CE, the gradual “Islamization” of the southern Philippine islands – Mindanao and Sulu – had reached a juncture where being a Muslim had become part of the social fabric. As Moshe Yegar points out, however, this did not mean that there was strong adherence to Islamic orthodoxy, as the Philippine Muslims were traditionally not well-versed in the religion or the Qur’an, observed very few rituals, and were syncretic in their religious practices. Rather, they regarded Islam “as the focal point of their identity and way of life.”⁹

By 1565, the arriving Spanish had found that while they could convert the rest of the country to the Catholic faith, they faced greater obstacles in dealing with the Mindanao and Sulu peoples. Aside from occasional successes in compelling traditional local sultans and feudal chiefs or *datus* into making isolated concessions, the Spanish were basically unable in the course of the next 350 years to completely crush a defiant Muslim resistance in the south. The Spanish, recalling the North African Moors that had conquered the Iberian peninsula in the eighth century, labelled the Muslim resistance movement as the “Moro.”¹⁰ When the Spanish themselves capitulated in 1898 to the United States at the end of the Spanish-American War, the problem of pacifying Mindanao and Sulu

⁹ Moshe Yegar adds that, of all the groups, the ethnic Tausugs were the oldest Muslim community and considered relatively the most orthodox. See his *Between Integration and Secession: the Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 187.

¹⁰ Cesar Adib Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines* (Diliman: University of the Philippines Press, 1999), 89–92.

passed to Washington.¹¹ The Moro Muslims fought the Americans as well, culminating in the August 1899 signing of the Bates Treaty between the Sultan of Sulu and the United States. While this agreement acknowledged the sultan’s authority over his subjects, it was suddenly abrogated in 1902 when a Moro Province was created and direct rule was imposed from colonial Manila. Because the Moro Province was regarded as being populated by “wild tribes,” the US Expeditionary Army was tasked with imposing order on what was seen as a practically “ungovernable” region.¹²

These “wild tribes” did not at first present a unified front against the American colonial authorities. As Abinales recounts, “[r]esistance was scattered and unity never emerged among leaders of the different Muslim communities.” Each “ethnic group responded to American military occupation based on how it affected their own areas” and did not project the impression of an existing, unified “Moro Mindanao.”¹³ As scholars such as Thomas McKenna and Joseph Liow observe, however, the American colonial encounter was to eventually help forge a sense of overarching Moro unity and identity amongst educated Muslims in the south.¹⁴

Before the arrival of Christian Filipino settlers from the northern islands of Luzon and Visayas from 1912 onwards, Mindanao, Sulu, and the island of Palawan were the ancestral homelands of more than thirty ethno-linguistic groups. While thirteen of these groups – such as the Badjao, Molbog, Iranun, Palawani, Sama, Kalagan, Sangil, Jama-mapun, and Kalibugan, and in particular the politically powerful Tausug, Maguindanao, and Maranao – were considered as Moro, and later on more precisely as

¹¹ Syed Serajul Islam, “The Islamic Independence Movements in Patani of Thailand and Mindanao of the Philippines,” *Asian Survey* 38, no. 5 (1998): 444–5; Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Muslim Resistance in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines: Religion, Ideology and Politics* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2006), 8–9.

¹² Islam, “Islamic Independence Movements,” 445; Patricio Abinales, *American Military Presence in the Southern Philippines: a Comparative Historical Overview* (Honolulu: East-West Center Working Paper 7, October 2004), 3.

¹³ Abinales, *American Military Presence*, 3.

¹⁴ Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 132; Joseph Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 65–6.

