



# The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** A new autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao marks the culmination of 22 years of negotiations between the Philippine government and the secessionist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). This breakthrough follows a five-month battle in 2017 for Marawi City by pro-ISIS fighters who, though on the defensive, still pose a threat.

**Why does it matter?** The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region should represent the end of the Moro conflict with the Philippine state. Proponents portray it as an “antidote to extremism”. But the new administration has to confront a corrupt, inefficient local bureaucracy, clan conflict and ongoing violence by pro-ISIS groups.

**What should be done?** The Bangsamoro government, with Manila's and donors' support, should respond to the grievances of those in Muslim Mindanao sceptical of the new autonomous region, help 30,000 MILF fighters return to civilian life, try to win over Islamist armed groups outside the peace process and redouble efforts to deliver social services.

## *Executive Summary*

The inauguration in March 2019 of a new autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao marks the culmination of a decades-long peace process between the Philippines government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Advocates for the new region promote it as “the antidote to extremism”. Indeed, Filipino lawmakers passed legislation setting up the autonomous region in part due to fear, after a five-month battle in Marawi city in 2017 between Philippines forces and local groups aligned with the Islamic State (ISIS), that delays in the peace process were fuelling militancy. Military operations have since ground down ISIS-linked groups, but those groups could still disrupt the transition or gain recruits from its failure. Priorities for the new Bangsamoro transition authority include delivering quick wins in service provision, reaching out to Mindanaoans sceptical of the new autonomous region, helping MILF fighters return to civilian life and continuing efforts to win over armed groups that reject the peace process. For their part, the Philippine armed forces should avoid military tactics that displace large numbers of civilians.

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao should represent the end of the Moro struggle for self-determination and the resolution of the conflict between Moros and the Philippine state. The new autonomous region’s leaders must now fulfil the political aspirations of 3.5 million Muslim Mindanaoans. But the transition faces many challenges. The region has a long history of separatist fronts fracturing when peace deals are reached and splinter groups taking up arms again against the state and their former allies. Such fragmentation, if repeated, could create new recruiting opportunities for Islamist militants, including those associated with ISIS. The MILF itself must undertake the fraught task of transforming from rebel movement into political party and government. It must decommission fighters and commanders, many of whom will likely resist giving up weapons given the number of other armed groups still active and the prevalence of arms in Mindanao.

Armed groups outside of the peace process pose the gravest security threat to the new autonomous region. Several proclaim allegiance to ISIS; most profess also to fight for Moro independence. The five-month battle for Marawi City in Lanao del Sur province in 2017 represented the high-water mark of a pro-ISIS alliance that united fighters from Mindanao’s three largest ethnic groups, the Tausug, Maranao and Maguindanao. Since the Philippine armed forces ousted the militants in October 2017, ISIS-linked groups have been under heavy military pressure in mainland Mindanao, as well as the island provinces of Basilan and Sulu, where loosely organised factions of the Abu Sayyaf Group hold out. Despite this pressure, groups that pledged fealty to ISIS have staged several damaging bombings over the past year and continue fighting the security forces.

Manila’s response has been predominantly military. Its recapture of Marawi, involving artillery and airstrikes, left much of the city centre in ruins. Locals resent the lack of reconstruction since then. After the Marawi siege, aggressive operations have continued against small bands of militants, leaving most of them weakened but in places displacing large numbers of civilians. Congress has three times extended martial law – instituted in Mindanao on the first day of the Marawi siege – most recently

until the end of 2019. Officials argue that martial law is necessary because existing counter-terrorism legislation is inadequate.

Critical to countering the appeal of Islamist militancy is a successful transition to autonomy, initially via the interim Bangsamoro Transitional Administration which is run by the MILF and will govern the region until elections in 2022. In this effort, it faces an enormous challenge amid high expectations. Greater autonomy, accountable and representative leadership, and redressing “historical injustices” against the Moro should erode at least some support for militants who tap into those grievances, among others, to recruit. The new regional authorities also need to act quickly to deliver services, curb corruption and show that peace brings dividends, tasks for which they will need donors’ support. Perhaps most urgently, given that those authorities neither control local governments nor command their own regional police force – both still report to Manila – they and the Philippine government need to agree on how the new region will shoulder its responsibility for security and governance.

Specific steps that could bolster the new Bangsamoro region’s prospects for success include:

- ❑ The Philippine armed forces should avoid tactics that cause displacement and generate local anger. Aerial bombardments and artillery fire may have been necessary to dislodge militants from Marawi, but are less suited to the operations in rural areas that have taken place since then.
- ❑ The Bangsamoro Transitional Authority should seek to meet high popular expectations, notably by demonstrating that the new region can bring a peace dividend. Delivering services, particularly improvements in access to health, education and improved road connections, is a priority. The MILF should ally with existing clan-connected local governments, given the important service delivery role those governments play.
- ❑ The MILF should seek to involve representatives of areas that voted against establishing the autonomous region in its decision-making to help gain wider buy-in (especially, but not only, in Sulu, where militancy remains a significant concern). Donors should consider supporting quick-impact projects in such areas. Nothing suggests those areas’ inhabitants will turn *en masse* to jihadism, but their alienation would hinder efforts to contain militant groups. At the same time, MILF leaders should continue efforts to persuade armed groups that reject the peace process to abandon their armed struggle and join it in decommissioning.
- ❑ The new regional authority and donors should fully fund programs to help demobilised MILF and other fighters find new livelihoods to avoid a new potential recruitment pool for militants and other armed groups. But the new authorities and donors should be clear-eyed: rather than seeking large-scale disarmament, which is unlikely to succeed, they should consider negotiating formal or informal agreements among MILF commands and other armed groups on weapons management.

Although Islamist militancy is far from the only challenge facing the new Bangsamoro region, it remains a significant threat in Mindanao. ISIS-linked groups are on the back foot and their numbers small; still, they conduct disruptive attacks across diverse locations in Mindanao, could undercut confidence in the transition

authority and potentially could be reinvigorated by MILF splinters or disillusioned former fighters. A successful Bangsamoro is unlikely to wholly eradicate militancy, but a failed one almost certainly would lead to disillusionment and anger that could reinvigorate jihadist and other violent groups and poison prospects for peace in Mindanao.

**Manila/Brussels, 27 June 2019**

# The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro

## I. Introduction

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The establishment in March 2019 of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao purportedly marks the end of nearly a half-century of Moro separatist conflict in the southern Philippines.<sup>1</sup> More than forty years of fitful negotiations between the Philippine government and Muslim secessionist fronts – first the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), then, since 1997, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) – reached a milestone with congressional approval of the Bangsamoro Organic Law in July 2018.<sup>2</sup> That law is the legal instrument for the implementation of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, in principle ending a conflict that has cost more than 120,000 lives.<sup>3</sup> A new autonomous region, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, replaced the existing autonomous region created in 1989.<sup>4</sup> Voters in Muslim Mindanao emphatically endorsed the organic law in a two-stage plebiscite in early 2019, after Congress passed the law. The plebiscite ratified the new autonomous region and determined its geographical scope.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°80, *Southern Philippines Backgrounder: Terrorism and the Peace Process*, 13 July 2004. For terrorism in Mindanao, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 152, *The Philippines: Counter-insurgency vs. Counter-terrorism in Mindanao*, 14 May 2008; and 110, *Philippines Terrorism: The Role of Militant Islamic Converts*, 19 December 2005. “Moro” refers to the Muslim inhabitants of Mindanao, though the MNLF and MILF have attempted to expand the appellation to local Christians who trace their ancestry to the pre-colonial era and indigenous people in the Bangsamoro region willing to accept the ascription.

<sup>2</sup> For earlier stages of the peace process and related issues, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°281 *The Philippines: Renewing Prospects for Peace in Mindanao*, 6 July 2016; 248, *The Philippines: Dismantling Rebel Groups*, 19 June 2013; 240, *The Philippines: Breakthrough in Mindanao*, 5 December 2012; 225, *The Philippines: Local Politics in the Sulu Archipelago and the MILF Peace Process*, 15 May 2012; 213, *The Philippines: Indigenous Rights and the MILF Peace Process*, 22 November 2011; Briefings N°s 125, *The Philippines: A New Strategy for Peace in Mindanao?*, 3 August 2011; 119, *The Philippines: Back to the Table, Warily, in Mindanao*, 24 March 2011; 88, *The Philippines: Running in Place in Mindanao*, 16 February 2009; 83, *The Philippines: The Collapse of Peace in Mindanao*, 23 October 2008.

<sup>3</sup> An accurate count is not available, but the toll of those killed is almost certainly higher. The number of 120,000 killed, widely repeated in media and other reports, appears to date to 1996, and cover the period 1969-1995. Francisco J. Lara, Jr., *Insurgents, Clans and States: Political Legitimacy and Resurgent Conflict in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines* (Manila, 2014), p. 62, note 8.

<sup>4</sup> The Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was established by Republic Act 6734, amended in 2001 by Republic Act 9054.

<sup>5</sup> The ARMM comprised the provinces of Basilan (excluding Isabella City), Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. In contrast, the new autonomous region encompasses the former ARMM territory, excluding Isabella City on Basilan Island, but adds Cotabato City and 63 villages in Cotabato province. With a turnout of 80 per cent, voters in Sulu province voted “No” to ratification of the law, 163,526 to 137,630.

Passage of the Organic Law was difficult and slow, beset by years of delays and outbreaks of violence. Even under President Rodrigo Duterte, the first Filipino president from Mindanao and a supporter of the law, it languished in Congress, with many politicians sceptical of both the MILF and the autonomy deal. The MILF warned that local frustration with delays in the peace process was fuelling jihadist militancy and strengthening armed groups outside the peace process. Several such groups pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 and 2015. Under the banner of Daulah Islamiyah (a name that also translates as Islamic State), an alliance between some of these groups demonstrated unexpected capabilities in seizing parts of Marawi City in Lanao del Sur and holding out against the armed forces from late May to early October 2017.<sup>6</sup> The shock of the battle for Marawi, the largest engagement by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) since WWII, and the MILF's argument that further delays would benefit militants, helped propel the organic law's passage in Congress.

This report examines the challenges facing the new autonomous region and its MILF-dominated interim authority, particularly their ability to contain militants who oppose the peace process, including those inspired by ISIS. It draws on research in Mindanao and Manila, conducted between late 2017 and June 2019, including interviews with national and local officials, military and police officers, civil society representatives and non-governmental organisations, local politicians, security and political analysts based in Mindanao, senior MILF leaders and members of the Bangsamoro Transition Commission and the Bangsamoro Transition Authority. Security concerns precluded research in Sulu province. It was not possible to meet active jihadists, but research included interviews with several former militants who fought in Marawi and surrendered to security forces in late 2017.

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<sup>6</sup> "Philippines: Addressing Islamist militancy after the battle for Marawi", International Crisis Group, 17 July 2018.



