

Decapitation, Retaliation, and the Indicators of Escalation in Mindanao

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Contents

About ICCT	iii
Abstract	1
Introduction	2
Background	3
The Escalation of Retaliatory Narratives in Marawi	5
Are These Threats Credible?	7
Indicators of Escalation	8
Policy Recommendations	12
Conclusion	14
Bibliography	15
Annex A: Circulated Text Messages in Marawi	18
About the Author	20

Abstract

This policy brief examines the recent developments within the Dawlah Islamiyah (DI) community in Mindanao, Southern Philippines, following the death of Abu Zacariah in Marawi. His demise has sparked significant upheaval, particularly regarding the leadership succession within the DI. Initially, the leader of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) was poised to become the next emir of Dawlah Islamiyah Philippines. However, in a surprising turn of events, he surrendered to the 6th Infantry Division of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. This event, along with other indicators, suggests a substantial weakening of DI groups in the region. The most notable aspect of this decline is the collective demoralisation among its combatants, evidenced by an unprecedented rate of surrender since 2020. Despite these developments indicating a potential diminishing threat, the study identifies three critical factors that could escalate conflicts: the possibility of a prison siege, increased intergroup cooperation, and the involvement of foreign fighters. These elements require continuous monitoring by authorities to effectively manage and mitigate the risk of renewed violence and instability in the region.

Keywords: Dawlah Islamiyah (DI), Mindanao, Decapitation, Retaliation, Marawi Siege

Introduction

Abu Zakariah has been an elusive figure.¹ He has been a target of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and Philippines National Police (PNP) since the death of Abu Dar in March 2019.² Abu Zakaiah was the last surviving member of the Dawlah Islamiyah (DI)³ who directly participated in the 2017 Marawi Siege.⁴

Based on a private interview with Dr Rommel Banlaoi in 2022, Abu Zakariah was able to evade detection due to his extended family network and his supporters in the Butig-Lanao region, allowing him to leverage on community goodwill for temporary safe havens.⁵ Hence, there was a deficit in actionable intelligence to pinpoint his location. On 14 June 2023, Abu Zakariah was finally killed in Marawi City after a local tip-off, which led to a joint AFP-PNP operation to arrest him.⁶

On 28 June 2023, the Al Faris Media Centre (AFMC) declared Ismail Abubakar (Abu Turaife) as the emir of DI Philippines (see Figure 1). Abu Turaife, who is also the leader of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighter (BIFF), privately refuted this claim to leadership and argued that he was neither consulted nor aware of the arrangement. However, a pledge of allegiance by Abu Turaife was eventually circulated on 2 July 2023. It is still unclear if the pledge of allegiance was officially issued by Abu Turaife. It was later reported that Abu Turaife had surrendered to the AFP's 6th Infantry Division.⁷

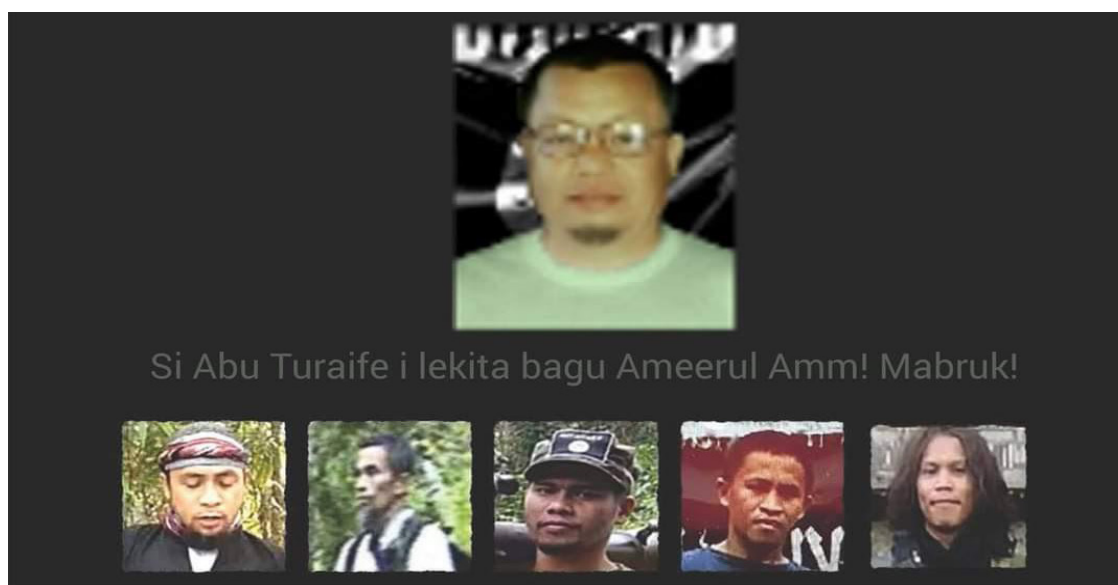


Figure 1. Declaration of Abu Turaife as Emir retrieved from AFMC, 28 June 2023

1 Zam Yusa, "The New Face of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia," *The Diplomat (blog)*, June 1, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/the-new-face-of-the-islamic-state-in-southeast-asia/>.

2 Kenneth Yeo, "The Strategic Patience of Dawlah Islamiyah in Mindanao," *The Diplomat (blog)*, March 21, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/the-strategic-patience-of-dawlah-islamiyah-in-mindanao/>.

3 Note that "Dawlah Islamiyah" is the recognised term used both by the authorities and Islamist terrorist in the Philippines to represent all pro-Islamic State groups in Mindanao, Southern Philippines.

4 Manila Standard, "Maute Leader Named Emir of ISIS in Southeast Asia," *Manila Standard (blog)*, March 4, 2022, <https://manilastandard.net/news/314211638/maute-leader-named-emir-of-isis-in-southeast-asia.html>.

5 Yeo, "The Strategic Patience of Dawlah Islamiyah in Mindanao."

6 Bianca Dava, "ISIS-Southeast Asia Leader Killed in Marawi: Military," *ABS-CBN News*, June 14, 2023, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/06/14/23/isis-southeast-asia-leader-killed-in-marawi-military>.

7 Rommel C. Banlaoi, "Terrorist Threats In The Philippines 22 Years After 9/11: Declining But Not Disappearing – Analysis," *Eurasia Review (blog)*, September 10, 2023, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/11092023-terrorist-threats-in-the-philippines-22-years-after-9-11-declining-but-not-disappearing-analysis/>.

It is important to note that DI groups are severely weakened by the AFP's onslaught. Hence, it is highly unlikely for them to possess the capacity to launch a major attack in the short-term. However, authorities should not be complacent, as the threat can rapidly escalate if signals are ignored. As members of the DI Maute Group (DIMG) have issued direct threats to "outdo the Marawi Siege,"⁸ this article will examine potential parallels between the lead-up to the Marawi Siege in 2017 to discuss the three indicators of threat escalation, and five policy recommendations to address the threat.