Bangsamoro, the rest came to be known as Lumad – the non-Muslim and non-Christian indigenous clans of Mindanao.¹⁵

Under direct rule, US military forces attempted to govern the “wild, backward, and unpacified” Moro Province with considerable coercion. The thinking in official circles was that “success depended on the Army being unhampered in its pursuit of civilizing the Moros.”¹⁶ Such a *carte blanche* policy contributed to several atrocities: the so-called Bud Dajo (or Bud Dajo) massacre of March 1906 saw US forces led by General Leonard Wood annihilating nearly one thousand Tausugs for resisting disarmament. The carnage that day was the outcome in no small measure to one Datu Uti’s refusal to negotiate surrender terms, insisting instead that the ethnic Tausugs – Moros traditionally known for their warrior ethos¹⁷ – would fight until “we can no longer raise aloft the *kris* (a traditional Malay weapon).” Seven years later, two thousand Tausugs, including women and children, were killed in the so-called Bud Bagsak incident. A former senior ASG militant framed these events as enduring community rallying symbols during a presentation in Manila as late as October 2010.¹⁸

US military officers in the Mindanao region sought to not merely forcibly pacify the Moros but also “civilize” them prior to integrating them into the rest of the country. The colonial authorities thus introduced a secular educational system and sent non-Muslim teachers to Moro schools – a policy that undermined the traditional authority of the religious teachers. Moro Muslims reacted by boycotting such schools, leading to a spike in illiteracy. Furthermore, as part of the “civilizing” project, Christian

¹⁵ Jamaal A. Kamlian, “Ethnic and Religious Conflict in Southern Philippines: a Discourse on Self Determination, Political Autonomy and Conflict Resolution,” lecture at Emory University, November 4, 2003. The term “Bangsamoro” – *Bangsa* being the Malay term for *nation* – emerged in the late 1960s to function as a clearer identity marker for a “new and distinct nation.” See Liow, *Muslim Resistance*, 8. Moreover, in more recent times the Bangsamoro identity has been extended by the major separatist groups like the MILF to embrace non-Muslim resident in Mindanao, to assure the latter that they would be fairly treated under any future Muslim rule in the south. See Liow, *Religion and Nationalism*, 70–2.

¹⁶ Abinales, *American Military Presence*, 5.

¹⁷ Interview with Abu Hamdie, Quezon City, Philippines (March 25, 2011). Abu Hamdie, a former Abu Sayyaf Group militant, is an ethnic Tausug.

¹⁸ Abu Hamdie, “Walking Away from Terrorism: a Case of Disengagement,” lecture at the Tenth Biennial International Conference, organized by the Council for Asian Transnational Threat Research (CATR), Manila, October 26–28, 2010; Liow, *Religion and Nationalism*, 64.

Filipinos from the rest of the country were encouraged and assisted financially to settle in the Moro Province. Land legislation passed between 1902 and 1919 moreover gradually claimed all lands in the Philippines as state property, although individuals could apply for private ownership. However, institutional bias was built into the system, as the 1919 legislation permitted a non-Christian Filipino to apply for ten hectares of land, while a Christian could apply for twenty-four. The net result was “legalized land grabbing,” with Moro control of their ancestral lands being gradually prised from their collective grasp.¹⁹ The population in the Mindanao region ultimately came to comprise the Moro Muslims, Lumad, and Filipino settlers. Christian settlers eventually formed seventy-five percent of the region encapsulated by Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan, except for the five provinces that came to be regarded as the Moro homeland, namely Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi.

Presently, the Bangsamoro people make up twenty percent of the total Philippine population. Apart from the aforementioned five provinces, they are present in large numbers in some municipalities in Cotabato, Lanao del Norte, Zamboanga del Norte, and Davao del Sur. Significant communities also remain in Sultan Kudarat, South Cotabato, Zamboanga del Sur, and Palawan. Lumads, for their part, today comprise approximately five percent of the population in Mindanao. In any case, by the time of Philippine independence in 1946, an embattled sub-culture of Moro Muslims had emerged, identifying and permanently fixing the Christian Filipino settlers as “Them.” A “popular and common perception” held that it “was the settlers who had helped the Spaniards” and who “drove them away from their ancestral lands.”²⁰

In March 1935, 120 Moro *datus* or feudal rulers from Lanao penned the so-called Dansalan Declaration, demanding that the Moros be excluded from any future independent Philippine nation. They desired to remain under separate US rule in the Mindanao region, “if they could not be granted their separate independence simultaneously.” The deeply ingrained cultural prejudice of the Moros towards Christian “outsiders” permeated the Dansalan document:

¹⁹ Islam, “Islamic Independence Movements,” 445; Abinales, *American Military Presence*, 5.

