



capable and has succeeded Abdullah Maute as the new operational leader of Marawi. Omarkhayam too suffered injury but is leading the fight. With the saturation of Philippine security forces in Marawi, the fight against IS is steadily coming to an end. With the death of Abdullah, both Hapilon, the IS overall leader and Omarkhayam, the new IS operational leader in Marawi are likely to fight or flee. The likelihood of them fleeing and linking up with IS centric groups that pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the IS leader is unlikely. The chief IS advisor to Hapilon, Dr Mahmud bin Ahmed has fabricated a suicide vest which he is likely to wear in the final battle.

#### 4. Likely Developments

Operating outside Marawi, the most active of the threat groups is the IS directed Jamaah Mohajirin Wal Ansar (JMA), a group in the southern Philippines with extensive links to foreign fighters. JMA is attacking the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the largest armed group that is working with the Duterte government to establish a permanent peace. Guided by IS, JMA is determined to breakup MILF, the government ally. IS believes that the attacks will fracture MILF and the pro-IS members within MILF will splinter and join IS centric groups such as JMA. Esmael Abdulmaguid alias Abu Turaibe who leads JMA attracts foreign fighters. The latest encounter between MILF and JMA was at Barangay Tee, Datu Salibo, Maguindanao at 1400 hrs on September 27 2017. As the battle in Marawi comes to an end, the clashes elsewhere in Mindanao are likely to increase in frequency, scale and magnitude.

The strongest IS group JMA is a splinter group of a faction of Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters led by Esmael Abubakar alias Bongos. Although they are numerically weak, IS entities outside Marawi are building its forces against MILF. As there are IS supporters within MILF, JMA mounts attacks on MILF with the hope that the mighty MILF will factionalize and IS will be the recipient of MILF deserters. However, MILF collaborating with the Armed Forces of the Philippines has kept MILF intact and is a real force fighting JMA.

#### 5. Government Response

Until the IS siege of Marawi on May 23, 2017, the Philippine government was in denial of IS presence in Mindanao. However, the response of the Philippine government to Marawi siege led by President Duterte, Secretary Lorenzana, Armed Forces Chief Gen Ano and Intelligence chief Gen Santos was decisive.

Only after IS sieged Marawi did President Duterte acknowledge IS presence. Until May 23, 2017, the entire Philippine government refused to acknowledge the IS was operating on its soil. To deny reality is not unusual for developing countries. Even after the terrible IS Attack in Dhaka on July 1, 2016, still the Government of Bangladesh denies IS presence. Philippines suffered the destruction of an entire city, 1000 lives lost and millions of dollars wasted because of the failure of the previous administration to acknowledge IS had build a presence and was expanding.

Contrary to common thinking, IS siege of Marawi was not an intelligence failure but an operational failure. The failure of government to act based on intelligence that IS was building up its forces in Marawi. The Philippines intelligence community has stated to work together with the operational units after the fall of Marawi. Within the military intelligence and operational units, there is greater cohesion more than ever before. They provide relevant information to the troops fighting on the ground. Intelligence units now are sitting down

together with battlefield commanders sharing every information they got so as to validate and provide useable information for the troops on the ground. As the previous government at the highest failed to acknowledge the threat, there was no serious effort to study IS and build appropriate capabilities.

The fighting lasted over four months because of three reasons. First, the government underestimated IS ideology and fighting capabilities especially the use of snipers and explosiv devices. Second, the terrain could not be effectively cordoned and sealed. Third, the Philippine military units were trained for jungle and rural warfare and not urban warfare.

Until August 2017, the infiltration and exfiltration of IS from the Main Battle Area (MBA) enabled IS to replenish its human losses and material wastage. The fighters formed three layers of defence protecting Hapilon, Abdullah and Omarkhayam. Today, the MBA is isolated but the quality of IS leadership and the human shield with hostages are likely to protract the fight for another few weeks.

#### 6. The Future

Hapilon instructed his IS men to merge with pro-IS ASG fighters of Radulan Sahiron, plan and strategize an armed attack in different places in Mindanao. They wish to target Iligan, Cagayan and Cotabato City. Both ISP and ISL fighters planned to conduct terrorist activities in the municipalities of Lumbatan, Bayang, Tugaya and Madalum in Lanao del Sur, around Lake Lanao. Some of these plans have been intercepted and disrupted.

After having attempted and failed to create a province (wilayat) in the eastern edge of Asia, IS central in Syria is thinking long term. IS intention is to build IS forces in the southern Philippines and infiltrate its neighbour Indonesia, the largest Muslim country. However IS Philippines cannot hold territory unless they have a stronger fighting force to hold ground and fight. As long as the MILF led by Al-Hajj Murad Ebrahim is intact, IS Philippines will not achieve its immediate goals.

#### 7. Conclusion

The IS centric threat landscape outside Marawi is growing. In Mindanao, several groups have joined IS. As the IS leadership outside in Mindanao is intact, IS will prevail in the Southern Philippines.

Nonetheless, as Mindanao is only 20 percent Christian and the demography and geography limits IS expansion and dominance in the southern Philippines. Unless MILF breaks up and a large faction join IS, the rise of IS is not an existential threat to the Philippines. However, the very presence of IS in Mindanao threatens not only the Philippines but the Neighbours. IS created its East Asia Division with the intention of expanding the network from the Philippines to parts of Northeast and Southeast Asia. If IS spreads to Sabah in Malaysia and Eastern Indonesia, IS will pose a significant challenge to Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and the entire region. Unlike the leaders in the Middle East, the Southeast Asian leaders demonstrated resolve in dealing with IS. They have seen what IS has done to the Middle East.

In the future, if IS occupies a city, the standing militaries will follow the doctrine embraced by the Government of the Philippines. The Marawi model subscribes to the doctrine of containing, isolating and eliminating IS.