



Addressing Islamist Militancy in the Southern Philippines

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Principal Findings

What's new? Nearly three years after Manila granted autonomy to the Bangsamoro, the majority-Muslim region in the southern Philippines, its former main Islamist rebel group is running the interim government. While militant groups outside the peace process are weakened, they are not yet defeated.

Why did it happen? The Bangsamoro's political transition has brought gains to the war-torn region, depriving militants of some of their appeal. The Philippine military's operations and the pandemic have also pressured insurgents, who are now very few in number and spread over large areas.

Why does it matter? Despite the interim government's policies to contain violence, sporadic clashes with insurgents continue in various provinces. Delays in delivering the promised peace dividends will not automatically replenish the militants' ranks, but they do raise the risk of renewed recruitment.

What should be done? The Bangsamoro's interim government should step up socio-economic assistance to hard-hit areas, work with local authorities to reintegrate former militants and devote more energy to resolving the local conflicts militants often exploit. For its part, Manila should fast-track rehabilitation of Marawi, the city ravaged by battles with insurgents in 2017.

Executive Summary

Militant violence is declining but has not disappeared in the newly created Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in the southern Philippines. Close to three years into the transition, the former rebels of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) who are leading the interim government have largely contained jihadists opposed to the peace process, with the national army's help. Yet while the threat of major violence appears low, sporadic clashes in the region continue. Meanwhile, while frustration at the region's lack of development will not necessarily fuel militancy, it could push people, including youth, into the militants' arms. To avoid this outcome, the interim government should enhance the pace, quality and scope of service delivery; calibrate, where needed, reintegration programs for militants; and boost its conflict resolution efforts throughout the region. The Philippine government, for its part, should fast-track the rehabilitation of Marawi, the city partly destroyed during a five-month battle between the military and a jihadist alliance in 2017.

After the government defeated the coalition that laid siege to Marawi, militants returned to staging smaller-scale attacks on security forces. These armed groups, some of which have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), remain outside the peace process between the national government and the MILF, which culminated in creation of the BARMM in early 2019. Although the total number of fighters remains small – apparently no more than a few hundred – each of these outfits poses a challenge to peace in the Bangsamoro. In Maguindanao province, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and their ISIS-inspired offshoots still wield some clout. In the Lanao region, remnants of the Maute Group, who made up the bulk of the jihadist forces during the Marawi battle, are much weakened but still appear to be recruiting. In the Sulu archipelago, the Abu Sayyaf criminal-militant network is on the defensive but not extinct.

Despite a drop in violence following the interim government's inauguration in 2019, intense flare-ups continue to mar the transition. In Basilan and Sulu provinces, militants carried out a series of suicide bombings between 2018 and 2020 – the first such attacks in the Philippines. Some were perpetrated by foreign fighters, indicating that Mindanao continued to attract jihadists from abroad after the Marawi siege, although in small numbers. Militants in central Mindanao, on the other hand, have been unable to stage large-scale operations; even hit-and-run attacks on soldiers, once common, have fallen off. The BARMM's advent seems to have been crucial in curbing the dissatisfaction in that area that paved the way for the war in Marawi.

Militants, who are overwhelmingly from the Bangsamoro, tap local grievances to promote their agenda and take advantage of the nexus of politics, clan ties and the shadow economy to sustain themselves. Although the armed groups cannot hold territory due to intensified military operations, kinship ties often provide their members with safe havens. At times, militants ally themselves with criminal elements or local politicians. Meanwhile, unemployment and poverty, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, threaten to spoil the last few years' gains.

Both national and Bangsamoro policies aimed at curbing militancy have evolved. President Rodrigo Duterte's administration, while supportive of the Bangsamoro

government, is in charge of the region's security and thus on the front lines of tackling militancy. Military operations have killed hundreds of fighters over the last two years. But Manila has also altered its counter-insurgency tactics, including by working with local authorities to urge militants, under military pressure, to surrender in return for financial and livelihood assistance. As a result, hundreds of militants have laid down their weapons. Other new measures to curb militancy have included national anti-terrorism legislation and a range of traditional peacebuilding interventions falling under the umbrella of "countering and preventing violent extremism". As for the Bangsamoro government, it first worked to start dialogue with militant groups, and later opted for a more governance-oriented approach, supporting programs to disarm militants and designing development plans for conflict hotspots in the region.