Background

The Philippines has been a hotspot for Islamist terrorism. Today, key conflict theatres in the Philippines are located in Mindanao, Southern Philippines. Groups in Mindanao follow the Terrorist-Territory-Tribe Nexus (T3 Nexus), which highlights the relationship between the terrorist group, the territory they operate in, and the ethno-linguistic tribe their members belong to.⁹ This T3 Nexus creates a potent environment for terrorist groups in the Philippines to create cultural distance between the locals and the Manila-based government, and frame their insurgency as a local affair.¹⁰ Thereby, better winning the hearts and minds of the local population from the Filipino elites. Table 1 highlights the critical terrorist groups in Mindanao, the territory they operate in, and their ethno-linguistic tribe.

Terrorist Group	Territory	Ethnolinguistic Tribe
Abu Sayyaf (Dawlah Islamiyah Sulu)	Sulu	Tausug
Abu Sayyaf (Dawlah Islamiyah Basilan)	Basilan	Yakan
Maute Group Dawlah Islamiyah Lanao	Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur	Maranao
Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters	SPMS Box	Maguindanao

Table 1. The T3 Nexus

It is precisely due to the T3 Nexus that there is generally little coordination between the groups due to inter-ethnic rivalry.¹¹ However, the Dawlah Islamiyah (DI) groups in Mindanao have often declared an overall emir of DI in the Philippines as they intend to retain their statuses as the East Asian Wilayah.¹² This tradition began in February 2016 after Isnilon Hapilon, leader of DI Basilan, was recognised as the emir of the East Asia Wilayah (EAW).¹³ He travelled to Butig, Lanao del Sur,

⁸ See Annex A.

⁹ Kenneth Yeo, "Geography, Governance, Guns: Characterising Islamist Terrorist Sanctuaries in Maritime Southeast Asia (2014 – 2021)," *Asian Security* 19, no. 1 (October 12, 2022): 82–101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2022.2132854>.

¹⁰ Cristiana C. Brafman Kittner, "The Role of Safe Havens in Islamist Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (2007): 307–29.

¹¹ Note that this is based on the author's field research in Marawi and Sulu where there seemed to be an unspoken animosity between the Maranao and Tausug people.

¹² During my conversation with Brigadier General Eugenio Baquio, Commander of the 1101st Infantry (Bayug) Brigade, he shared that the Islamic State Central Committee outlined five conditions for the establishment of a wilayah (province). Two of the five conditions are to select an overall emir (leader) of the groups operating in the region, and to unite all groups operating in the region. September 1, 2023.

¹³ "ISIS Officially Recognises Pledges of Allegiance from Militant Groups in the Philippines," *The Straits Times*, February 15, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-officially-recognises-pledges-of-allegiance-from-militant-groups-in-the>.

to join the Omar and Abdullah Maute and launched the Marawi Siege in May 2017.¹⁴

After the termination of the Marawi Siege in October 2017 and the death of Isnilon Hapilon, Owaydah Marohombsar (Abu Dar) took over as the overall leader of all DI factions. Abu Dar was one of the survivors of the Marawi Siege and played an active role in recruitment and proselytisation. He was said to be a “charismatic leader” and was “very knowledgeable about the Qu’ran.”¹⁵ Abu Dar survived two years as the overall DI leader before being killed by the AFP in April 2019.¹⁶

However, before the death of Abu Dar, Hajan Sawadjaan from DI Sulu was gaining notoriety within the Islamist terrorism sphere. He orchestrated a series of suicide bombing attacks in the Philippines between 2019 and 2021.¹⁷ Sawadjaan also revived Abu Sayyaf’s kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) activities along the Sulu Archipelago in 2019.¹⁸ He took on the role of “acting emir” after the death of Abu Dar. The AFP eventually killed Hajan Sawadjaan in an armed skirmish in August 2020.¹⁹ Hajan Sawadjaan’s death was significant as it immediately led to the surrender of more than 100 DI Sulu members.²⁰

Salahuddin Hassan from the BIFF took over as the emir of DI Philippines after the death of Hajan Sawadjaan. Prior to Hassan’s leadership, he was the lieutenant of Abu Turaife. His leadership was short-lived, as he and his wife were killed in October 2021.²¹ Jer Mimbantas (Abu Zakariah) from DIMG then took over as the emir of DI Philippines until he was killed in June 2023. The chart below shows when each individual became the leader of the terrorist group and subsequently became the overall leader of DI Philippines (Figure 2).

14 Rohan Gunaratna, “The Siege of Marawi: A Game Changer in Terrorism in Asia,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9, no. 7 (2017), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26351533>.

15 Carmela Fonbuena, “Leader of Isis in Philippines Killed, DNA Tests Confirm,” *The Guardian*, April 14, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/14/leader-of-isis-in-philippines-killed-dna-tests-confirm>.

16 Priam Nepomuceno, “Confirmation of Abu Dar’s Death ‘Milestone’ in Counter-Terror Efforts,” *Philippine News Agency*, April 15, 2019, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1067320>.

17 Kenneth Yeo, “Suicide Bombings in Mindanao,” *International Centre for Counter Terrorism*, November 8, 2021, <https://icct.nl/publication/suicide-bombings-mindanao/>.

18 Kenneth Yeo, “Kidnapping in the Sulu Sea: Implications on Terrorism in the Philippines,” *The Diplomat*, October 4, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/kidnapping-in-the-sulu-sea-implications-on-terrorism-in-the-philippines/>.

19 Jim Gomez, “Army Chief: Militant Leader Likely Killed in Philippines,” *AP News*, August 25, 2020, sec. Army, <https://apnews.com/article/d4595e2a569618d3f7abb3dd10aa30f7>.

20 Based on data collected, more than 110 DI Sulu members surrendered in the fourth quarter of 2020. The data can be retrieved from the Southeast Asia Militant Atlas. See Kenneth Yeo, “Southeast Asia Militant Atlas,” *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies: International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research*, 2021, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/southeast-asia-militant-atlas/#.YPjzf-gzaM8>.

21 Bong Sarmiento Fernandez Edwin O., “Terrorist Leader, Wife Slain in Maguindanao Raid,” *Inquirer News*, October 30, 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1508292/terrorist-leader-wife-slain-in-maguindanao-raid>.