## II. Militancy in Mindanao and the Battle for Marawi

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ISIS is only the latest avatar of jihadist militancy in Mindanao. Since the late 1980s, after Moro veterans of the Afghanistan war against the Soviet Union began returning to the island, foreign fighters, mostly from Indonesia and Malaysia but also other parts of the world, took refuge with the MNLF and MILF. They imparted tactical and technical know-how and, with less success, jihadist ideology; both the MNLF and MILF, however, remained focused on their local struggle for self-rule not global jihadist aspirations. Indeed, under pressure during the U.S.-led “war on terror” to sever ties with transnational terrorist groups, the MILF expelled foreign jihadists from its camps in the mid-2000s. Small numbers of foreign fighters continued to find refuge in Mindanao with splinter groups that stayed outside the peace process.<sup>7</sup>

The Daulah Islamiyah Wilayatul Mashriq (Islamic State-Eastern Region), an alliance of ISIS-affiliated groups, formed in late 2015 with the aim of establishing an ISIS *wilayah* (province) in Mindanao. It united militant groups dominated by the three largest ethno-linguistic groups in Muslim Mindanao: a faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group, mostly Tausugs and some Yakan; the Maute Group of Lanao del Sur, mostly Maranaos; and a faction of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), dominated by Maguindanaoans. Dr. Mahmud bin Ahmad, a Malaysian militant, reportedly facilitated the alliance’s creation, served as its main link to ISIS in Iraq and Syria and helped transfer funds from Syria via Indonesia.<sup>8</sup> In addition to allegiance to ISIS, symbolised by oaths sworn by the groups’ leaders to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, these groups maintain at least a formal commitment to Moro independence and reject the Bangsamoro peace process. Until 2017, the Daulah Islamiyah alliance appears to have remained fragmented, with each group operating largely in its own area.

In 2017, Daulah Islamiyah’s siege of Marawi City demonstrated organisation and capabilities that caught Manila, local officials and the MILF offguard. Located in an upland region on the shore of Lake Lanao, Marawi is the capital of Lanao del Sur province and a centre of commerce, religion and education in the Maranao heartland. As the Philippine’s only “Islamic City”, a designation that the city council bestowed in 1980, the siege was imbued with symbolism for many Mindanao Muslims, particularly the Maranao.

On 23 May 2017, security forces attempted to arrest Isnilon Hapilon, leader of a Basilan-based Abu Sayyaf faction, in Marawi City. Recognised in an ISIS publication, Al-Naba, as *amir* of Islamic State forces in the Philippines, Hapilon had apparently arrived in Lanao del Sur in December 2016 with authority to consolidate the pro-ISIS alliance with Abdullah and Omar Maute brothers.<sup>9</sup> The brothers’ Maute Group had been staging ever-larger attacks in and around Butig, their mother’s hometown,

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<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group email correspondence, Mindanao peace process expert, November 2018; Crisis Group report, *Counter-insurgency vs. Counter-terrorism*, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, *Marawi, the “East Asia Wilayah” and Indonesia*, IPAC Report No. 38, 21 July 2017; Felipe Villamor, “Key ISIS operative in the Philippines”, *The New York Times*, 19 October 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Philippine Government submission to Supreme Court, “Consolidated Comment, G.R. Nos. 23658, 23771 & 231774”, 12 June 2017.

near Marawi.<sup>10</sup> The botched attempt to arrest Hapilon led the alliance to launch, ahead of schedule, a planned assault on the city.<sup>11</sup> Hundreds of gunmen under Hapilon's and the Maute brothers' command poured into the streets, taking hostages and battling soldiers. As the fight stretched into days, then weeks, Maute Group fighters from surrounding areas who had not participated in the initial attack, many arriving by boat from Lake Lanao, bolstered the Daulah Islamiyah's rank; others, some disillusioned, later escaped by the same route.<sup>12</sup>

Over the course of a five-month battle, the Philippines armed forces conducted airstrikes on militants lodged in Marawi's fortress-like homes, built to withstand the violence of clan feuds. By the end of the siege, the city centre was heavily damaged, more than 1,130 people had been killed (974 militants, 165 soldiers and police officers and 47 civilians, according to the government), and some 1,400 were wounded.<sup>13</sup> The fighting forced some 600,000 residents from Marawi and nearby towns to flee.<sup>14</sup>

The Marawi siege was unusual in part because of its international dimension. The Daulah Islamiyah reportedly sought to seize Marawi in order to gain recognition from ISIS' global leadership, which, although squeezed in Iraq and Syria, still controlled large parts of those countries and whose brand, in 2017, remained reasonably strong among jihadist militants worldwide.<sup>15</sup> Philippine security officials believe the siege aimed to fulfil two requirements for recognition as an ISIS province: controlling territory and unifying local jihadist groups in ISIS's cause.<sup>16</sup> Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said in January 2017 that ISIS leaders in Syria instructed Hapilon to find territory suitable for a province of the caliphate.<sup>17</sup> Former Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Eduardo Año said ISIS gave the Maute group at least \$1.5 million for the Marawi siege.<sup>18</sup> Dr. Mahmud, the Malaysian militant, reportedly recruited for-

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<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interviews, academic from Marawi, Quezon City, February 2019; former Maute Group fighters, Marawi, March 2019.

<sup>11</sup> On 8 June 2017, the military released a video of Hapilon, the Maute brothers and others plotting the Marawi siege, which authorities believed the alliance planned to send to ISIS as proof of the group's ability to establish a base in Mindanao. Carmela Fonbuena, "Terror in Mindanao: The Mautes of Marawi", Rappler.com, 26 June 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former Maute Group fighters, Marawi, March 2019.

<sup>13</sup> The fighting cost the military \$70 million, while the city's rehabilitation and reconstruction is estimated by the Office of Civil Defence at three billion dollars. "Battle for Marawi deepens Philippines' military budget challenge", *The Diplomat* (online), 22 September 2017; "Marawi rehab could cost up to P150 billion", GMA News Online, 17 October 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Evacuees fled primarily to Iligan City, Cagayan de Oro City and adjacent municipalities. Roughly 80 per cent of the evacuees sheltered with family and friends while the rest, including Marawi's poorest residents, stayed in government evacuation centres. Crisis Group interview, ARMM senior official, Cotabato City, 21 November 2017. "Displaced persons due to Marawi Crisis reach 600,000", CNN Philippines, 14 August 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Filipino army officer; civil society representative, Marawi, February 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interview, Filipino army officer, Singapore, March 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Carmela Fonbuena, "ISIS makes direct contact with Abu Sayyaf, wants caliphate in PH", Rappler.com, 26 January 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Amy Chew, "Fears of another Marawi as Islamic State militants regroup, plan suicide bombings", Channel News Asia, 6 November 2017.

eigners to travel to Mindanao.<sup>19</sup> Dr. Mahmud died in the battle, alongside at least 40 foreign fighters.<sup>20</sup>

The Daulah Islamiyah also exploited a chaotic social and political situation in Marawi. Before the siege, Marawi had a high level of violent crime and a reputation as the centre of Muslim Mindanao's drug trade.<sup>21</sup> Two former mayors were named as "narco-politicians" in a watch list issued by President Duterte in August 2017; both men maintain their innocence, and one, Omar "Solitario" Ali, was briefly removed from the list.<sup>22</sup> These former mayors are related to the Maute clan, which owned construction and other businesses. The family was also associated with the MILF in Lanao del Sur. The Maute clan was involved in conflicts with local politicians, including the vice governor of the province and the mayor of Butig, where the Maute Group repeatedly clashed with the armed forces in 2016. The local political dimension of the crisis in Marawi is obscure, but army officers, politicians, residents and former Daulah Islamiyah fighters acknowledge it as a factor.<sup>23</sup>

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about how ISIS-linked groups won support ahead of the Marawi siege or why young people, mostly men, in Mindanao turn to militancy. Daulah Islamiyah recruiters appear to exploit a wide array of grievances. That said, common themes emerge from local accounts, including interviews with former militants. Recruiters emphasise opportunities to study Islam and stress the imperative of defending Islam and one's community from its enemies. Maute Group recruiters were often skilled preachers, who contrasted the purity of the proposed Islamic State with the appalling character of local politics. Family and other personal ties often play a role, but some rank-and-file fighters report joining Daulah Islamiyah without knowing anyone who had done so.<sup>24</sup> Recruiters also stoked anger at Manila, the Philippines armed forces and national and local authorities' perceived corruption and deficits in service delivery, though many Mindanaoans share those resentments without joining ISIS.

Militants express contempt, often along generational lines, for established elites, including the MILF for its perceived sell out; Owayda Benito Marohosamsar, alias

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<sup>19</sup> Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, *Marawi, the "East Asia Wilayah" and Indonesia*, IPAC Report No. 38, 21 July 2017; Felipe Villamor, "Key ISIS operative in the Philippines", *The New York Times*, 19 October 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior army officer, Marawi, March 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Rufa Cagoco-Guiam and Steven Schoofs, "A Deadly Cocktail? Illicit Drugs, Politics and Violent Conflict in Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao", in Francisco J. Lara and Steven Schoofs (eds.), *Out of the Shadows: Violent Conflict and the Real Economy of Mindanao* (Quezon City, 2016), p. 138; John Unson, "Hataman: ARMM's drugs problem worse than terrorism", *Philippine Star*, 22 January 2013; John Unson, "Task force mull to address strife, lawlessness in Marawi", Notre Dame Broadcasting Corporation News, 10 October 2015.

<sup>22</sup> "Ex-mayors of Marawi hold out", *The Manila Times*, 8 August 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Majul Gandamra, Marawi mayor, Iligan, 5 February 2019; former Maute Group fighters, Marawi, February 2019; former Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao assemblyman, Cotabato City, March 2019; Philippines army officer, March 2019. International Alert Philippines, *Conflict Alert 2018: War and Identity* (2018); Patricio N. Abinales, "Moro Societies in the Philippines before and after the 2017 Marawi Crisis", paper for Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University, 20th Anniversary Symposium, October 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former Maute Group fighters, Marawi, February and March 2019; Dimnatang Pansar, mayor, Butig, February 2019.

Abu Dar, a Daulah Islamiyah leader, told an informant, “The moment you sit down with [the Philippine government], that’s the end of the struggle”.<sup>25</sup> Militancy might also offer opportunities for profit, personal advancement or adventure. The Maute Group gave money to the families of some recruits who joined the fighting in Marawi.<sup>26</sup> Overall, however, generalisations can be misleading because motivations for participation in violence vary from place to place and individual to individual.

Both the MILF and officials in Manila maintained that the slow pace and fitful progress of the peace process fuelled the surge of militancy that led to the Marawi takeover. MILF Chairman Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim said, “We can roughly conclude that all these splinter groups are a result of the frustration with the peace process”.<sup>27</sup> Successive setbacks and the perceived fickleness of politicians in Manila threatened to erode popular confidence in the MILF’s leadership, which had committed itself to the peace process. Their arguments appear to have won the day, in that the Philippine Congress passed the Bangsamoro Organic Law, setting up the new autonomous region, in large part due to legislators’ recognition that its delay had proven counterproductive. A senior army officer observed that passing the law would “negate frustrations” that years of fighting had achieved so little.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, academic from Marawi, Quezon City, February 2019.

<sup>26</sup> One former fighter said his family received 25,000 pesos (\$490) for his participation, but his motivation to join the battle was revenge for the army’s killing of his religious teacher rather than money. Crisis Group interviews, former Maute Group fighters, Marawi, February 2019.