²⁰ Kamlian, “Ethnic and Religious Conflict.”

we do not want to be included in the Philippines for once an independent Philippines is launched, there would be trouble between us and the Filipinos because from time immemorial these two peoples have not lived harmoniously together. Our public land must not be given to people other than the Moros.²¹

Moro *datus* warned the Americans that the Moros and the Christian Filipinos should never be made to coexist under one flag. At any rate, the United States went ahead and granted the Philippines independence in July 1946, incorporating the Sulu-Mindanao region and ignoring the statehood demands of the *datus*.²²

Since Philippine independence, continuing massive and uncontrolled inflows of Christian settlers and loss of ancestral lands, together with state-encouraged and expanding foreign multinational control of the pineapple, banana, sugar cane, rubber, and other sectors of the Mindanao economy, have intensified the “marginalization and underdevelopment of the Bangsamoro” and indigenous Lumads.²³ The Mindanao area – comprising thirty-three percent of the total land area of the Philippine archipelago – remains the richest part of the country in terms of natural resources.

However, for decades, the pattern of investment has been geared towards production for the global export market rather than local needs, thereby disrupting Moro subsistence production practices, expanding the income gap with the Christians and pushing the Moro community towards the “economic periphery.”²⁴ Moreover, succour from the democratic political system has never been forthcoming. The relatively weak post-war Philippine state was organized in patronage networks comprising state leaders and the country’s wealthy provincial families and urban and rural elites.

Within this political framework, the traditional sultans and *datus* in the relatively underdeveloped Mindanao region – the Alontos of Lanao, the Pendatuns, Ampatuans, and Sinsuats of Cotabato, and the Abu Bakrs of Sulu, for example – while lacking the wealth of their Christian counterparts in the central and northern Philippines, managed to manipulate the system to their advantage. The traditional aristocratic leaders *inter alia* secured access to public-works funding and other types of patronage, gained

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.; Islam, “Islamic Independence Movements,” 446.

²³ Kamlian, “Ethnic and Religious Conflict.”

²⁴ Islam, “Islamic Independence Movements,” 452.

influence over local police systems, and, in a pattern that endures to this day, created their own private armies. By interposing themselves between the “suspicious, increasingly aggrieved Muslim minority and the determined national state associated with Christians,” they “increased their power at the local level” and accumulated “prestige and influence in the national capital,” while the state permitted them to retain their largesse and private armies in exchange for keeping order and ensuring the peaceful apportioning of land between the Moros and the Christian settlers.²⁵

That an alienated “outsider” sentiment remains pretty widespread amongst ordinary Moro communities even in the present day, not just in Mindanao but elsewhere in the country, is palpable. While visiting Maharlika village – a “little Mindanao in Metro Manila” started by President Ferdinand Marcos for internally displaced persons from the south during the 1970s – the author was informed by analyst Rommel Banlaoi that, in general, the “Moros don’t mix around with Christians outside the village, while Christians are ‘afraid’ to go in there.” In addition, the stereotyping of Muslims as “dirty” and “criminals” remains “very strong.”²⁶ This bias is reflected in continuing generalized neglect by the government of quality-of-life issues in Maharlika and Mindanao, as well as the systemically low economic status of the large majority of the Moros relative to the rest of the country.²⁷

A former ASG militant named Abu Hamdie informed the author on the other hand that Christians are still seen as oppressors and colonizers, and in this respect certain ASG leaders he knows – such as the current top ISIS representative in Southeast Asia Isnilon Hapilon – “throughout his life never engaged with Christians.” Hamdie recounted that Isnilon’s father apparently taught him to see Christians, not as fellow human beings, but as “animals” and “colonizers who should be driven away.”²⁸