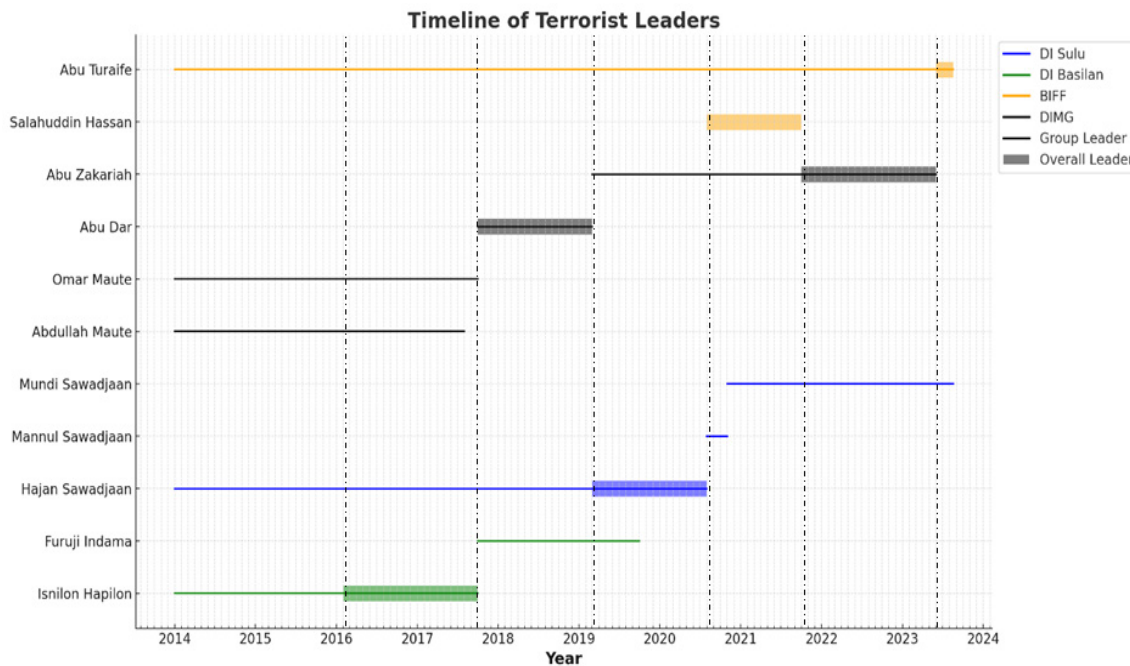


Figure 2. Timeline of Terrorist Leaders in the Philippines

The Escalation of Retaliatory Narratives in Marawi

Before Abu Zakariah was killed, four DIMG members were arrested by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) on 26 May 2023. Among the arrested, Muhammad Nasif, age eighteen, was identified as the spokesperson of DIMG. In response to the arrests, the Abu Zakariah-led DIMG threatened to carry out bombing attacks and sow violence in the villages where the four members were arrested. This led to the 3-hour evacuation of Morogong village, jointly coordinated by the MILF, AFP, and PNP in the evening of the same day.²² This evacuation indicates that the Filipino authorities assessed the DIMG threat to be credible and persistent.

After the evacuation of the village, Abu Zakariah travelled to Marawi City and rented an apartment in Marawi with his lieutenants on 14 June 2023. According to online and community discussion, he was discovered because of a tip-off by the locals, which led to the AFP-PNP joint operations to arrest him.²³ The death of Abu Zakariah led to an outpouring of support from members and sympathisers of DI. In the evening of Abu Zakariah's death, the Abu Turaife-led BIFF faction launched an ambush against a PNP police car near the police headquarters of Shariff Aguak town to retaliate against the authorities.²⁴ That attack killed two police officers, wounding four others.

Additionally, DIMG forwarded messages to sow fear among residents of Marawi. They argued that the death of their leader could not be forgiven as it was the result of a tip-off from a Muslim

22 Merlyn Manos, "Hundreds Evacuate in Lanao Del Sur over Dawlah Islamiyah Threat," *Rappler*, May 28, 2023, sec. Mindanao, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/mindanao/hundreds-evacuate-lanao-del-sur-over-dawlah-islamiyah-threat/>.

23 This was also verified during my field research in Pagadian City when Major General Antonio G. Nafarrete, Commander of the 1st Infantry (Takbak) Division, confirmed that the killing of Abu Zacariah was a result of a tip-off from the locals. He added that this tip off highlights the local's animosity against the DIMG group as it was credible, timely, and actionable. August 27, 2023. This conclusion was also reached by the Commander of Taskforce Marawi. August 25, 2023.

24 Rommel Rebolledo and Ferdinandh Cabrera, "2 Cops Killed, 4 Wounded in Maguindanao Del Sur Ambush," *Rappler*, June 15, 2023, sec. Editors' Pick, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/mindanao/cops-killed-ambush-maguindanao-del-sur-june-14-2023/>.

individual to the authorities. Hence, as retribution, DIMG threatened to launch an assault on Marawi that would “outdo the [2017] siege of Marawi.”²⁵ They also claimed that DIMG members have thoroughly infiltrated Marawi City and have actively participated in public gatherings. DIMG also called on residents of Marawi to reach out to DIMG to prepare for the “second Marawi Siege.”²⁶

Through the AFMC, previously known as the East Asia Knights, the administrators appealed to regional audiences to join their group chat. AFMC distributed a message in the Malay language to persuade viewers to join a localised group chat, claiming that AFMC is published locally by the ethnic-Maranaos. They also threatened key figures in Southeast Asia, including the leader of MILF, Ibrahim Murad, President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., President of Indonesia, Jokowi Widodo, and President of Singapore, Halimah Yacob (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Threat Against Presidents in Southeast Asia retrieved from AFMC, 20 June 2023

There was also a call for vengeance against the MILF. AFMC published an appeal to kill MILF members for aiding both the AFP and PNP in arresting their members and killing their leader. One of their communication materials features the beheading of an MILF member to demonstrate intent to seek revenge against the MILF for arresting DIMG members.

²⁵ See Annex A.

²⁶ See Annex A.

Are These Threats Credible?

Today, it is unlikely that jihadi terrorist organisations in the Philippines possess the capability to launch a Marawi Siege-style offensive. Successful military and non-military interventions have resulted in the collective demoralisation of terrorist groups in Mindanao. On 1 June 2023, a total of 1,866 DI combatants across Sulu, Basilan, Lanao, and Maguindanao surrendered to the AFP.²⁷ Table 2 below shows the trend of combatant surrender.²⁸ Such a rate of voluntary resignation from the ground up is unprecedented in the Philippines.²⁹