<sup>27</sup> “MILF chief: 30,000 rebels to disarm in Bangsamoro deal”, Associated Press, 25 July 2018. Throughout this report the names used for individuals are those by which they are best known; often, especially MILF leaders, these are *noms de guerre*. While legal names are gaining currency, particularly upon the inauguration of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, commonly used names are used in this report to avoid confusion.

<sup>28</sup> Lt. General Carlito Galvez, Western Mindanao Command commander, in “BBL important part of peace efforts in Mindanao – military official”, GMA News, 9 November 2017.

### III. Challenges for the Bangsamoro

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#### A. *Guerrillas to Governors*

The success of the new autonomous region and, in turn, its ability to diminish militancy's appeal in Mindanao hinges in large part on the transformation into a government of the MILF, which calls itself a "revolutionary organisation".<sup>29</sup> The Bangsamoro Transition Authority – an 80-member interim governing body whose formation marks the first stage toward establishment of the new autonomous region – has three years to build a parliamentary regional government and a bureaucracy capable of administering and delivering social services. It must do so in the Philippines' poorest region.<sup>30</sup>

That transition authority is mandated by the Bangsamoro Organic Law to administer the region until parliamentary elections in May 2022 and the formation of an elected regional Bangsamoro government in June 2022. It includes 41 figures nominated by the MILF and 39 selected by the national government, all appointed by President Duterte. Its members were sworn in at the presidential Malacañang Palace on 22 February 2019, and a ceremonial turnover from the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, established in 1989 as part of a peace deal with the MNLF, took place in Cotabato City four days later. Philippines Chief Minister Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim appointed the twelve members of the transition authority's interim cabinet in late March; six are Maguindanaoan, two Maranao, one Tausug and one indigenous, a Teduray. The two remaining ministers each represent a single, smaller Moro group.<sup>31</sup>

One challenge for the new autonomous region is the legal basis for oversight of local government, a problem that had persistently plagued its predecessor.<sup>32</sup> The organic law does not give the new regional government jurisdiction over local government units – villages, municipalities and provinces. The local legislative and executive offices are often dominated by powerful clans, even as they remain subject to national laws and institutions.<sup>33</sup> Instead, the organic law mandates several Intergovernmental Relations Bodies to "coordinate and resolve issues [...] through regular consultation and continuing negotiation in a non-adversarial manner".<sup>34</sup> These bod-

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<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohagher Iqbal, Bangsamoro Minister of Basic, Higher and Technical Education, Cotabato City, 11 March 2019.

<sup>30</sup> The Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao had the highest poverty rate, lowest per capita regional gross domestic product, lowest life expectancy at birth (men and women), lowest net enrolment in elementary school, and lowest level of connection to the electricity grid of all of the country's sixteen regions. Malcolm Cook, "Three Challenges Facing the Bangsamoro Organic Law", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 82, December 2018, p. 4 and Appendix 1, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> As of mid-June 2019, ministers for Transportation and Communication and Trade, Investments, and Tourism has not been appointed. Crisis Group electronic correspondence, member, Bangsamoro Transition Authority, June 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil society organisation representative, Cotabato City, March 2019.

<sup>33</sup> "Analysts weigh in on Bangsamoro powers, functions", *Business World*, 7 April 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Republic Act No. 11054, Article VI, Section 2. These bodies include the National Government-Bangsamoro Government Intergovernmental Relations Body, the Philippine Congress-Bangsamoro Parliament Forum, Fiscal Policy Board, Joint Body for Zones of Joint Cooperation, Infrastructure Development Board, Energy Board and Sustainable Development Board.

ies are meant to ensure that the Bangsamoro autonomous region has greater power than ordinary local governments in working with national agencies. How these coordinating and mediating bodies, which have not yet been constituted, will function in practice remains uncertain.

The organic law's economic provisions are attractive to the MILF and should change power dynamics in the region, but it is not clear how soon the transition authority can access the new resources. The new autonomous region is to receive an annual block grant equivalent to 5 per cent of net national revenue, in addition to an annual allocation of five billion pesos (\$96 million) for ten years to rehabilitate conflict-affected areas. The block grant is meant to be available in 2020, but its actual allocation is subject to national political decision-making.<sup>35</sup> In 2019, the transitional authority is able to spend 31 billion pesos (\$600 million) originally budgeted for the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao.<sup>36</sup> Control of the block grant should give the new authorities a carrot to motivate commanders and combatants from MILF and other groups to decommission and potentially to win over parts of Mindanao that did not support the peace deal.

Provisions for a Bangsamoro police force specified in the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro did not survive Congress and are not included in the organic law. Instead, a Regional Police Office under the Philippine National Police will provide security in the region. The lack of a Bangsamoro force, reporting to the region's authorities, is a disappointment for the MILF, but their negotiators chose not to jeopardise the organic law by pressing the issue.<sup>37</sup> MNLF and MILF members will be eligible to join the Regional Police force. Some decommissioned MILF fighters will likely apply to the regional police force, but there is no quota for former combatants as there was for the MNLF under the 1996 peace agreement. A Moro activist in Marawi observed:

Peace, order and security should be the key thing in the law, but this all rests with the national government. Allow us to police our own. Who else can deal with the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and Abu Sayyaf Group?<sup>38</sup>

Whether the interim authority and the autonomous region's eventual government will be able to improve service delivery and win over all the region's inhabitants is far from clear. The MILF must prove it has the capacity to lead a transitional gov-

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<sup>35</sup> The Bangsamoro Organic Law provides for the "automatic allocation" and "regular release" of the 5 per cent block grant, but it also requires that "national laws and the budgeting rules and regulations of the Department of Budget and Management and Department of the Interior and Local Government applicable to local government units shall apply". Some local observers believe that the national government may be reluctant to disburse the block grant if the transition authority cannot demonstrate the capacity to administer it or if the Bangsamoro government fails to adhere to national laws. Others are confident that the Crisis Group interviews, political analyst, Cotabato City, March 2019; NGO representative, Manila, June 2019; email correspondence, NGO representative; and email correspondence, governance expert, Manila, June 2019. Republic Act No. 11054, Article XII, Sections 17, 18 and 19.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, member, Bangsamoro Transition Authority, Cotabato City, 12 March 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohagher Iqbal, Bangsamoro Minister of Basic, Higher and Technical Education, Cotabato City, 11 March 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Marawi, 18 March 2019.

ernment and deal with a variety of constituencies and actors in the Bangsamoro: from minorities like the Lumad (indigenous peoples) and Christians to local politicians and clan leaders. Bangsamoro unity has long been elusive.<sup>39</sup> A new autonomous region dominated by the mostly Maguindanaoan MILF does not sit well with many MNLF supporters, who are largely Tausug, not to mention the Christians and indigenous communities.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, former Sulu Governor Sakur Tan filed a petition with the Supreme Court in October 2018 for a Temporary Restraining Order to stop the plebiscite.<sup>41</sup> Tan is a long-time critic of the peace process with the MILF, believing that an autonomous government led by mainlanders in Maguindanao will not benefit the island provinces.<sup>42</sup> As of early June 2019, Bangsamoro Chief Minister and MILF leader Al-Haj Murad had not yet visited the western islands of Sulu, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi in his role as chief minister of the transition authority; while Tawi-Tawi and Basilan voted in support of the autonomous region, Sulu did not, and still needs to be brought on board.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, many in Mindanao, including some in the transition authority, are unhappy with what they see as the exclusive, heavily Maguindanaoan composition of that authority and the Bangsamoro Transition Authority interim cabinet. Even as officials talk about inclusivity, “this [imbalance] sends the wrong message”, said one member of the transition authority.<sup>44</sup> Some observers detect a refusal among MILF leaders to share authority, attributable to a lack of trust. Instead, they are seen as centralising power.<sup>45</sup>

The MILF could also face internal challenges. Its leaders acknowledge six main command bases, which encompass military bases and control over communities living in areas surrounding those bases in central Mindanao.<sup>46</sup> The central MILF committee exercises sometimes tenuous control over base commanders, who are embedded in a social system organised by kinship; loyalty to powerful local clans

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<sup>39</sup> Miriam Coronel Ferrer, “Forging a Peace Settlement for the Bangsamoro: Compromises and Challenges”, in Paul D. Hutchcroft, (ed.), *Mindanao: The Long Journey to Peace and Prosperity* (Mandaluyong City 2016), pp. 124-127. According to the 2000 census, Lumads accounted for only 2 per cent of the population (around 60,000) in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, compared to Muslims who constitute 90 per cent (roughly 2.5 million). Crisis Group Report, *Indigenous Rights*, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local official, Marawi City, 25 August 2018; MNLF supporter, Cotabato City, February 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Lian Buan, “Governor Tan of Sulu runs to Supreme Court to block Bangsamoro law”, *Rappler.com*, 30 October 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Local Politics in the Sulu Archipelago*, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> Isabella City in Basilan voted against incorporation into the Bangsamoro. Sulu voters narrowly rejected the Bangsamoro Organic Law, but as the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao voted as a single unit, Sulu joined the new autonomous region.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interview, member, Bangsamoro Transition Authority, Cotabato City, 12 March 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, NGO representative, Manila, June 2019.

<sup>46</sup> These are Camp Abubakar, Camp Omar, Camp Badar in Maguindanao; Camp Bushra in Lanao del Sur; Camp Bilal, on the Lanao del Norte-Lanao del Sur border; and Camp Rajamudah in North Cotabato.

sometimes competes with loyalty to the MILF leadership.<sup>47</sup> Local observers expressed concern before the organic law's passage that the MILF senior leadership's control over its commanders, and the commanders' control over the rank-and-file, was weakening.<sup>48</sup> Factionalism also appears to be growing within its leadership as it transitions into a government with access to new sources of funds and influence. According to one local observer: "They are liquidating the MILF and saving themselves".<sup>49</sup> Perceptions that the MILF leadership is cashing in on its prominence in the new autonomous region could alienate commanders.

The passage of the organic law and inauguration of the new region have bought the MILF leadership some time. But potential disaffection among its factions remains arguably as much a risk as the possible disillusionment of non-Maguindanaoans or the population as a whole.<sup>50</sup>

## B. "Normalisation" and Decommissioning

The so-called Normalisation Process is codified in an annex to the 2014 peace agreement.<sup>51</sup> It encompasses security, including decommissioning the MILF's armed force (the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces), socio-economic development, confidence-building measures, and transitional justice and reconciliation. On 24 April 2019, Duterte issued Executive Order No. 79, establishing the Inter-Cabinet Cluster Mechanism on Normalisation to oversee the process, which Chief Minister Murad Ebrahim acknowledged was lagging behind the peace agreement's political track.<sup>52</sup>

Decommissioning, which entails demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration, is both essential and difficult.<sup>53</sup> According to the peace agreement, there are four phases of decommissioning. The first, a token transfer of 75 firearms and the return to civilian life by 145 MILF combatants, was marked by a ceremony in 2015. The second phase, decommissioning 30 per cent of fighters, was to take place upon passage of the organic law authorising the Bangsamoro. The MILF submitted a list of

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<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Cotabato City, April 2019; Peter Kreuzer, *Political Clans and Violence in the Southern Philippines*, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt Reports 71 (2005), p. 13; Jeroen Adam, "Bringing Grievances Back In: Towards an Alternative Understanding of the Rise of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, vol. 174, no. 1 (2018), p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Cotabato City-based attorney, Manila, February 2019; Ziaur-Rahman Alonto Adiong, former ARMM assemblyman, Cotabato City, 12 March 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Cotabato City, April 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, Edward Guerra, Minister of Finance, Budget and Management, Cotabato City, 11 March 2019.