Further stabilisation will depend on whether the national and regional governments can sustain, and even expand, their efforts. Measures they could take include:

- ❑ Further adjustments to military and police operations, which, while necessary, often lead to large-scale displacement of civilians because units have used excessive force in populated areas. Non-military counter-insurgency tactics should be strengthened to rebalance security operations, for example a stronger focus on policing and intelligence in some areas.
- ❑ Augmentations of the interim regional government's efforts to resolve local conflicts by strengthening the reach of responsible ministries, such as those handling public safety and local government, and by supporting existing community-based mechanisms.
- ❑ Closer coordination of the various disengagement programs for militants that exist in BARMM provinces, with extra funding for such initiatives, when required, and cooperation with local authorities. The interim regional government should also design gender-sensitive measures for male and female combatants, as well as for their families.
- ❑ Better delivery of public services and development outreach in places marred by conflict, for example the hinterlands of Maguindanao province known as the SPMS Box and remote areas of Lanao del Sur province.
- ❑ Expedited reconstruction of Marawi city, through the Philippine government's Task Force Bangon Marawi.

The BARMM's formation is a long-awaited window of opportunity for peace in Mindanao. Militant groups for now are mostly small outfits that pose nothing like the threat they did some years ago at the height of the battle in Marawi. Still, in the right conditions, they could regain momentum and throw the transition off track. Sustaining peace gains is vital to preventing that from happening.

Manila/Brussels, 18 March 2022

Addressing Islamist Militancy in the Southern Philippines

I. Introduction

Born in 2019, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) is the latest attempt by the Philippine government and the former rebels of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to end the Moro Muslim separatist struggle.¹ The outcome of two decades of negotiations, the BARMM provides “self-rule” to the majority-Muslim Bangsamoro region, in an effort to address the population’s long-time grievances against Manila.² During the transition period, which Manila has extended from three to six years, the MILF is leading the interim regional government, known as the Bangsamoro Transition Authority.³ The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the first Moro rebel movement, is also participating in the interim government.

The MILF considers the BARMM a vital step in bringing peace and development to the region after years of conflict, calling it an “antidote to extremism”.⁴ But militant groups outside the peace process are, to varying degrees, proving to be resilient. Three years after the BARMM’s creation, these armed bands, which operate in most Bangsamoro provinces and draw their members from the region’s largest ethno-linguistic groups, are considerably weakened but not yet defeated.⁵ These outfits often embrace Islamist objectives, for example advocating for a broad application of Sharia law.

Some of these groups pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 and 2015, coming together as a loose coalition under the banner of Daulah Islamiyah.⁶ Their subsequent prominence was to a large extent the outcome of hiccups in the peace process, which led some militants to call for returning to armed struggle.⁷

¹ For background on the peace process, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 322, *Southern Philippines: Fostering an Inclusive Bangsamoro*, 18 February 2022; 313, *Southern Philippines: Keeping Normalisation on Track in the Bangsamoro*, 15 April 2021; 306, *Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, 14 April 2020; and 301, *The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro*, 27 June 2019.

² The Bangsamoro refers to the indigenous Muslim population of the southern Philippines, comprised of thirteen ethno-linguistic groups that converted to Islam, as well as non-Muslim indigenous people, also known as Lumad. The BARMM, meanwhile, comprises the mainland Mindanao provinces of Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao, as well as three smaller island provinces in the Sulu archipelago: Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. It also includes Cotabato City and 63 villages that belong to a Special Geographic Area.

³ See Georgi Engelbrecht, “The Philippines: Three More Years for the Bangsamoro Transition”, Crisis Group Commentary, 29 October 2021.

⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *Militancy and the New Bangsamoro*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁵ The Bangsamoro’s largest ethno-linguistic groups are the Maguindanaons in central Mindanao, the Maranaos in Lanao and the Tausug in the Sulu archipelago.

⁶ Daulah Islamiyah is Arabic for “Islamic State”. For an overview of these groups, see “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia”, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 25 October 2016, pp. 8-9. The Philippine government uses Daulah Islamiyah as a “collective term for all local terrorist groups that have pledged allegiance to [former] Islamic State leader Abu

Drawing from a pool of disgruntled ex-guerrillas, impoverished farmers and frustrated youth, this alliance, including parts of the Abu Sayyaf Group from the Sulu archipelago and the Maute Group from Lanao del Sur, attacked government installations in Marawi in May 2017.⁸ Joined by foreign fighters, the ISIS-inspired band seized parts of the city, battling the military for almost five months in what became the largest urban engagement on Philippine soil since World War II. To defeat the militants, President Rodrigo Duterte declared martial law throughout Mindanao. After vicious combat that devastated large parts of Marawi, the army took the city back in October, killing more than 900 militants, according to government sources.⁹