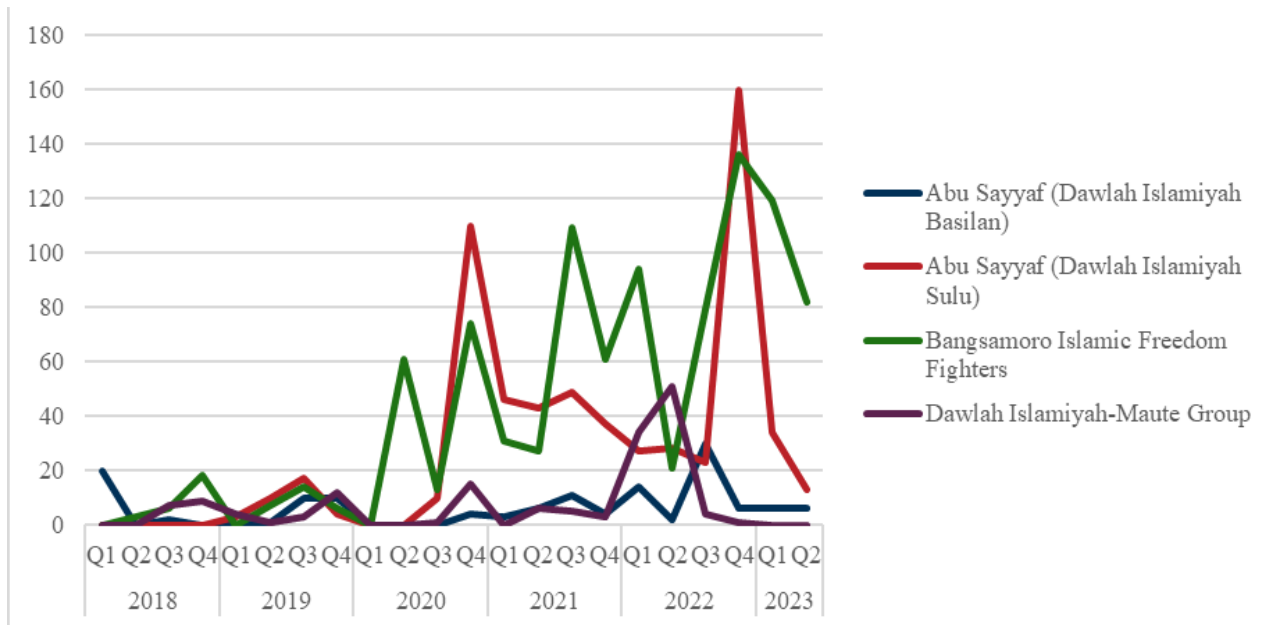


Table 2. Combatant Surrenders in Mindanao by Group retrieved from the Southeast Asia Militant Atlas

Moreover, jihadi terrorists in Mindanao have lost their connections with their regional counterparts. There were attempts to connect with the Thai insurgents through the al-Nibras Media Centre in September 2022. However, the only attack it claimed was at the Tak Bai police station ambush on May 2022.³⁰ Additionally, the AFMC does not seem to be in touch with the Indonesian Islamic State-linked groups. They failed to report both the Makassar Cathedral Church Bombing on 28 March 2021 and the Astana Anyar Police Station Suicide Bombing on 7 December 2022, both of

27 The term “surrender” is not recognised in the local communities in Muslim Mindanao. For example, the Tausugs are culturally not allowed to surrender. Instead, ex-combatants were said to have “returned” to their communities and are called “returnees” instead. Nonetheless, this article will continue to use the term “surrender” for a more intuitive operational context. See Nurhati Tangging and Kenneth Yeo, “Reintegrating Former Terrorist Combatants in Mindanao,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 15, no. 3 (June 9, 2023): 31–36.

28 Yeo, “SEA Militant Atlas.”

29 Note that the accuracy of the data is limited to publicly reported surrenders. There are complications to this data as surrendered combatants may not be actual combatants. During travels in Marawi and Sulu, the author noted that some individuals surrender because they are “wrongly tagged” by the AFP or PNP, and wanted to take the opportunity to “clear their name” by surrendering. There are also accounts of unreported surrenders as a significant number of combatants surrendered to the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) or the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) instead of the AFP or PNP. Overall, while these numbers may not display a completely accurate account of combatant surrenders in Mindanao, it is the best data that is publicly available.

30 Mariyam Ahmad et al., “Brazen Attack in Thai Deep South Shatters Ramadan Truce,” *Benar News*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/brazen-attack-in-thai-deep-south-shatters-ramadan-truce-05262022132145.html>; Kenneth Yeo, “Rebranding the East Asia Knights: A Reflection of Dawlah Islamiyah’s Effort to Learn,” *GNET (blog)*, March 1, 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/03/01/rebranding-the-east-asia-knights-a-reflection-of-dawlah-islamiyahs-effort-to-learn/>.

which are significant attacks in Indonesia.³¹

Despite their severely weakened state, DIMG remains resilient. Only 164 DIMG members have surrendered, a number significantly smaller than that of the Abu Sayyaf splinter, DI Sulu (614), and the BIFF (961). There was a temporary surge in the number of DIMG returnees after the AFP bombarded their strongholds with airstrikes on 4 March 2022.³² However, DIMG restored internal discipline and prevented an exodus (see Table 3).³³

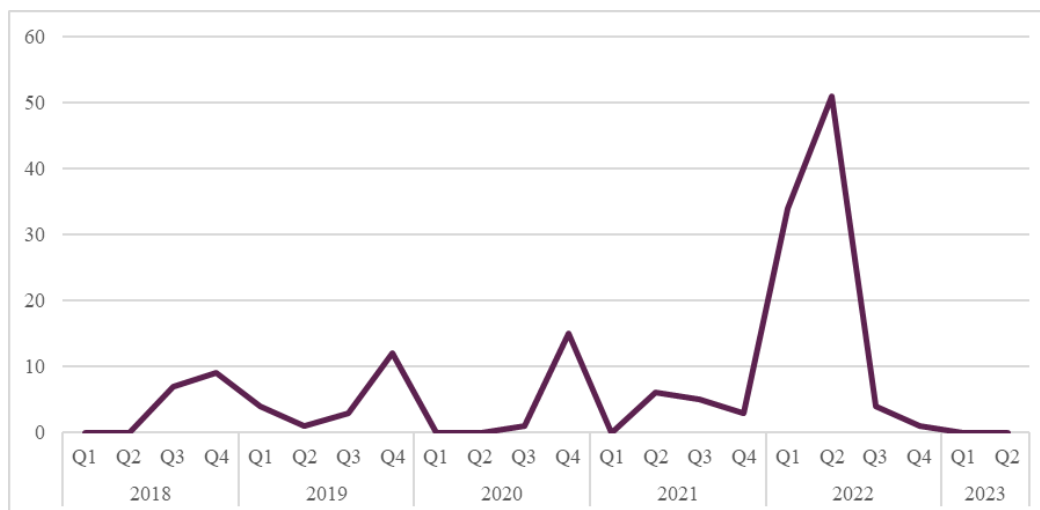


Table 3. Dawlah Islamiyah Maute Group combatant surrenders retrieved from the Southeast Asia Militant Atlas

Indicators of Escalation

Given the resilience and fervour of DIMG members, we cannot ignore the potential of threat escalation despite their current numerical weaknesses. If DIMG intends to siege the city, as they threatened, their immediate priority is to increase their combat strength rapidly. This section draws lessons from the 2017 Marawi Siege to identify avenues where the group can rapidly increase their combat strength to identify gaps and propose policy recommendations to minimise the risks of another large-scale assault.³⁴ Based on experiences from the Marawi Siege, there are three indicators of potential threat escalation: multiple jailbreaks, intergroup cooperation, and the recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs).

Jailbreaking Campaigns

Prior to the Marawi Siege, the Maute Group launched four prison sieges to increase their fighting force. Firstly, the Maute Group attacked the Provincial Jail in Marawi City on 29 August 2016, freeing 73 prisoners.³⁵ Then, they attacked the Kidapawan City Prison on 1 April 2017, freeing 158 prisoners in the process.³⁶ Finally, they attacked the Marawi City Jail and Malabang District Jail concurrently on 23 May 2017, and freeing 107 prisoners from both assaults.³⁷

³¹ Yeo, "Rebranding the East Asia Knights."

³² "30 Dawlah Islamiyah Supporters Surrender in Lanao," Sunstar, March 8, 2022, sec. Zamboanga, <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/1923021/zamboanga/local-news/30-dawlah-islamiyah-supporters-surrender-in-lanao>.

³³ Yeo, "SEA Militant Atlas."

³⁴ See Annex A.