<sup>51</sup> The Annex states, "Normalization is a process whereby communities can achieve their desired quality of life, which includes the pursuit of sustainable livelihood and political participation within a peaceful deliberative society".

<sup>52</sup> Bong S. Sarmiento, "EO on normalization a big boost to Bangsamoro peace deal, MILF says", *MindaNews*, 3 May 2019.

<sup>53</sup> The MILF objects to the conventional terminology of "DDR", which they believe smacks of the counter-insurgency and connotes capitulation. The terminology "putting weapons beyond use" was adopted from the Northern Ireland peace process. Crisis Group interview, Mohagher Iqbal, chairperson, Peace Implementing Panel, MILF, Cotabato City, 5 December 2018; Crisis Group report, *Disarming Rebel Groups*, op. cit., p. 2.



12,000 combatants to the decommissioning body in March. The process is to be completed in November. The two last stages, involving first a further 35 per cent of fighters, and then the remainder, are supposed to be completed by the end of the transition authority's term in 2022.

Many former MILF combatants are likely to resist disarmament. They are meant to turn their arms over to an Independent Decommissioning Body, comprised of representatives from Turkey, Norway, and Brunei Darussalam. That body is charged with verifying and registering combatants, conducting an inventory of MILF weapons, collecting and storing weapons and, in the final phase, putting them beyond use. Many weapons in fighters' hands are owned by individuals and families who may be reluctant to surrender weapons, which they see as essential for their security, given the prevalence of firearms, clan disputes and private armed groups in Mindanao. MILF commanders may also be hesitant to fully disarm for the same reason.<sup>54</sup> Murad said there are only 6,000 to 7,000 MILF-owned weapons, a number that some observers consider too low.<sup>55</sup>

The success of decommissioning rests foremost on the benefits package promised to former combatants who lay down their arms. Only a small proportion of former MILF fighters, numbering in the hundreds, are likely to be able to enter the regional police force, and others will be disinclined to do so given it is not controlled by the Bangsamoro authority. Socio-economic benefits made available to the 145 fighters demobilised in 2015 reportedly failed to meet those combatants' and their communities' expectations.<sup>56</sup> That said, though details are still being worked out, the MILF leadership has expressed confidence that government and international partners who work on the issue will improve the package for the next phase.<sup>57</sup> Officials have indicated that vocational training and scholarships will be offered to combatants and their family members. The government says it will offer 100,000 pesos (\$1,925) in cash to each combatant as a goodwill measure.<sup>58</sup>

Decommissioning will be vital to preventing former MILF combatants from joining militant groups. A minister in the transition authority said:

I told the Philippine government we need a better package because we have competition [from extremist groups] [...] Combatants will be watching. Does something good happen for the first batch [to decommission]? Important that it works well, for us and for the government.<sup>59</sup>

Fighters who feel abandoned by their leaders could join armed groups outside the peace process. An MNLF supporter said, "If they can't care for the [MILF] combat-

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<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, member, Bangsamoro Transition Authority, Cotabato City, April 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cotabato City-based attorney, Manila, March 2019; Bong S. Sarmiento, "Galvez: Gov't, MILF drafting IRR of Annex on Normalization", *MindaNews*, 9 March 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cotabato City-based attorney, June 2019; Third Party Monitoring Team, "Fifth Public Report, July 2017 to February 2019", 11 March 2019, p. 19.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohagher Iqbal, Bangsamoro Minister of Basic, Higher and Technical Education, Cotabato City, 11 March 2019.

<sup>58</sup> Bong S. Sarmiento, "Galvez: P1.2B needed as aid to MILF fighters", *Inquirer.net*, 26 April 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, Edward Guerra, Bangsamoro Minister of Finance, Budget and Management, Cotabato City, 11 March 2019.

ants, BIFF is waiting for them”.<sup>60</sup> The generational divide evident in Maute Group propaganda that portrayed the MILF as sell-outs could widen.

### C. *Bangsamoro Autonomy: An Antidote to Extremism?*

The MILF leadership has long described autonomy for the Bangsamoro as the “antidote to extremism”.<sup>61</sup> Prior to the organic law’s passage, MILF chairman Mohagher Iqbal said the law addresses the grievances of the Bangsamoro people, “and once passed it will make violent extremism irrelevant”.<sup>62</sup> For the MILF leadership, the creation of a new autonomous region vindicates their decision to stick with the peace process.<sup>63</sup> Iqbal said, “When we are part of the government, we will have both moral and legal authority to tackle terrorists”.<sup>64</sup> The hoped-for antidote properties of the new autonomous region lie primarily in providing better access to health services and education, improved infrastructure, notably road connections, and establishing more accountable and representative leadership: “We want to remove oppression, discrimination as a reason to rebel”.<sup>65</sup>

As the realities of governing become evident, a greater sense of the limitations of autonomy may be dawning. Iqbal said that without its own police force, the new Bangsamoro government is “powerless” to use force in combating “extremism”: “In view of that”, he said, “we will organise the people. Extremism is part of the human psyche. We can’t prevent it, but we will try to prevent its organisation”. According to Iqbal, this primarily means improving the quality of education available to people in the Bangsamoro.<sup>66</sup> Clearly, however, such efforts would at best yield results only over time.

One concrete step the MILF can take is to try to bring groups outside the peace process, including splinters, back into the mainstream. Following passage of the organic law, the MILF reached out to two factions from the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), a group that split from the MILF in 2008 – one faction led by Ustadz Karialan (Imam Minimbang) and the other by Ismael Abubakar (Imam Bungos) – in an effort to bring them into the MILF fold.<sup>67</sup> Both factions initially responded

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<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interview, MNLF supporter, Cotabato City, February 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Mohagher Iqbal, chairperson, Peace Implementing Panel, MILF, Cotabato City, 22 November 2017 and 5 December 2018; Arienne Apatan, “With new Bangsamoro law, MILF opens doors to BIFF members”, ABS-CBN News, 30 July 2018; Amy Chew, “Islamic State’s grip widening in southern Philippines, says MILF leader”, Channel News Asia, 5 November 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohagher Iqbal, chairperson, Peace Implementing Panel, MILF, Cotabato City, 22 November 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohagher Iqbal, Bangsamoro Minister of Basic, Higher and Technical Education, Cotabato City, April 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohagher Iqbal, chairperson, Peace Implementing Panel, MILF, Cotabato City, 5 December 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interview, Edward Guerra, Bangsamoro Minister of Finance, Budget and Management, Cotabato City, 11 March 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Mohagher Iqbal, Bangsamoro Minister of Basic, Higher and Technical Education, Cotabato City, 11 March and 17 April 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohagher Iqbal, Cotabato City, 5 December 2018; “With new Bangsamoro law, MILF opens doors to BIFF members”, ABS-CBN News, 30 July 2018; “1st BARMM POC meet tags ASG, BIFF as security risks”, *Manila Bulletin*, 14 March 2019.

with a “wait and see” stance.<sup>68</sup> In April 2019, a combination of military pressure and encouragement from the MILF was reportedly drawing Karialan’s faction closer to re-joining the MILF in the normalisation process, but as yet neither group has made a formal announcement along those lines.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior MILF official, Cotabato City, March 2019; civil society organisation officer, Cotabato City, April 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group correspondence, Mindanao-based journalist, May 2019; “Fierce AFP campaign forces BIFF, faction to forge alliance”, *Business Mirror*, 7 April 2019; “‘Leave or die’: Military vows to keep out extremists from PHL shores after IS defeat in Syria”, *Business Mirror*, 13 April 2019.

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## IV. Islamist Armed Groups Outside the Peace Process

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Several armed groups that stayed out of the peace process and now oppose both the Philippine government and the new MILF-led Bangsamoro authorities can claim followers, even if only small numbers. Some are ISIS-affiliated or ISIS-inspired; all have some capacity to act as spoilers. The ISIS-linked groups sustained heavy losses in the Marawi siege and military offensives have kept them under pressure since.

### A. *Central Mindanao/Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters*

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) broke away from the MILF in 2008, following the Supreme Court's nullification of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain – a decision seen as betraying Moro interests.<sup>70</sup> Disgruntled by the MILF's return to peace talks after that decision, commander of the group's 105th Base Command, Ameril Umbra Kato, established the BIFF in 2010. The group operates mainly in Maguindanao and North Cotabato, both MILF strongholds.

When Kato died in April 2015, the BIFF splintered into three factions, led by Karialan, Bungos and Abu Toraife. Only Abu Toraife is known to have pledged allegiance to ISIS, though Bungos seems to have flirted with an ISIS association.<sup>71</sup> Karialan's faction has disavowed any association with ISIS.<sup>72</sup>

Estimates of militant group numbers are unreliable and rarely disaggregated by faction. In June 2018, the AFP put Abu Toraife faction's strength at between 60 and 100 fighters.<sup>73</sup> The military estimated that the BIFF, excluding Abu Toraife's faction, had 264 members in February 2019.<sup>74</sup> According to the MILF, as of March 2019, there were no more than 200 BIFF fighters in total. Whatever the precise figure, even this small number could act as spoilers through continuing acts of violence provoking disruptive military operations and by seeking recruits from within the MILF's ranks.<sup>75</sup>

Despite coming under serious military pressure, the BIFF factions have carried out a series of bombings in central Mindanao over the past year. Some appear to be related to local extortion rackets, and possibly were not directed by BIFF leaders. On 28 August, a bombing in a night market in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat province, killed three and wounded 36. On 2 September, a blast at an internet cafe in the same town killed two and wounded fifteen. Authorities suspect BIFF militants under Bungos in

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<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Collapse of Peace in Mindanao*, op. cit.

<sup>71</sup> Sources in Mindanao reported that Bungos pledged allegiance to ISIS but later retracted the pledge. Crisis group email correspondence, Philippine security expert, June 2019. A purported spokesman for the Bungos faction, Abu Misry, claimed that the faction's leaders had been in direct contact with ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, but this claim has not been verified. "The BIFF-ISIS connection and social media", Rappler.com, 19 September 2019.

<sup>72</sup> "Clerics assume command of BIFF", Philstar.com, 22 July 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Francis Wakefield, "Gov't troops destroy main IED factory of BIFF in Maguindanao", *Manilla Bulletin*, 10 June 2018.