Khalil Sharif Pundomo, an elected *barangay* (district) councillor in the Muslim enclave of Quiapo in Quezon City, offered additional insights into the political culture of the present-day Moros. Khalil, an ethnic Maranao and scion of the politically powerful Sharif clan from Marawi, serves a three thousand-strong population in his rather run-down *barangay*, of

²⁵ Abinales, *American Military Presence*, 8.

²⁶ Rommel Banlaoi comment (March 26, 2011). See also Liow, *Religion and Nationalism*, 69 and Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*, 408–9.

²⁷ Banlaoi comment.

²⁸ Abu Hamdie interview.

which ninety percent are also Muslims of Maranao descent. A simple stroll by the author around the *barangay* revealed clear elements of the embattled Bangsamoro sub-culture – very evident were DVDs of hardcore Bangsamoro separatist commanders from the south of the country, such as Commander Bravo, Ameril Umbra Kato, and the popular fundamentalist preacher Ahmad Basilon. To be sure, Khalil – while lamenting that in the Mindanao region laws are not applied fairly and corruption is a problem – emphasized that he would work “within constitutional means” to pursue his community’s interests. Khalil – who made an impression as a practical young man – after all had a business to run, and the Quiapo community, which in March 2011 essentially comprised small businesses selling textiles, pirated DVDs, souvenirs, and roadside food stalls, had little economic incentive to engage in cooperation with the militant groups in the south of the country. Khalil claimed he had expressly warned both militants and criminals not to “bring trouble” to the Quiapo community, but to “stay away.”²⁹ In late April and early May 2017, however, two bombs went off in Quiapo. In the second blast two people were killed, and it appeared that a Shia office in the enclave had been targeted, hinting at the type of sectarian attack ISIS undertakes. Indeed, while local police denied any connection of the Quiapo bombings with ISIS, the latter claimed responsibility for both attacks.³⁰

In any case, in his interview, Khalil was emphatic that he wanted “a separate Bangsamoro homeland as that is the history.” He argued that for Moros there are only two options, “separate or integrate,” and if integration was the only option then it was “very important” that shariah law be applied for the Moro population. He iterated that “religion is very important, part of the identity.” He averred that every Moro Muslim had the ultimate objective “to live their own way of life.”³¹

Thus, the reason for armed violence in Mindanao was the lack of self-determination and respect for the Moro ancestral domains. So cherished was the Bangsamoro identity in the present day that Khalil cajoled his Quiapo constituents not to refer to themselves as Muslim if they did wrong, but rather as “Tausug, Maguindanao, or Marananao,” because it was important not to tarnish the good name of the Muslim community. Khalil insisted that the Muslim identity was more important than ethnic identity, and that there was a need to “protect the religion.” While he was

²⁹ Interview with Khalil Sharif Pundomo, Quiapo, Quezon City (March 27, 2011).

³⁰ *Marawi, the “East Asia Wilayah” and Indonesia*, 6.

³¹ Pundomo interview.

careful to point out that protecting and defending Bangsamoro rights and status through the “education” route was the preferred option, he also understood why some Moros had resorted to violent struggle as an “option.”³²

The Origins of Contemporary Bangsamoro Secessionist Movements: MIM, MNLF, MILF

The violent “option” alluded to by Khalil Sharif Pundomo has been long in gestation. By the 1960s, intensifying Moro resentment at their creeping economic and social “minoritization” at the hands of the Christian-dominated Filipino State – despite the best efforts of the traditional *datus* at keeping the peace – had led to sporadic violent clashes between Christians and Muslims.³³ Exacerbating the situation was the accession to power in the mid-1960s of the ambitious President Ferdinand Marcos, who actively sought to break the power of the local strongmen who were allies of national opposition elites in the south. Marcos unleashed the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) on Mindanao, destroying the old compact between the state and the traditional Muslim leaders, using the military to break up opposition private armies and setting up rival Muslim associations loyal to him. The outcome was a breakdown in southern stability as a culture of assassinations and electoral violence emerged.