³⁵ "Philippine Extremists Stage Mass Jailbreak," *The Straits Times*, August 29, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippine-extremists-stage-mass-jailbreak?login=true&close=true>.

³⁶ Felipe Villamor, "Philippines Jailbreak Frees More Than 150 Inmates, Prompting Manhunt," *The New York Times*, January 4, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/04/world/asia/philippines-jailbreak-mindanao.html>.

³⁷ Rambo Talabong, "DILG Confirms 2 Marawi Jailbreaks Freeing 107 Inmates," *Rappler*, May 24, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/2017/05/24/dilg-confirms-2-marawi-jailbreaks-freeing-107-inmates/>.

Collectively, these assaults have potentially led to the recruitment of up to 338 released inmates, which may have increased the combat strength of the Maute Group in 2017, before the Marawi Siege. If DIMG decides to conduct a series of jailbreaking operation, they could significantly increase their combat strength and escalate the terrorist threat.

An added motivation to launching prison sieges is to rescue their captured comrades. Until 1 June 2023, there is a total of 314 DI members being arrested. Of which, 42 DIMG, 35 BIFF, 128 DI Sulu, and 93 DI Basilan members (see Table 4).³⁸ Most of them are held in the New Bilibid Maximum Prison, or the Philippines Bureau of Corrections. The specific breakdown of where DI members are held is not publicly available.

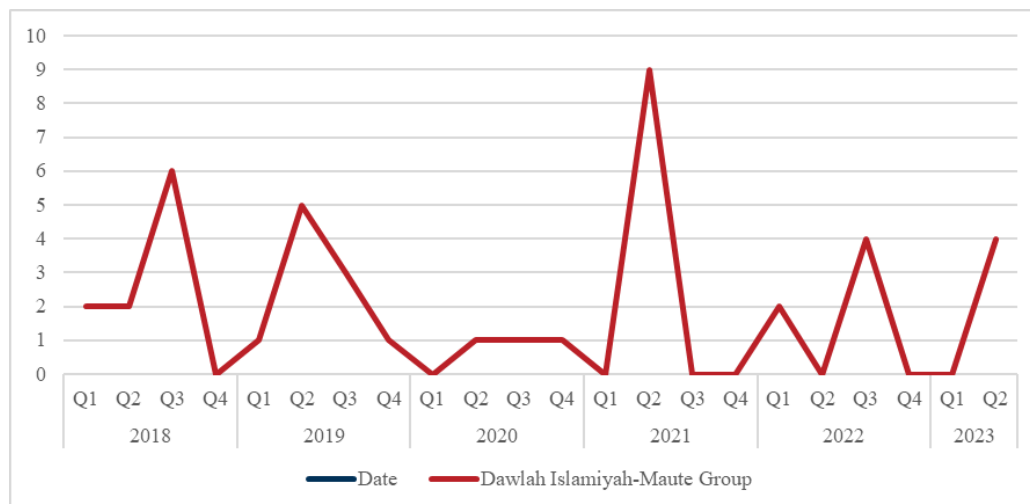


Table 4. Arrested Dawlah Islamiyah Members retrieved from the Southeast Asia Militant Atlas

The relatively high number of arrested DI members may potentially provide the leaderless DIMG with the support of the BIFF, and the motivation to launch a prison siege on prisons in Mindanao to rescue their comrades. Moreover, a prison break can provide DIMG members with exposure and experience to fighting in a semi-urban environment, and raise the morale of the militants.

Inter-Group Cooperation

Terrorist groups in the Philippines are highly territorial. There is a T3 Nexus that disincentivises groups from cooperating.³⁹ Hence, any cooperation between groups can indicate the potential for a severe threat escalation.

Such escalations were observed before the Marawi Siege. Isnlon Hapilon and approximately 70 other DI Basilan members travelled to Butig to join the Maute Brothers, Abdullah and Omar Maute in January 2016.⁴⁰ They were also joined by other groups like the Ansar Khilafa Philippines (AKP) to increase their numerical strength.⁴¹

Today, most terrorist groups in Mindanao have suffered from collective demoralisation. However, despite their high numbers of militant surrenders, the BIFF seem to retain a healthy combat strength; sufficient to launch an ambush against the PNP. Hence, it is crucial to monitor

rappler.com/nation/170838-dilg-confirms-marawi-jailbreaks-freeing-107-inmates.

38 Yeo, "SEA Militant Atlas."

39 Yeo, "Geography, Governance, Guns."

40 "Isnlon Totoni Hapilon," United Nations Security Council, February 2, 2023, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/isnlon-totoni-hapilon.

41 Sidney Jones, "Marawi the 'East Asia Wilayah' and Indonesia," *Institute for Policy Analysis for Conflict*, no. 38 (July 21, 2017).

developments between the BIFF and DIMG.

Understanding the BIFF could be tricky. The BIFF today is split into three factions: the Turaife, Bungos, and Karlialan factions. Of which, only the Turaife faction has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.⁴² The Turaife faction could be a strategic ally of DIMG due to the proximity of their strongholds.⁴³

Abu Turaife's posture towards DIMG is unclear. He seemed to be supportive of the broader militant jihad movement in Mindanao. Notably, his group retaliated by ambushing the PNP police vehicle after the death of Abu Zakariah. He has also declared interest to be the "leader of jihad" when COVID-19 first struck the Philippines.⁴⁴ Hence, he seemed to have some ambitions in leading the Islamic State coalition beyond Maguindanao.

However, he is also cautious in his claims to leadership and has also actively supported others in the claim to that role. Hence, after the death of Hajan Sawadjaan, emir of DI Philippines between 2019 to 2020, Abu Turaife did not take up the mantle despite having the opportunity and credentials. Instead, it was his lieutenant, Salahuddin Hassan, who was declared to be the emir of DI Philippines.⁴⁵ He has also supported the leadership of Abu Erhabee in January 2023 in the AFMC, although some claimed that he was "shaheed" (martyred). Additionally, while Abu Turaife was recognised as the emir of Dawlah Islamiyah Philippines, he has privately rejected the role through an intermediary. It is also important to note that the BIFF did not fight on the frontlines in the 2017 Marawi Siege.⁴⁶

The most recent update on Abu Turaife was his surrender to the AFP's 6th Infantry Division along with five senior BIFF members from his faction.⁴⁷ With this development, the management of the surrendered BIFF members would determine how the remnant BIFF members will mobilise or demobilise against the AFP.

Foreign Terrorist Fighters

FTFs played a significant supplementary role in the shortfall in combat strength. The 2017 Marawi Siege drew significant numbers of foreign fighters. IPAC identified 21 Indonesian FTFs who had travelled to Mindanao and joined the EAW.⁴⁸ Malaysian terrorist Dr Mahmud Ahmad, now deceased, had also recruited significant numbers of FTFs from Malaysia.⁴⁹ Even after the conclusion of the Marawi Siege, more than 100 FTFs continued to travel to the Philippines to sustain ongoing conflicts across Mindanao.⁵⁰

42 Froilan Gallardo, "Iqbal Says 2 of 3 BIFF Factions OK MILF's Peace Overtures; Most Radical Rejects," *MindaNews* (blog), September 5, 2018, <https://www.mindanews.com/peace-process/2018/09/iqbal-says-2-of-3-biff-factions-ok-milfs-peace-overtures-most-radical-rejects/>.