<sup>74</sup> "SC upholds 3rd martial law extension", Philippines News Agency, 19 February 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interview, Edward Guerra, Bangsamoro Minister of Finance, Budget and Management, Cotabato City, 11 March 2019.

the first attack, and Abu Toraife's faction in the second.<sup>76</sup> On 31 December 2018, during the Bangsamoro Organic Law plebiscite campaign, a bomb exploded outside South Seas Mall in Cotabato City, killing two and wounding 32; authorities claim Abu Toraife's faction was behind the attack.<sup>77</sup>

Another central Mindanao group, Ansar al-Khilafah Philippines, was a small band operating in South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat and Sarangani provinces that maintained links with foreign fighters and Islamic converts. Police killed the group's leader, Mohammad Jaafar Sabiwang Maguid, also known as Tokboy, on 5 January 2017 in Sarangani. Authorities believe that Ansar al-Khilafah is now defunct, though one army officer warned that there may be two or three Maguid associates at large who could revive the group in the right conditions.<sup>78</sup> Police attributed a 16 September 2018 bombing in General Santos City that injured eight to Bassar Sahak, a member of Ansar al-Khilafah who reportedly also had ties to Abu Toraife. Soldiers killed Sahak in Massim, Sarangani, on 22 October 2018. Another bombing on 16 September, in Midsayap, North Cotabato, appears to have been carried out by a criminal gang associated with Ansar al-Khilafah.<sup>79</sup>

#### B. *Lanao del Sur/Maute Group*

After the Marawi siege ended, Maute Group remnants went to ground in remote areas of Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao. Led by Abu Dar, and reportedly flush with money looted from Marawi, they continued recruitment efforts at least into 2018. Abu Dar commanded respect for his charisma and skill as a preacher, and was reportedly able to attract a small number of followers, especially among relatives of slain fighters seeking revenge.<sup>80</sup>

As clashes with soldiers continued and money ran short, Maute Group remnants appeared to have been ground down. A fatwa issued on 25 July 2017 by Sheikh Abuhuraira Abulrahman Udasan, on behalf of the Bangsamoro Dar Al-Ifta (religious advisory council), emphasising "the need to fight violent extremism and ... divisions among Muslims", appears to have eroded support for the movement.<sup>81</sup> Abu Dar was

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<sup>76</sup> "Facial composite of Isulan blast suspect released", UNTV News, 31 August 2018; Ferdinand Cabrera, "1 dead, 15 injured in Isulan town's second bombing in 5 days", MindaNews, 2 September 2018; Christian V. Esguerra, "Pressure on MILF to hunt down Sultan Kudarat bombers: analysts", ABS-CBN News, 4 September 2018; Bong S. Sarmiento, "Islamic State blasts back in the Philippines", *Asia Times*, 4 September 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, military official, Cotabato City, 19 January 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western Mindanao Command, Zamboanga City, February 2019; Carmela Fonbuena, "Counterterrorism: Why the death of AKP's Tokboy matters", Rappler.com, 9 January 2017.

<sup>79</sup> John Unson, "7 hurt in General Santos City IED blast", *Philippine Star*, 16 September 2018; "Diraw 'My Way': BIFF tagged in videoke bar blast in North Cotabato", Philippines News Agency, 17 September 2018; "Pro-ISIS leader slain in southern Philippines", *Mindanao Examiner*, 23 October 2018; "Sub-leader of ISIS-inspired group AKP dies in encounter with gov't troops", GMA News, 24 October 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Colonel Brawner, commander, 103rd Brigade, Marawi; academic from Marawi, Quezon City, February 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Carmela Fonbuena, "MILF commits to implement fatwa vs radical extremism", Rappler.com, 5 July 2017.

reportedly shunned by some members of his family.<sup>82</sup> The Philippine armed forces stepped up operations in 2019, leading more fighters to surrender. A senior army officer in Marawi said, “I think the ideology only dwells in the leader, whereas rank-and-file are mostly in it for money”.<sup>83</sup> Philippine soldiers killed Abu Dar on 14 March 2019 in Tubaran, Lanao del Sur. A handful of fighters, perhaps as few as fifteen, remain on the run, reportedly led by Zacaria Romato, an uncle to the Maute brothers, who lacks Abu Dar’s purported religious credentials and rhetorical skills.<sup>84</sup>

### C. *Basilan and Sulu Islands/Abu Sayyaf Group*

The Abu Sayyaf Group is a loose confederation of small networks in the Sulu archipelago, founded in the early 1990s by disgruntled MNLF fighters. The amorphous armed bands that constitute the group, some of which now claim ISIS ties, have proven resilient and resistant to military measures, which reflects their embeddedness in local communities. ISIS’s appeal in Sulu appears to stem from its international cachet and the resources that, at its height, it could bring.<sup>85</sup>

Though the Basilan-based group led by Hapilon was decimated in Marawi, another Abu Sayyaf commander on the island, Furuji Indama, is still at large. Furuji is not known to have pledged allegiance to ISIS. According to the security forces, he is contained in one municipality, where he has some support from the community.<sup>86</sup> A number of alleged Abu Sayyaf members linked to Furuji have been arrested in Manila in recent months, including one who attempted to detonate a grenade as he was being arrested.<sup>87</sup> It is not clear if these suspected militants were planning attacks in Manila. In spite of an improved security situation in Basilan, militants presumed to be Abu Sayyaf members continue to mount attacks.<sup>88</sup>

In Sulu, joining an Abu Sayyaf-affiliated armed group is for some people the best of bad options. According to one army officer: “People have to pick sides”, either in the conflict between local militants and the government, or in feuds among clans.<sup>89</sup> Sometimes in conflict with one another, these bands tend to coalesce in the face of a common enemy such as the Philippine security forces. Anti-military sentiment in

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<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ziaur-Rahman Alonto Adiong, former ARMM assemblyman, Cotabato City, 12 March 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interview, Colonel Brawner, commander, 103rd Brigade, Marawi, February 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interview, Colonel Brawner, commander, 103rd Brigade, Marawi, February 2019; “Army uncovers Maute terror plot”, *Philippine Star*, 1 April 2019. Abu Dar reportedly lived in Saudi Arabia for several years and operated an Arabic translation service near the Philippine Embassy in Riyadh. Crisis Group interview, academic from Marawi who knew Abu Dar, Quezon City, February 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sulu-based civil society organisation, Zamboanga City, February 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western Mindanao Command, Zamboanga City, February 2019.

<sup>87</sup> “Police nab alleged Abu Sayyaf member in Binondo”, ABS-CBN News, 22 December 2018; “Alleged Abu Sayyaf man arrested in Quezon City”, *The Philippine Star*, 16 April 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Francis Wakefield, “Troops recover Sayyaf’s remains, rifle after clash in Basilan”, *Manila Bulletin*, 19 March 2019 and “Soldier, militia men killed by Abu gunmen in Basilan”, *Manila Bulletin*, 11 April 2019; Julie Alipala, “3 soldiers hurt in Basilan ambush”, *Inquirer Mindanao*, 16 May 2019.

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group interview, army officer, Zamboanga City, February 2019; Jennifer Oreta and Kathline Tolosa, *Pagpapatit: Mediating Violence in Sulu* (Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2012).

Sulu is strong, with lullabies immortalising fathers killed by the army. Even the military acknowledges that the memory of past military abuses is “hard to erase”.<sup>90</sup>

There are two main Abu Sayyaf factions in Sulu. One is led by Radullon Sahiron, a Robin Hood-like figure to many locals. He distances himself from foreigners and is not associated with ISIS. Sahiron, now in his 70s, lost his left arm while fighting with the MNLF against the government, and locals believe he is still committed to Moro liberation. Given his kinship to the island’s major political families, asked one observer: “How can you catch him?”<sup>91</sup> Some in Sulu are worried about a vacuum when he dies that could be filled by harder-line individuals.<sup>92</sup> He commands roughly 100 fighters.<sup>93</sup>

The other major Abu Sayyaf leader is Hajan Sawadjaan. According to the U.S. government, Sawadjaan is the current Daulah Islamiyah leader, but it is not clear what ties, if any, he has with ISIS’s global leadership.<sup>94</sup> Sawadjaan was reportedly selected by a meeting of pro-ISIS groups, including representatives from the Toraike BIFF faction (but not the Maute Group), in Sulu in May or June 2019.<sup>95</sup> While Sawadjaan’s precise ISIS ties are unclear, he is known to engage in kidnapping and to seek resources from foreign fighters, including those affiliated with ISIS.<sup>96</sup> He controls five or six subgroups, totalling about 100 fighters, reportedly hosted the perpetrators of deadly bombings in Basilan and Sulu, and continues to harbour foreign fighters.<sup>97</sup>

Both Basilan and Sulu have suffered recent militant strikes. On 31 July 2018, a Moroccan with the nom de guerre Abu Kathir Al-Maghrib, detonated explosives in a van he was driving in the Basilan town of Lamitan. Ten local militia members and villagers were killed, along with the bomber, and eleven wounded. It is not clear if the bomber intended to kill himself in the attack. Police believe he intended to target a gathering of about 2,000 students and teachers.<sup>98</sup>

In Jolo, Sulu, on 27 January 2019, two bombs exploded at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Cathedral, killing 23. Contradictory official statements bred confusion about the attack’s details.<sup>99</sup> Initial reports from the army and police indicated two IEDs were

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<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interview, AFP Western Mindanao Command, Zamboanga City, 15 February 2019.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, former official, Regional Human Rights Commission-ARMM, Zamboanga City, 16 February 2019.

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sulu-based civil society organisation, Zamboanga City, February 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sulu-based civil society organisation, Zamboanga City; Colonel Gerry Besana, spokesman, Western Mindanao Command, Zamboanga City, February 2019.

<sup>94</sup> “Lead Inspector General quarterly report to the U.S. Congress on Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines, October 1, 2018 – December 31, 2018”, p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interview, Colonel Gerry Besana, spokesman, Western Mindanao Command, Zamboanga City, March 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sulu-based civil society organisation, Zamboanga City; Colonel Gerry Besana, spokesman, Western Mindanao Command, Zamboanga City, February 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sulu-based civil society organisation, Zamboanga City, 21 September 2018; “Indonesian suicide bombers behind Jolo blasts – Año”, CNN Philippines, 1 February 2019 (update 6 March 2019); “Philippine official: Abu Sayyaf harbouring suicide bomber”, Associated Press, 8 February 2019; “Amid loss of leaders, unknown militant rises in Philippines”, Associated Press, 22 February 2019.

<sup>98</sup> “Philippine official: Abu Sayyaf harbouring suicide bomber”, Associated Press, 8 February 2019.

<sup>99</sup> Speculation about the Jolo attack is rife. Some suspect a false flag, given the high level of security around the cathedral. The bombing shortly preceded the Supreme Court’s consideration of petitions

remotely detonated by cell phone, but Interior Secretary Eduardo Año acknowledged the possibility of a suicide attack – if true, an alarming new tactic in Mindanao. On 28 January, President Duterte, with an entourage that included Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, visited the cathedral. The following day, Duterte, citing “confidential sources”, said it was a suicide attack, perpetrated by a foreign married couple. Lorenzana at first suggested the attack was not likely a suicide bombing, but that the bombs were remotely detonated, though eventually he fell into line with Duterte’s assessment. DNA tests could only confirm that the two unidentified suspects were a man and a woman.<sup>100</sup>

#### D. *Misuari’s MNLF*

MNLF founder Nur Misuari remains a wild card in the Bangsamoro. Among the Moro militant leaders, Nur Misuari is closest to President Duterte, whom he has known since Duterte was Davao City mayor.<sup>101</sup> Misuari still enjoys support from some MNLF commanders and their followers in Sulu, as well as respect among the broader Moro community as the MNLF’s founding chair.<sup>102</sup> The MNLF did not demobilise its fighters after the 1996 agreement it signed with the government, though some were absorbed into the Armed Forces of the Philippines and auxiliary units.<sup>103</sup> Nor were Misuari and the MNLF party to the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, but Duterte has attempted to mollify him with a separate peace track premised on an eventual transition to federalism in the Philippines – a transition that, if it occurred, could raise questions about the status of the new autonomous region. The president also granted Misuari temporary immunity from arrest.<sup>104</sup>

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challenging the constitutionality of martial law, which involved justices questioning security officials on justifications for the extension on 29 January. Crisis Group interview, former official, Regional Human Rights Commission-ARMM, Zamboanga City, February 2019; political analyst Cotabato City, February 2019.