The ongoing Muslim-Christian settler conflict was further exacerbated by military support to the latter. The upshot of these developments was a co-optation of the cowed Muslim aristocratic elites by Marcos and their political decline.³⁴ In light of Manila’s long-standing irredentist claims on the Malaysian State of Sabah, moreover, elements within the military in March 1968 organized a covert plot – called Jabaidah (or Jabidah) – to train on the island of Corregidor a group of Moro Muslims in commando tactics. The idea was that when these *agents provocateur* infiltrated Sabah they could effectively agitate amongst the population and influence them to demand annexation by the Philippines. In the event, when the Moro soldiers balked at proceeding with the mission, thirty of them were summarily executed by their Christian officers. The so-called Jabaidah

³² Pundomo interview.

³³ Astrid Tuminez, “Rebellion, Terrorism, Peace: America’s Unfinished Business with Muslims in the Philippines,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15, no. 1 (2008): 214.

³⁴ Islam, “Islamic Independence Movements,” 448; Abinales, *American Military Presence in the Southern Philippines*, 9.

massacre spurred the emergence of organized and violent Moro secessionist movements.³⁵

Two months after the Jabaidah incident, one of the most prominent and powerful *datos* of Cotabato, Datu Udtog Matalam, launched the MIM, aimed at setting up an independent Islamic Republic of Sulu and Mindanao. MIM called for a “jihad or holy war to change Moroland into a Darul Islam.”³⁶ MIM sought in this regard the outright secession of Mindanao, Sulu, and the Palawan regions from Manila’s grasp, and in its public rallies promoted the slogan: “We are not Filipinos, we are Bangsamoros.”³⁷ Rather than posing any significant threat to Philippine stability, the MIM was essentially a desperate attempt to publicize Moro grievances.³⁸ Datu Udtog complained about the diminishing status of traditional leaders and village elders, the educational system that “systematically alienated the school children” by demeaning “the cultural milieu in which they grew,” and the ongoing Christian settler encroachment upon Moro territory that in effect “reduced the economic base of Moroland.”³⁹ More fundamentally, the Jabaidah incident “generated strong feelings among Muslims and galvanized their fears that their lives were of little value in Philippine society.”⁴⁰ Security studies expert Rommel Banlaoi has argued that “it was through the MIM” that “the ideology of Bangsamoroism” first coalesced.⁴¹

Datu Udtog’s complaints fell on deaf ears – the Christian-led anti-Moro Ilaga movement mobilized in response, releasing forces that culminated in

³⁵ McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels*, 141; Islam, “Islamic Independence Movements,” 448, no. 15; Liow, *Muslim Resistance*, 10; George C. Decasa, *The Quranic Concept of Umma and its Function in Philippine Society* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1999), 374; Patricio P. Diaz, “MNLF: When? Who?” *Mindanews*, February 7, 2011.

³⁶ Decasa, *The Quranic Concept of Umma*, 373.

³⁷ Kamlian, “Ethnic and Religious Conflict.” See also Rommel C. Banlaoi, “Bangsamoroism and the Nexus of Identity Politics and Violent Extremism in the Southern Philippines,” paper presented at the International Workshop on “The Impact of Identity Politics on Violent Extremism,” organized by the Centre of Excellence for National Security of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, and the Global Futures Forum, Singapore, October 23–25, 2011.

³⁸ Decasa, *The Quranic Concept of Umma*, 373.

³⁹ Kamlian, “Ethnic and Religious Conflict.”

⁴⁰ Decasa, *The Quranic Concept of Umma*, 374.

⁴¹ Banlaoi, “Bangsamoroism.”