43 The BIFF operates at the "SPMS Box" which is geographically close to the Lanao region where DIMG operates. See Joseph Franco, "Addressing Islamist Militancy in the Southern Philippines," *Crisis Group* (blog), March 18, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/philippines/addressing-islamist-militancy-southern-philippines>.

44 "BIFF Commander Claims Leadership of Jihad in Mindanao, Calls for Recruits," *SITE Intelligence Group* (blog), August 19, 2020, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/biff-commander-claims-leadership-of-jihad-in-mindanao-calls-for-recruits.html>.

45 Fernandez, "Terrorist Leader, Wife Slain in Maguindanao Raid."

46 Patricia Lourdes Viray, "BIFF Attack Not Connected to Marawi Siege," *Philstar.Com*, June 23, 2017, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/06/23/1712924/biff-attack-not-connected-marawi-siege>.

47 Rommel C. Banlaoi, "Terrorist Threats In The Philippines 22 Years After 9/11: Declining But Not Disappearing – Analysis," *Eurasia Review* (blog), September 10, 2023, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/11092023-terrorist-threats-in-the-philippines-22-years-after-9-11-declining-but-not-disappearing-analysis/>.

48 Jones, "Marawi the 'East Asia Wilayah' and Indonesia."

49 Katerina Francisco, "FAST FACTS: Who Is Mahmud Ahmad?," *Rappler*, October 17, 2017, <http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/185586-fast-facts-mahmud-ahmad>.

50 Zam Yusa, "Philippines: 100 Foreign Fighters Joined ISIS in Mindanao since the Marawi Battle," *The Defense*

The danger posed by FTFs in the Philippines has increased significantly since 2019. During the 2017 siege, militants did not employ suicide bombings.⁵¹ However, the then emir of DI Sulu, Hajan Sawadjaan, introduced suicide bombing operations into Sulu after two Indonesians blew themselves up at a cathedral in Jolo.⁵² The authorities should expect some variations of suicide bombing executed by foreign fighters if there is an influx of foreign fighters.

Despite attempts to attract FTFs into Marawi, DIMG has lost contact with its regional counterparts.⁵³ In July 2020, the Western Mindanao Command (WESMINCOM) declared that FTFs were no longer detected in Mindanao.⁵⁴ This was largely because:

- a) terrorist elements in Sabah were dismantled by the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM);⁵⁵
- b) JAD cells had been disrupted after the implementation of Indonesia's counterterrorism law in 2018;⁵⁶
- c) MIT had been systematically decimated by Operation Madago Raya.⁵⁷

However, the Philippines should continue to keep an eye on the FTF space. A potential source of FTFs can come from the arrested terrorists in the region. Based on publicly available data, a total of 673 JAD members were arrested since the implementation of the Indonesian Counterterrorism Law (see Table 5).⁵⁸

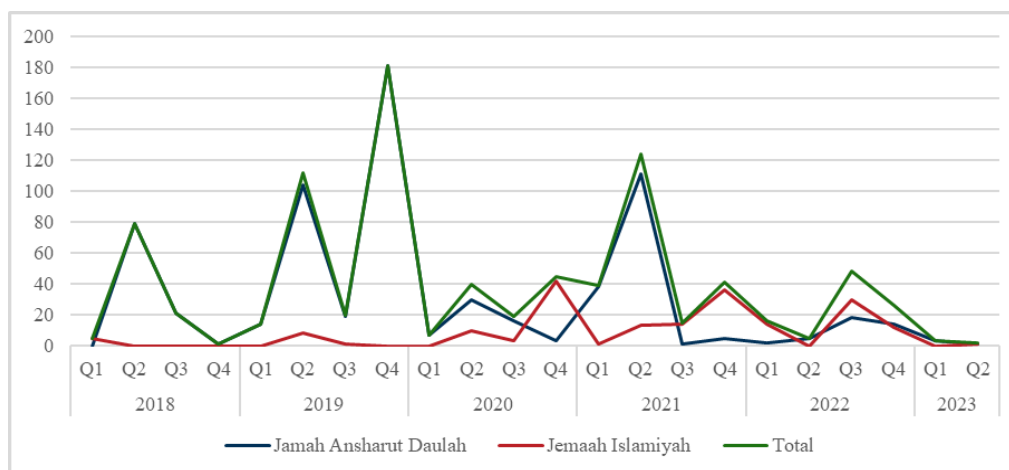


Table 5. Jamah Ansharut Daulah and Jemaah Islamiyah arrests retrieved from the Southeast Asia Militant Atlas

Post, November 5, 2018, <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/11/05/100-foreign-fighters-join-isis-mindanao-philippines-marawi/>.

51 Joseph Franco, "Detecting Future 'Marawis,'" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 1 (2020): 3–12.

52 Kenneth Yeo, "The Changing Dynamics of Islamist Terrorism in Philippines," *The Diplomat*, February 28, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/the-changing-dynamics-of-islamist-terrorism-in-philippines/>.

53 Yeo, "Rebranding the East Asia Knights."

54 Bombo Analy Soberano, "Presensiya Ng Mga Foreign Terrorists Sa Mindanao 'di Na Nararamdaman – Wesmincom Chief | Bombo Radyo News," *Bombo Radyo Philippines (blog)*, July 26, 2020, <https://www.bomboradyo.com/presensiya-ng-mga-foreign-terrorists-sa-mindanao-di-na-nararamdaman-wesmincom-chief/>.

55 "ESSCom Crippled 41 Abu Sayyaf Groups since Formation in 2013, Says Commander," *Malay Mail*, December 8, 2021, sec. Malaysia, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/12/08/esscom-crippled-41-abu-sayyaf-groups-since-formation-in-2013-says-commander/2026920>.

56 Alif Satria, "Two Decades of Counterterrorism in Indonesia: Successful Developments and Future Challenges," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 14, no. 5 (2022): 7–16.

57 Jasminder Singh, "Operation Madago Raya: Indonesia's Joint Military-Police Approach to Counter-Terrorism," *RSIS Commentaries*, February 2, 2023.

58 Yeo, "SEA Militant Atlas."

Sentences of individuals charged under Indonesia's Anti-Terrorism Law range between 3 and 5 years, depending on the nature of their participation.⁵⁹ Hence, the 419 JAD members arrested before 2019 are expected to be released by 2024, and the additional 211 JAD members arrested before 2021 are expected to be released by 2026. Assuming a terrorist recidivism rate of 11 percent,⁶⁰ we should expect at least 46 JAD recidivists in 2024 and 69 JAD recidivists in 2026. Moreover, the inmate rehabilitation program in Indonesia remains opaque as there is little information on how Indonesian rehabilitation and reintegration institutions are coping with the influx of terrorist detainees.