<sup>100</sup> Raffy Santos, “Abu leader’s brother among suspects in Jolo church blast”, ABS-CBN News, 28 January 2019; Pia Ranada, “Duterte says wife, husband suicide bombers behind Jolo bombing”, 29 January 2019; Joviland Rita, “Info on suicide bombers behind Jolo attack not yet verified – Lorenzana”, GMA News, 30 January 2019; “Leads suggest Jolo blast not a suicide bombing – AFP”, GMA News, 2 February 2019; Rambo Talabong, “2 unidentified bodies in Jolo bombing male, female – PNP”, Rappler.com, 20 February 2019.

<sup>101</sup> “Duterte’s ‘pessimistic’ remarks on the Bangsamoro peace process worries, confuses stakeholders”, *MindaNews*, 7 May 2017.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group interviews, peace advocates, Zamboanga City, 24-25 November 2017. A fifteen-member MNLF Executive Committee, objecting to what they called Misuari’s “one-man rule” ousted him in 2001, elevating him to Chair Emeritus. Misuari retained control over a faction of the group. Yusoph Jikiri, former Sulu governor and representative, took over leadership of the MNLF from Muslimin Sema, a Maguindanaoan and former Cotabato City mayor, in early 2017. Jikiri and Sema supported the Bangsamoro Organic Law. Carolyn O. Arguillas, “Sema steps down as MNLF chair; Jikiri takes over”, *MindaNews*, 20 February 2017.

<sup>103</sup> Other MNLF fighters joined the MILF, criminal gangs, and the Abu Sayyaf Group, and still others returned to civilian life.

<sup>104</sup> In September 2017, an anti-graft court ordered Misuari’s arrest for fraud in textbook procurement during his term as governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The alleged fraud involved the purchase of 115.2 million pesos (\$2 million) in educational materials in 2000



On 27 March 2019, Duterte said Misuari had threatened to “go to war” if the government did not pursue federalism. Though it is not clear what military capabilities Misuari commands, his status as MNLF founding chairman could allow him to rally those discontented with the new Bangsamoro government.<sup>105</sup> The MNLF and Abu Sayyaf Group are linked by history and kinship ties among members and though the MNLF leadership demonstrates no sympathy for jihadism, elements of the two movements could unite against a common enemy, as they have done in the past.<sup>106</sup>

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and 2001. Misuari also faces charges filed by the Zamboanga City government for crimes connected to the MNLF’s 2013 siege of the city, when some 300 fighters attempted to take over city hall.

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interviews, peace advocates, Zamboanga City, November 2017; Crisis Group telephone interview, member, Bangsamoro Transition Authority, April 2019.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sulu-based civil society organisation, Zamboanga City, 21 September 2018.

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## V. Government Responses

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Manila has largely responded to the Daulah Islamiyah's emergence and takeover of Marawi with military measures. This is consistent with what some observers see as Duterte's militarisation of the government, reflected in the high number of former military officers in his cabinet.<sup>107</sup> Although military operations have seriously weakened some militant factions, particularly the ISIS-linked groups responsible for the Marawi takeover, they can involve destructive tactics and leave large numbers of people displaced. Much of the civilian response, particularly efforts to help former militants demobilise, has been ad hoc and left to local governments. Marawi's reconstruction has moved at a snail's pace, angering many of those who fled their homes during the fighting.

### A. Martial Law and Military Operations

President Duterte placed Mindanao's 27 provinces and 33 cities under martial law on 23 May 2017, the first day of the Marawi siege, for 60 days.<sup>108</sup> Congress has three times extended martial law, most recently until 31 December 2019. Mindanaoans across the island have largely welcomed the move as necessary for restoring security, notwithstanding memories of military abuses under martial law during President Ferdinand Marcos' tenure. Indeed, this time around the armed forces have acted with some restraint. The military has not assumed administrative control, for example, but has sought to strengthen local government by monitoring and cracking down on official absenteeism.<sup>109</sup> Martial law is most evident in the increased number of checkpoints, greater military presence, and curfew.<sup>110</sup>

Some officials suggest that martial law is necessary because existing terrorism law is inadequate.<sup>111</sup> The 2007 Human Security Act (HSA, Republic Act 9372), which was supposed to address the problem, was not used to charge a suspect until 2018.<sup>112</sup> Its stringent provisions, meant to forestall potential abuse by state forces, rendered it ineffective.<sup>113</sup> Senate Bill No. 2204, the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2019, would amend

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<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cotabato City-based attorney, Manila, June 2019; "Duterte admits militarizing government", *Manila Standard*, 1 November 2018.

<sup>108</sup> Proclamation No. 126 imposed martial law on Mindanao and suspended the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus.

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interview, military officer, Marawi City, August 2018; Jovanie Espesor, "Waltzing with the Powerful: Understanding NGOs in a Game of Power in Conflict-ridden Mindanao", *Pacific Dynamics: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2017), p. 76.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community members, Camp Bito Buadi Itowa, Marawi City, August 2018.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interview, local official, Cotabato City, February 2019; correspondence, military officer, Quezon City, 10 October 2018.

<sup>112</sup> A court in Taguig convicted a suspected Maute Group member in late November 2018 under Article 3 of the law for recruiting fighters. This appears to be the second conviction under the Human Security Act. "First conviction in anti-terror law", *Business World Online*, 20 July 2015; "Taguig court convicts Maute recruiter for terrorism, 2 others for rebellion", *Inquirer.net*, 20 November 2018.

<sup>113</sup> Under the law, a detained person acquitted on charges of terrorism automatically makes the state liable for damages of 500,000 pesos (\$9,500) "for every day that he or she has been detained or deprived of liberty or arrested without a warrant as a result of such an accusation". Authorities consider the three-day warrantless period too short to build a case against a suspect. They said that

the Human Security Act to extend the period of detention without arrest warrant or charge from three days to fourteen, among other measures.<sup>114</sup>

Military operations, notwithstanding some successes, often exact high tolls in destruction and displacement. The operation in Marawi itself involved tactics that left much of the city centre in ruins, though militants also shoulder responsibility for much of the damage and ousting entrenched fighters from fortified urban areas arguably would have been impossible without considerable destruction. Even in 2019, when jihadist groups pose a diminished threat, operations remain heavy-handed. Offensives against the BIFF in Maguindanao in 2019, beginning in February but continuing for months, involved artillery and airstrikes. By late March, fighting had displaced some 39,800 people, according to the UN.<sup>115</sup> A local civil society representative observed that many local people, noting the coincidence of the offensive with the inauguration of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, were asking: “So, this is peace in the Bangsamoro?”<sup>116</sup>

### *B. Local Governments’ Reintegration Efforts*

Absent a national policy from Manila, some local governments have initiated their own programs to help militants demobilise. The Basilan provincial government initiated in 2016 one such program, the Program Against Violence and Extremism (PAVE), aimed at assisting former Abu Sayyaf militants return to civilian life. The program provides former militants counselling, medical checks, housing and farming and skills training. Without a national strategy and program to deal with militant groups, the provincial government opted for ad hoc efforts.<sup>117</sup> Governor Jim Hatan-Saliman decried the lack of a national policy, which leaves local governments in reactive mode.<sup>118</sup>

Civil society organisations raised concerns that the Basilan government’s initiative lacks a clear legal framework, calling into question its sustainability. Some victims’ groups have complained that former fighters receive more attention than communities affected by the conflict, and NGOs worry that their participation in the program could tarnish their reputations.<sup>119</sup>

The situation in Sulu is dire. The military has been carrying out aggressive operations to crush the Abu Sayyaf Group, particularly in Patikul municipality. In an effort

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the requirement that surveillance and investigation must have prior approval from the Court of Appeals; and that the person being investigated is informed of the surveillance, are counterproductive in the context of monitoring terrorist actions. Par. 1, Sec. 50 of Republic Act 9372, 6 March 2007.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, journalist, Quezon City, November 2018.

<sup>115</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Philippines: Situation Report”, 29 March 2019.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cotabato City, March 2019.

<sup>117</sup> On the other hand, at the height of the Marawi siege, the government entertained the possibility of negotiations with the ASG. Priam Nepomuceno, “Talks with ASG won’t violate gov’t no-negotiation policy: Lorenzana”, Philippines News Agency, 30 July 2018.

<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jim Hatan-Saliman, Governor of Basilan, Zamboanga City, 21 September 2018.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former official, Regional Human Rights Commission-ARMM, Zamboanga City, February 2019; development expert, Manila, March 2019.

to pressure the group, the government reportedly controls the flow of food into Jolo Island, aiming to disrupt militants' supplies but risking shortages in some communities.<sup>120</sup> Many locals see the provincial government as impotent in the face of continuing military operations.<sup>121</sup> As Abu Sayyaf surrenders mount, there are insufficient resources for assisting, training and reintegrating hundreds of former fighters.<sup>122</sup> Sulu residents resent the central government and military and militants are embedded in local communities. Under these circumstances, dialogue between local civil society organisations and community leaders might help to identify local grievances, appropriate government interventions and potential avenues to reach out to militants.<sup>123</sup>

### C. *Marawi's Rehabilitation*

More than two years after the Marawi siege began, the so-called Most Affected Area, the main battleground that covers 250 hectares and includes the city centre, remains in ruins and littered with unexploded ordinance. The Task Force Bangon Marawi, an inter-agency body President Duterte created in June 2017 to oversee the city's rehabilitation, does not include local representatives at its highest levels. Delays in clearing rubble and planning reconstruction have left thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) unable to rebuild their homes. Some in the Bangsamoro Transition Authority detect a reluctance Duterte's part to invigorate rehabilitation efforts.<sup>124</sup>

Frustration and resentment among IDPs are intense. Some are angry that the government did not exhaust what they believe were opportunities to negotiate, through local leaders, the militants' withdrawal before imposing martial law and launching the military bombardment.<sup>125</sup> Some even claim the destruction of Marawi was intentional, so that its rebuilding could benefit vested interests of politicians in Manila.<sup>126</sup> Many express despair at their exclusion from reconstruction efforts. In March 2019, IDPs aired their anger at members of Task Force Bangon Marawi during two days of public hearings. Task Force chair and housing secretary Eduardo del Rosario, at one point was reduced to tears by criticisms of his performance, and promised that residents would be able to return to the most affected area by September 2019, but some IDPs are sceptical.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group interview, former official, Regional Human Rights Commission-ARMM, Zamboanga City, February 2019.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sulu-based civil society organisation; former official, Regional Human Rights Commission-ARMM, Zamboanga City, February 2019. The U.S. Department of State's Rewards for Justice Program is offering up to \$1 million for information leading to Sahiron's arrest. On 27 February 2007, the U.S. District Court, District of Columbia, indicted Sahiron and charged him with hostage taking and "aiding and abetting and causing an act to be done".