Today, deradicalisation initiatives in Indonesia remain inconsistent in terms of its effectiveness and sustainability. The recent Astana Anyar Police Station Bombing on 7 December 2022, demonstrates the risk of ill-rehabilitated detainees. The perpetrator, Agus Sjanto (Agus Muslim), was detained for four years for deploying a pressure cooker bomb in 2017 and released in September 2021.⁶¹ He was released despite his refusal to undergo rehabilitation. Such recidivists represent a potential threat not only to Indonesia, but also to the Philippines, where its conflict-ridden south can continue to attract radicals.

Policy Recommendations

The threat of terrorism should not be overstated, the terrorist threat landscape has improved significantly in the Philippines and the region since 2019. The level of violence is reduced drastically, terrorist strongholds were overrun, and most importantly, the rank-and-file militants suffered from collective demoralisation which compelled them to surrender to the authorities.

At the same time, the authorities and affected communities should avoid complacency and overconfidence, taking the reduced terrorist threat in the Philippines for granted. The Philippines has once experienced a lull in terrorism between 2009 and 2012.⁶² However, the complex terrain of Mindanao (archipelagic, mountainous, and densely forested), and the poverty-stricken population, there continue to be propensity and opportunities for extremists to exploit.⁶³

Hence, on top of monitoring the indicators of threat escalation, the relevant agencies must take active measures to maintain the current level of security in Mindanao. With that, five recommendations are proposed in response to the three indicators of terrorist threat escalation: fortifying prisons; localise appeals for BIFF members to surrender; work with Abu Turaife to demobilise the BIFF; broaden intelligence sharing; and harden maritime borders.

Firstly, members who recalled the 2017 Marawi Siege would recognise the value of successful prison sieges. Jailbreaks not only raise the combat strength of the terrorist group, they also expose their combatants to a semi-urban combat environment. Hence, failure to lay siege on a prison could turn into lessons learned, while successful sieges can boost their morale. Moreover, the terrorist group could replenish their arms and ammunitions from a sieged prison. The recognition that prisons are valuable targets could pose danger to security personnel at prison facilities and the community residing around the five prisons within the reach of DIMG and

59 Observation by Alif Satria, International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, June 2023.

60 Prakoso Permono and A'an Suryana, "High Recidivism Rate Threatens Counterterrorism Strategy," *Asia News Network*, December 16, 2022, <https://asianews.network/high-recidivism-rate-threatens-counterterrorism-strategy/>.

61 Arlina Arshad, "Indonesia Police Station Blast Kills 2 in Suspected Suicide Attack," *The Straits Times*, December 7, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-investigating-explosion-at-bandung-police-station-report?login=true&close=true>.

62 Peter Chalk, "The Philippines' Continued Success Against Extremists," *CTC Sentinel* 2, no. 8 (2009).

63 Justin V. Hastings, *No Man's Land: Globalization, Territory, and Clandestine Groups in Southeast Asia* (NUS Press, 2011).

BIFF.⁶⁴ Hence, while security services in the Philippines are stretched, it is essential to increase the security of prisons in Mindanao and deny the forceful access to jail facilities.

Secondly, employ surrendered BIFF members to design and disseminate messages to encourage their comrades to surrender. This idea is not novel and has been mooted in the Philippines before.⁶⁵ In the history of warfare, surrendered militants have been used to demoralise the enemy. In some cases, surrendered militias have worked with the government to convince their peers who are still fighting to defect.⁶⁶ With more than 900 BIFF surrenderers, the military could engage some returnees to support AFP's efforts in psychological warfare. By aggravating the internal divisions within BIFF, they could inspire more BIFF surrenders and further demoralise remnant BIFF combatants. Hence, compelling the next leader of the BIFF to focus on restoring internal discipline, denying them the time and space to consider strategic decisions like cooperating with the DIMG.

Thirdly, work with Abu Turaife and the senior leadership of the BIFF who surrendered to demobilise the rank-and-file members of the BIFF. Abu Turaife has played a significant peripheral role in instigating violence and sustaining the insurgency. He has been leading the most violent faction of the BIFF since 2012. However, the AFP and PNP noted that the surrender of Abu Turaife should be managed with care. The excessive reporting of his surrender may spur ideologically hardened DI members to conduct retaliatory attacks in protest of his surrender.⁶⁷

Additionally, the authorities should not incentivise groups to consolidate their forces for their survival.⁶⁸ Announcements of a pursuit may incentivise Abu Turaife to take active measures to increase his group's combat strength by partnering DIMG. Therefore, it is crucial for AFP to foster closer partnership with key media agencies, journalists, and academics to manage published information about their key targets.

Fourthly, the Philippines and its regional counterparts must overcome institutional rivalries and broaden intelligence sharing mechanisms. The Our Eyes Initiative (OEI) was developed in 2018 in response to the 2017 Marawi Siege.⁶⁹ This initiative encourages high-level defence officials to exchange strategic intelligence about terrorism regularly. However, it is essential to include high level law enforcement officials to exchange strategic intelligence and analysis on the threat landscape in this arrangement. The law enforcement agencies also deal with terrorism-related issues and have access to local data that defence agencies do not. In the context of FTFs travelling to the Philippines, it is essential for member states to exchange intelligence on the statuses of key individuals detained for terrorist charges; information which is held primarily by the law enforcement agencies.

64 There are five prisons in Mindanao that are within the reach of the BIFF and DIMG:

- (1) Lanao del Sur Provincial Jail,
- (2) Malaybalay City Jail,
- (3) BJMP Cotabato City Jail,
- (4) Kidapawan City District Jail, and
- (5) BJMP Sultan Kudarat District Jail.

65 Sidney Jones, "Don't 'Crush' Abu Sayyaf Perpetrators, Debrief Them," *Lowy Institute (blog)*, January 31, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/don-t-crush-abu-sayyaf-perpetrators-debrief-them>.

66 Jeanette A. Koch, "The Chieu Hoi Program in South Vietnam, 1963-1971" (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1973).

67 Interview with Major General (Police) Lee Jan Ungria, *PNP Region 9 Intelligence Unit*, August 28, 2023.

68 Intelligence sources noted that a certain Mundi Sawadjaan, leader of the pro-Islamic State Abu Sayyaf Sulu faction, fled Sulu and attempted to contact Abu Turaife to join him — interview with Major General Eugenio Baquio, AFP 110th Infantry Brigade, September 1, 2023.

69 "Our Eyes' Initiative Concept Paper" (ASEAN Defence Minister Meeting, October 19, 2018), https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2018_Oct_12th%20ADMM_Singapore,%2019%20October%202018_%5BFinal%5D%20Our%20Eyes%20Initiative%20Concept%20Paper.pdf.

Finally, the Philippines and its regional counterparts must harden maritime borders at the Sulu-Celebes Seas. The maritime domain continues to be the gateway for foreign terrorist to enter Mindanao.⁷⁰ The seas continue to be too vast to monitor and coastlines too wide to patrol. Recognition should be given to the Philippines and Malaysia for advancing their coastal detection hardware through the Contact Group on the Sulu-Celebes Seas (previously known as the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement).⁷¹ However, every member state must play their part to prevent the illegal migration of FTFs.