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sulu-based civil society organisation, Zamboanga City, September 2018.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sulu-based civil society organisation, Zamboanga City, February 2019.

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group interview, minister, Bangsamoro Transition Authority, Cotabato City, March 2019.

<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group interview, academic from Marawi, Quezon City, February 2019; former Marawi City mayor, Iligan, March 2019.

<sup>126</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil society representatives, Marawi City, August 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group field notes, Marawi, March 2019; Crisis Group electronic correspondence, activist, Marawi, June 2019.

The mishandling of Marawi's rehabilitation is likely to fuel local grievances for years to come. One activist called Marawi "a ticking bomb".<sup>128</sup> At the same time, there is no clear evidence the IDP population has been particularly vulnerable to militant recruitment.<sup>129</sup> Many are as angry at the ISIS-linked groups as they are at the government. A former Marawi mayor characterised the city's residents: "They are more urban, more religious. They will be resentful, but they will complain rather than fight the government".<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Marawi, 18 March 2019.

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interviews, MILF official, Cotabato City; army officer, Marawi, both February 2019.

<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group interview, Iligan, March 2019.

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## VI. Priorities for the New Autonomous Region

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The worst fears sparked by the ISIS fight for and flag-planting in Marawi – that Mindanao would become a stronger magnet for ISIS fighters and an outpost of the caliphate – have not been realised. Indeed, the Philippine government’s policy since then has yielded some successes in containing jihadist militants. The organic law and moves toward Bangsamoro autonomy could serve to further erode their potential support base.

That said, jihadism remains a threat, not least because it offers an alternative to the status quo, and one that is likely to evolve.<sup>131</sup> A Maranao politician warned that local communities must not lower their guard: “[The next threat] may not necessarily be an ISIS group. It might evolve into something new”.<sup>132</sup> To date, there has been no instance of Moro suicide bombers (assuming the Jolo cathedral attackers were indeed foreigners), but the discovery of bomb vests in Marawi after the battle and reports of Daulah Islamiyah efforts to train local bombers indicate the potential for adoption of the tactic.<sup>133</sup> There are persistent reports of recruitment efforts in public high schools, state colleges and universities, and even in Catholic-run institutions of higher education. While the threat from extant jihadist insurgent groups has receded for the moment, it is likely that clandestine cells remain active.<sup>134</sup>

The transition authority inherits an administrative apparatus known for inefficiency and corruption. It will need support from the president, congress and international actors.<sup>135</sup> All involved should focus on four areas. First, the national government and armed forces should calibrate military offensives to reduce civilian harm. This would not only ease suffering but reduce the burden on the Bangsamoro Transition Authority caused by displacement and allow the MILF to continue efforts to persuade the BIFF to stop fighting. Second, the transition authority needs to demonstrate fast that it can bring a peace dividend, by working with clan-dominated local authorities to deliver services. Third, the MILF itself needs to reach out to those in Mindanao who are averse to its rule and respond to their concerns. Lastly, the MILF

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<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Mohagher Iqbal, chairperson, Peace Implementing Panel, MILF, Cotabato City, 5 December 2018; army officer, Zamboanga City, February 2019; Maranao politician, Cotabato City, March 2019; Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, IPAC Report No. 54, 5 March 2019, p. 1; See Quinton Temby, “Cells, Factions and Suicide Operatives: The Fragmentation of Militant Islamism in the Philippines Post-Marawi”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* vol. 41, no. 1 (2019), p. 118. Crisis Group interviews, academic, Marawi, February 2019; political analyst, Cotabato City, 14 March 2019.

<sup>132</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cotabato City, March 2019.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group interview, Colonel Romeo Brawner, 103rd Brigade commander, Marawi, February 2019. See Temby, “Cells, Factions and Suicide Operatives”, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group interviews, official, Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities, Cotabato City, November 2017; army officer, Marawi, February 2019. Crisis Group correspondence, governance expert, June 2019.

<sup>135</sup> Abhoud Syed M. Linga, “Building the Bangsamoro Government” in Paul D. Hutchcroft (ed.), *Mindanao: The Long Journey to Peace and Prosperity* (Mandaluyong City, 2016), pp. 133-157; Ashley South and Christopher M. Joll, “From Rebels to Rulers: The Challenges of Transition for Non-state Armed Groups in Mindanao and Myanmar”, *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2, p. 176.

and donors need to ensure decommissioned MILF fighters can earn money without turning to other armed groups.

### A. *Military Operations*

Security in the Bangsamoro is the national government's responsibility, but there needs to be coordination among the transition authority, Philippine armed forces and the police. Military offensives against militant groups in early 2019 displaced tens of thousands of people in Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao and Sulu.<sup>136</sup> In addition to the suffering of those displaced, the coincidence of this disruption with the inauguration of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region struck many locals as inconsistent with the promise of peace.<sup>137</sup> The armed forces maintain that they use airstrikes "only for areas not reachable by others means".<sup>138</sup>

Some local leaders have called for a suspension of military operations in parts of the Bangsamoro. In mid-May 2019, outgoing Maguindanao governor, and newly elected congressional representative, Esmael Mangudadatu, pledged that he would ask Duterte for a one-year halt to military operations in Maguindanao province. The moratorium would, he argued, allow the transition authority and the MILF time to implement social programs and persuade the BIFF to end their struggle.<sup>139</sup>

A total moratorium on military campaigns would be risky but the Philippine armed forces should at a minimum adjust their tactics. Halting operations in Sulu is unrealistic given the presence of Abu Sayyaf, but even in Maguindanao a moratorium could allow the BIFF to rebound. The Philippine armed forces should, however, calibrate operations to limit the impact on civilians, who are often compelled to flee fighting. In particular, they should exercise restraint in the use of airstrikes, artillery and standoff weapons that can be imprecise and indiscriminate.<sup>140</sup>

The security crisis that instigated the imposition of martial law has long passed, but local sentiment toward martial law remains mostly positive. The presence of checkpoints, in particular, appears to have led to a decrease in violence and helped curtail militant activity. There were fewer violent incidents in absolute numbers in 2017 than 2016, attributable in large measure to martial law and stricter enforcement of regulations on firearms.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross said 50,000 people were displaced in these provinces, almost 40,000 of them in Maguindanao. Froilan Gallardo, "Thousands flee fighting in 3 Mindanao provinces", *MindaNews*, 27 March 2019.

<sup>137</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ziaur-Rahman Alonto Adiong, assemblyman, Autonomous Region Muslim Mindanao, Cotabato City, 12 March 2019.

<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group electronic correspondence, army general, Maguindanao, June 2019.

<sup>139</sup> Sheila Mae Dela Cruz, "Mangudadatu to ask Duterte for moratorium on military operations in Maguindanao", *Inquirer.net*, 16 May 2019.

<sup>140</sup> Offensives against the BIFF in February 2019 involved airstrikes using 500-pound bombs. On a much smaller scale, army troops fired three 81mm mortar rounds to separate two feuding clans, one led by a former MNLF commander. Francis Wakefield, "8 Daulah Islamiyah terrorists killed in Maguindanao", *Manila Bulletin*, 3 February 2019; Noel Punzalan, "1 hurt as NoCot town clan war erupts anew", *Philippines News Agency*, 24 May 2019.

<sup>141</sup> Lanao del Sur was the exception to this trend. International Alert, *Conflict Alert 2018: War and Identity*, pp. xii, 6.

### B. *A Peace Dividend*

With popular expectations of the new Bangsamoro region dangerously high, the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority should make every effort to take advantage of a likely short window to begin meeting these expectations and reaping a peace dividend. Improving services delivery, particularly education, health and infrastructure, should be a top priority. Roads connecting the Bangsamoro to more prosperous areas of Mindanao and the MILF bases areas to towns are particularly important. Given the authority's limited capacity, an uncertain funding stream and the important role that existing clan-connected local government units play in services delivery, the MILF should quickly forge political alliances with local governments and prominent clans in order to produce results. The transition authority should enter into cooperative projects jointly implemented with local governments, which can happen even before its formal relations with those governments are ironed out.

The national government and the transition authority need to reach agreements on the latter's relations with local governments. They should quickly establish the Intergovernmental Relations bodies that are supposed to clarify and mediate relations between the Bangsamoro autonomous region and both national and local authorities. Without such bodies operating, the risk is high that confusion and conflicts over powers and resources will stymie the interim authorities and their successor permanent structures' performance.

The government's delays in rehabilitating and reconstructing Marawi could offer the Bangsamoro Transition Authority an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and concern for the people of Lanao del Sur. The Bangsamoro chief minister and his cabinet should work to speed up the return of IDPs to the Most Affected Area.<sup>142</sup> While the transition authority lacks the resources to rebuild Marawi itself, it could rehabilitate Butig or Piagapo, small towns that were also damaged in hostilities with the Maute Group.<sup>143</sup>

### C. *Political Outreach*

Vital, too, is that the MILF involves those groups that worry about its dominance in the new Bangsamoro government. Broad-based MILF alliance-building will require pragmatic bargaining over resources and the new region's policies and priorities. Greater inclusivity in region-level decision-making is crucial considering that there are areas of Mindanao – notably in the Sulu archipelago, where militancy remains a significant concern – that voted against establishing the new autonomous region, but are included within it nonetheless. Indeed, the situation in the Sulu, particularly continuing violence in Jolo, presents an especially thorny challenge for the new government. Nothing suggests those constituencies that oppose the MILF and the new region will turn *en masse* to jihadism, but resentment of the new region's authorities, if it worsens, would complicate efforts to tackle militant groups operating among them.

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<sup>142</sup> Crisis Group interview, advisor to the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, Cotabato City, 12 March 2019.

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group interview, member, Bangsamoro Transition Authority, Cotabato City, March 2019.



One means for gaining wider buy-in for the new region could be intensified direct engagement with populations in the ‘no’-vote areas to identify their specific grievances. Donors could consider support for small-scale, quick-impact projects in such areas. The MILF should also ensure that all regions and ethnic groups are adequately represented in the transition authority. It would be better for the MILF leadership to respond to disquiet at what some perceive to be the slanted composition of the authority and the cabinet than to have the president intervene, as some in the Bangsamoro anticipate he will be compelled to do.<sup>144</sup>

Attempts to encourage Islamist armed groups outside the peace process to join the decommissioning are also worth pursuing. In the wake of signing the Bangsamoro Organic Law, Duterte expressed a willingness to talk with the Abu Sayyaf Group, the only armed group proscribed under the Human Security Act.<sup>145</sup> Though he has since called for the group’s complete destruction, the transition authority and its partners should support efforts to establish dialogue with those elements of the Abu Sayyaf or their supporters that can be reached.<sup>146</sup> Such dialogue, facilitated by local civil society groups, could start small, seeking to identify the needs of communities where the Abu Sayyaf operate that the government could address. The MILF should also continue its efforts to persuade former comrades (and, in some cases, kinsmen) in the BIFF to re-join the mainstream. The benefits package offered to decommissioned fighters should be generous enough to constitute an incentive.

#### D. *Decommissioning*

The autonomous region and supporting donors should be clear-eyed about the probable limitations of decommissioning. Large-scale decommissioning of weapons is likely to be incomplete, given the prevalence of arms in Mindanao, distrust in the local security forces and the fact that armed groups – from clan militias and criminal gangs to jihadist militants – remain active. The new Bangsamoro authorities could consider negotiating formal agreements or informal understandings among MILF commands and private armed groups on the management of weapons. Forging such local agreements would be difficult, but one possibility is to engage Peace and Order Councils, inter-agency bodies at regional, provincial and city/municipality levels charged, among other things, with providing “a forum for inter-disciplinary dialogue and deliberation of major issues and problems affecting peace and order”.<sup>147</sup> Informal, local-level agreements on security matters, sanctioned by the authorities, have a long history in the Bangsamoro region.<sup>148</sup>

Both the transition authority and donors should work to ensure sufficient funds are available to enable MILF fighters to return to civilian life. Programs providing

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<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group correspondence, political analyst, Cotabato City, June 2019.

<sup>145</sup> A regional trial court in Isabella City, Basilan, labelled the Abu Sayyaf Group a terrorist organisation in 2015. “Anti-terrorism law weak, Senate wants longer surveillance, detention of suspects”, Rappler.com, 1 October 2018.

<sup>146</sup> Argyll Cyrus Geducos, “Let’s talk peace, Duterte tells ASG, armed groups”, *Manila Bulletin*, 29 July 2018; “Duterte: 2 suicide bombers behind cathedral attack”, *The Philippine Star*, 30 January 2019.

<sup>147</sup> These councils were established in the 1980s primarily to counter the communist insurgency.

<sup>148</sup> *Local Security in the Contested Bangsamoro Zone: Informality, Hybridity and Pragmatic Imperatives*, Rosalie Arcala Hall (ed.), (Pasig City: The Asia Foundation, 2017).

training and helping former combatants and their families find new livelihoods will be essential to mitigate the risk of creating a new recruitment pool for armed groups including militants.

## **VII. Conclusion**

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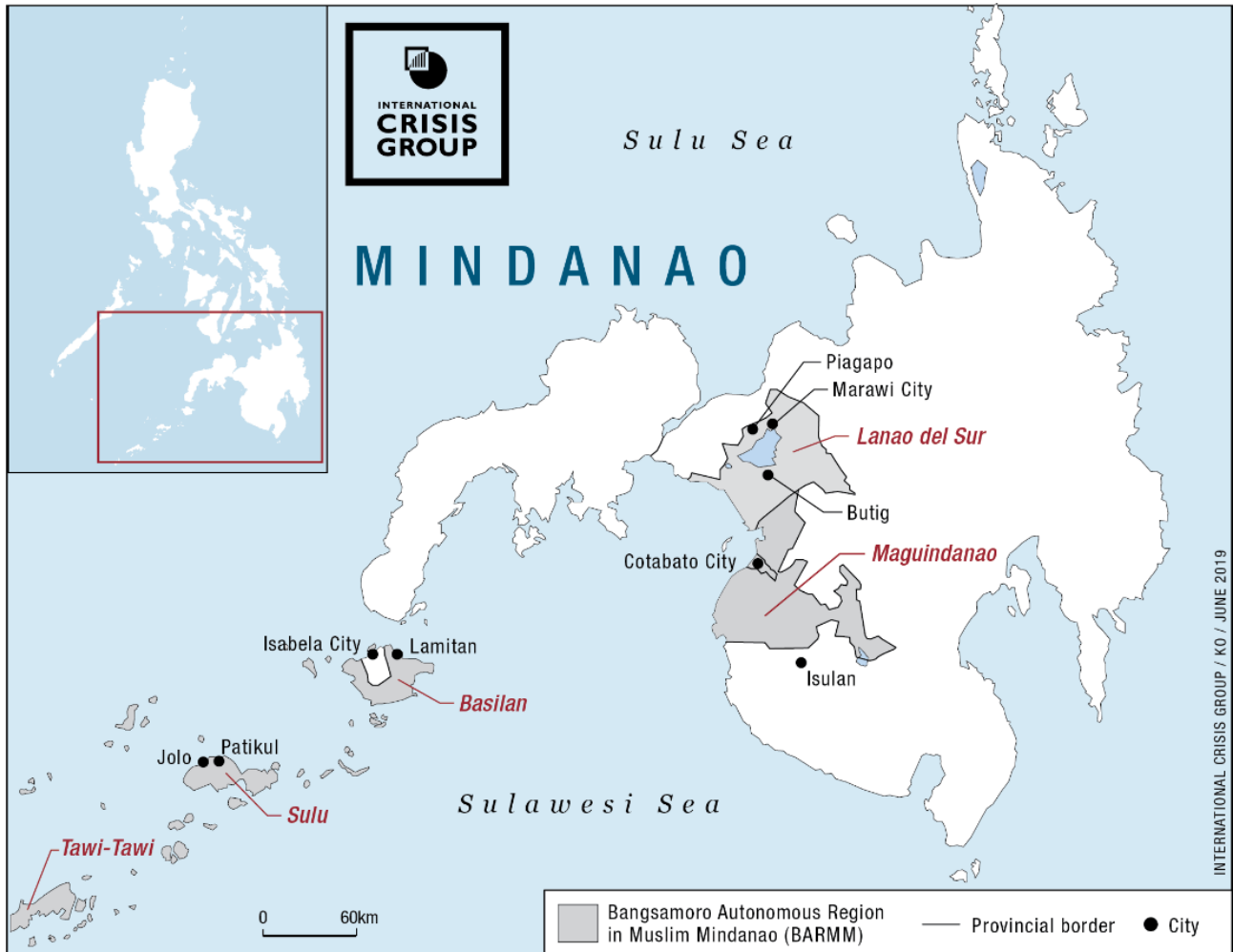
In 2017, the alliance of local armed groups that proclaimed allegiance to ISIS shocked the world by besieging Marawi and holding for five months parts of the town. Their ability to do so reflected the peculiar local political pathologies of Mindanao at least as much as the ISIS core's organisational reach. That siege, which drew partly on frustration with the MILF's commitment to a peace process that seemed to be going nowhere, in turn helped spur passage of the organic law that paves the way for a new autonomous entity that could diminish the local appeal of jihadist militancy. The MILF is now in large part responsible for making sure that happens.

The former separatist guerrillas, in their new role as Bangsamoro leaders, face challenges beyond jihadist militancy. Indeed, the mainsprings of political violence in Muslim Mindanao derive mostly from other local factors, notably violent competition among powerful clans for influence, including via elected office. With the presumed end of the Moro struggle and the demobilisation of MILF fighters, combatants and arms may just as easily enter the market for clan violence in Mindanao as fuel militancy. The new region's administrative structures and streams of funding could provoke heightened competition among local elites for these sources of power and patronage.

That said, militancy remains a threat. The ISIS-linked groups may be weakened and their numbers small, certainly compared with the MILF itself. But their attacks could erode confidence in the transition authority and they could benefit from MILF splinters or disillusioned former fighters. While even a well-administered new autonomous region is unlikely to completely eradicate militancy, it can help address its main drivers. Its failure, however, would lead to disenchantment and frustration that could reinvigorate jihadist and other violent groups and prolong the tribulations of Muslim Mindanao.

**Manila/Brussels, 27 June 2019**

Appendix A: Map of Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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**June 2019**

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## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2016

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### Special Reports and Briefings

*Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action*, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

*Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

### North East Asia

*Stirring up the South China Sea (IV): Oil in Troubled Waters*, Asia Report N°275, 26 January 2016 (also available in Chinese).

*East China Sea: Preventing Clashes from Becoming Crises*, Asia Report N°280, 30 June 2016.

*China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan*, Asia Report N°288, 10 July 2017 (also available in Chinese).

*The Korean Peninsula Crisis (I): In the Line of Fire and Fury*, Asia Report N°293, 23 January 2018 (also available in Chinese).

*The Korean Peninsula Crisis (II): From Fire and Fury to Freeze-for-Freeze*, Asia Report N°294, 23 January 2018 (also available in Chinese).

*The Case for Kaesong: Fostering Korean Peace through Economic Ties*, Asia Report N°300, 24 June 2019.

### South Asia

*Nepal's Divisive New Constitution: An Existential Crisis*, Asia Report N°276, 4 April 2016.

*Political Conflict, Extremism and Criminal Justice in Bangladesh*, Asia Report N°277, 11 April 2016.

*Sri Lanka: Jumpstarting the Reform Process*, Asia Report N°278, 18 May 2016.

*Pakistan's Jihadist Heartland: Southern Punjab*, Asia Report N°279, 30 May 2016.

*Pakistan: Stoking the Fire in Karachi*, Asia Report N°284, 15 February 2017.

*Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Government*, Asia Report N°285, 10 April 2017.

*Sri Lanka's Transition to Nowhere*, Asia Report N°286, 16 May 2017.

*Sri Lanka's Conflict-Affected Women: Dealing with the Legacy of War*, Asia Report N°289, 28 July 2017.

*Countering Jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh*, Asia Report N°295, 28 February 2018.

*China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks*, Asia Report N°297, 29 June 2018 (also available in Chinese).

*Building on Afghanistan's Fleeting Ceasefire*, Asia Report N°298, 19 July 2018 (also available in Dari and Pashto).

*Shaping a New Peace in Pakistan's Tribal Areas*, Asia Briefing N°150, 20 August 2018.

*Sri Lanka: Stepping Back from a Constitutional Crisis*, Asia Briefing N°152, 31 October 2018.

### South East Asia

*The Philippines: Renewing Prospects for Peace in Mindanao*, Asia Report N°281, 6 July 2016.

*Myanmar's New Government: Finding Its Feet?*, Asia Report N°282, 29 July 2016 (also available in Burmese).

*Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: No Traction*, Asia Briefing N°148, 21 September 2016.

*Myanmar's Peace Process: Getting to a Political Dialogue*, Asia Briefing N°149, 19 October 2016 (also available in Burmese).

*Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, Asia Report N°283, 15 December 2016 (also available in Burmese).

*Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, Asia Report N°287, 29 June 2017 (also available in Burmese).

*Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, Asia Report N°290, 5 September 2017 (also available in Burmese).

*Jihadism in Southern Thailand: A Phantom Menace*, Asia Report N°291, 8 November 2017 (also available in Thai and Malay).

*Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase*, Asia Report N°292, 7 December 2017 (also available in Burmese).

*The Long Haul Ahead for Myanmar's Rohingya Refugee Crisis*, Asia Report N°296, 16 May 2018 (also available in Burmese).

*Myanmar's Stalled Transition*, Asia Briefing N°151, 28 August 2018 (also available in Burmese).

*Bangladesh-Myanmar: The Danger of Forced Rohingya Repatriation*, Asia Briefing N°153, 12 November 2018.

*Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State*, Asia Report N°299, 8 January 2019 (also available in Burmese).

*A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, Asia Briefing N°154, 24 January 2019 (also available in Burmese).

*Building a Better Future for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, Asia Briefing N°155, 25 April 2019.

*An Opening for Internally Displaced Person Returns in Northern Myanmar*, Asia Briefing N°156, 28 May 2019 (also available in Burmese).

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