Conclusion

This policy brief gave an overview of the leadership transition among DI groups in the Philippines, highlighting that the death of Abu Zakariah is significant. Abu Zakariah was the last official emir of DI Philippines. His demise has led to a temporary uproar among DI militants in the Philippines. Remnants of DIMG has made explicit calls for revenge and retaliation towards the civilians of Marawi for tipping-off the AFP, PNP, and MILF.⁷² More significantly, the BIFF responded by launching an ambush against a police vehicle.

This brief recognises that the terrorist threat in Mindanao has deescalated drastically. The level of violence has gone down, and combatants have been surrendering to the authorities in large numbers.⁷³ Hence, threat issued by the DIMG are not credible at the moment. However, the Philippines authorities must not rest on its laurels as DI forces in the Philippines could rapidly escalate the threat if they were strategic about their operations.

The threat, nonetheless, is not the absolute capability of the terrorist groups in the Philippines today. They have been beaten to the point of disillusionment, evidenced by the high rates of surrender. However, the Philippines has been an attractive destination for regional foreign fighters and will continue to attract them if conditions favours them. Hence, authorities must not rest on their laurels and continue their counterterrorism efforts domestically and regionally.

70 Zam Yusa, "Malaysia and Indonesia Foreign Fighter Transit Routes to Philippines Identified," *The Defense Post*, November 20, 2018, <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/11/20/malaysia-indonesia-philippines-foreign-fighters-transit-routes/>.

71 "PCG Participates in the 7th Contact Group on Sulu and Celebes Seas," *The Maritime Review (blog)*, July 26, 2022, <https://maritimereview.ph/pcg-participates-in-the-7th-contact-group-on-sulu-and-celebes-seas/>.

72 Refer to Annex A.

73 Tangging and Yeo, "Reintegrating Former Terrorist Combatants in Mindanao."

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Annex A: Circulated Text Messages in Marawi

“BODHAR. 

bismillah

ASSALAMOALAYCOM WARAHMATOLLAH WABARAKATUHO

PAKISABOTAN AMI KO KADANDAN OMANGA BANGSA AMI SA INGD ARANAW IPOON D’N KO MANGA OLAMA NA GOSO MANGA DATO SARANAW S’KAMI SO MANGA PAGARINIYU APPHANIND’G QU BNAR M’LAGID OMANGA SASAHID KAMI ANTAWAKA OYAGOYAG KAMI NA ASAR ASISIEKAMI KO TITO A ONTOL TITHOKAMI KO RIYASTA OMANGA RIDOAY SA APIYA ANDAKAMI KO MANGA INGD SARANAW NA DIKAMI IRÁN D’N TAR’GAN TAMAN SA SOD’N SO MANGA M’RANAW IP’THORO KAMI DIKAMI IRÁN KATABANGAN KA BAKAMI IRÁN DN P’PHAKI POLANG SIIKO MANGA RIDOAY

NA kagiya miyatangk’d amiya Şahid so ĩsāko pkha onotan ami na dikami d’n magiyug obadi togae amala a rogó aranaw ayamala nagiyaya ingd a marawi    

Tatano diniyu anan kādi d’n khatay magaan na kaphlawalawanan so miyamsagad amasa amiyaadn amarata sa INGD ANN AMARAWI

TAWAGN AMI SO AD’N AMANGA MARATABAT IYAN AMAGIINGARAN SA MOSLIM SA INDOLON AMIRON SO JIHAD SABAP SA KIYAPANOBRA OMANGA RIDOAY O ALLAH NA SADN SA TAW ATALIKODAN IYAN SO JIHAD NA SAB’NAR AKNABA MOSLIM

SOPMAN SO MANGA BANGSA AMI SA MARAWI CTY NA BAKANO D’N POON MAWA SIIKO MANGA WALAY NIYU KA MIYAOMA P’MAN SO MASA AKINANGLAN SO JIHAD NA PAKI SABOTAN AMI RKANO DN ININ KA PARÁ DIKAMI NIYU KAPANGOBAN NA AWAKANO SAND’N SA MAGAAN INN KA MARANI KAMI D’N IN’NGKA AMI KO MANGA BAE AGO MANGA WATA SIBILIYAN AMBAKOWIT KANO D’N SO PMAN SO MAKA PNIAT SA TABANG KO JIHAD NA PAKI SABOTABO SA MAPIYA

MAGAAN SOMAGAAN NA MISAMPAY ININ KO MANGA TAW SA MARAWI KA SASAN KAMI DN KO PAGILIDAN

MAKA POPOOM INN AKATARO SIIKO ĩSĀKO MANGA OLOWAN OPPHANININDG SA JIHAD
هللا اي كئادعأ رمد مهللل نيملاعلا براي نيكشمل او رفكلا لذأو نيرفالكلا موقلا يلع انرصنا مهللل

Copy Paste” (WhatsApp Message to residents received on 14 June 2023)

“In the name of Allah

Greetings of Peace

We would like to inform our fellow citizens, the scholars, and the sultanates of Lanao. We are your brothers who fought for the truth even if we become martyrs or live on the path of truth. The truth is that we are insulted by our enemies, no matter where we go here in Lanao they won't stop until our fellow Maranaos point out our hiding spot. They wouldn't help us, instead, they let us be killed. Because of that, our leader whom we followed passed away, we will never allow blood not to be shed in the Lanao after the death of our leader, especially here in Marawi.

Remember that not now but soon, we will overdo the siege in Marawi.

We call on those of us who has dignity and claim that he is a Muslim, that he is ours, maybe because the enemies of Allah are too many because if he turns his back on the people, it might turn out that he is not a Muslim. And for our fellow citizen in Marawi City, you should leave your homes because the battle has come again.

We advise you for the sake of abundance, you can't blame us in the end because it's almost here. We are asking especially our women and children that they are natural. For those who want to join our struggle, please contact us.

This is from your leader of fight.

O ALLAH WE ASK FOR YOUR HELP THAT WE DEFEAT THOSE WHO OPPOSE YOU AND YOUR ELIGIANT THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE IN YOU AND THE WILD PATHS O LORD OF HUMANITY, MY LORD DESTROY YOUR ENEMIES WHO ARE OPPOSED.” (Translated)⁷⁴

“SPREAD THE INFORMATION

Langun tanu phangali, umani isa na didn pliyu sa walay. Bakanu paniwala a miapasad anan labaw aya miawafat na so Mapuro on a ISIS a si Abu Zacaria na Sawp taman kon ko mga pamilya niyan a mga ISIS pn. Diran bu di tharoon a miapasad ka an di phamaka ikteyar so mga sundaro ka samanaya na mlilibta rkamin saya na isis na so kadaklan na sa marawi. Ka.min juhuor siran.

Forwarded..” (WhatsApp Message to residents received on 14 June 2023)

“Let's all be careful, everyone don't leave the house, don't believe that this is over with the death of our ISIS leader, Zacaria. The family of our leader will also retaliate when they are angry. They said it was over because they don't want the soldiers to know. We are surrounded by ISIS and most of them are in Marawi actively attends public gathering.” (Translated)⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Text messages received by confidential local sources. Translations coordinated by Vanessa Panes.

⁷⁵ Text messages received by confidential local sources. Translations coordinated by Vanessa Panes.

About the Author

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