After lying low for a while, militants relaunched attacks on the army, leading it to mount a counter-insurgency campaign. While military operations have clearly weakened the militants, the armed forces have not managed to defeat them. In central Mindanao, factions of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and remnants of the Maute Group continue to operate, while Abu Sayyaf elements take cover in the Sulu archipelago. A veteran Filipino military officer said: “We have brought the number of insurgents to the lowest [ever], but we never seem to quash the whole thing”.¹⁰

Some observers postulate that ISIS left an enduring ideological legacy in the Philippines.¹¹ Whether its beliefs will spread beyond a small number of militants remains an open question, however. Some groups seem to be ISIS-inspired, but without direct links to the Middle East. Elements of salafi-jihadist thinking permeate some leaders’ discourse, even if they do not always resonate with the rank and file.¹² Talking about members of an Abu Sayyaf faction, a Sulu-based observer said they “idolise” ISIS – admiring its videos, for example – without “embracing” it.¹³ Bangsamoro leaders and former fighters alike emphasise that militants use Islamist ideas mainly as a tool

Bakar al Baghdadi”. Justice Peralta, Separate Concurring Opinion, General Registry, *Lagman vs. Medialdea et al.*, 19 February 2019.

⁷ For example, the delay of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, which fulfilled the terms of the 2014 peace agreement between the government and the MILF by creating the BARMM.

⁸ The attack followed a law enforcement raid on the hideout of Isnilon Hapilon, a senior Abu Sayyaf commander and coalition leader whom ISIS designated as emir.

⁹ See Crisis Group Report, *Militancy and the New Bangsamoro*, op. cit., p. 4. For journalistic accounts of the battle, see Criselda Yabes, *The Battle of Marawi* (Davao City, 2019); and Carmela Fonbuena, *Marawi Siege: Stories from the Front Lines* (Manila, 2020).

¹⁰ Retired Colonel Dennis Eclarin, quoted in “Counterinsurgency in the Philippines: An Inside Look at Partner Warfare”, podcast, Modern War Institute, 10 September 2020.

¹¹ “Evolving Terrorism Threat in Southeast Asia”, webinar, Nanyang Technological University, 15 April 2021. In March 2022, jihadist media released an image of people in the Bangsamoro pledging allegiance to the new ISIS leader, Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Quraishi. See tweet by Tore Hamming, researcher, @ToreRHamming, 2:52 pm, 12 March 2022.

¹² Salafi-jihadism combines a belief in a pure Islam (as practiced by the first Muslims, whom Salafis call the “pious ancestors” or *al-salaf al-salih*) with an inclination toward violent tactics in working to spread it.

¹³ Crisis Group online interview, source from Sulu, 13 July 2021. A known tactic of ISIS-affiliated fighters in Mindanao was to use jihadist branding in order to attract foreign funding. Crisis Group interview, source in Maguindanao, 1 December 2019.

to mould the rank and file in fighting the state.¹⁴ A civil society leader from Sulu said: “If you talk about religion, everyone will come”.¹⁵

This report assesses the efforts of the Philippine government and Bangsamoro interim authority in tackling militancy in Mindanao. It builds upon Crisis Group’s previous work on the southern Philippines and draws on research in Mindanao and Manila, conducted between late 2019 and October 2021, including interviews with MILF commanders, national and regional government officials, military officers, civil society representatives, development practitioners, villagers and international observers. It was not possible to meet active militants because of COVID-19 travel restrictions and security considerations, but the report makes use of other primary sources, for example sermons and speeches, to study these groups’ ideas.

¹⁴ Crisis Group online interviews, interim regional government member, 23 June 2021; former fighter, 25 February 2020.

¹⁵ Crisis Group online interview, 27 July 2021.

II. Violence after Peace: Militancy during the Transition

Since coming to power in early 2019, the former MILF rebels have focused on building the BARMM's bureaucracy, managing its budget and passing priority legislation.¹⁶ The transition was largely on track until mid-2020, although dealing with powerful local clans had its challenges.¹⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic, however, muddied the waters.¹⁸ The interim government had no choice but to shift gears to emergency response, and although it did so competently, it lost precious time in implementing the peace process roadmap.¹⁹ The broader normalisation agenda, a joint commitment by the Philippine government and the MILF under the 2014 peace treaty, is also running behind schedule.²⁰ Originally scheduled for 2022, the Bangsamoro's first parliamentary elections were postponed to 2025, as the three-year transition period doubled in length.²¹

As the transition proceeded, militancy in Muslim Mindanao faded, due to several factors. First, the jihadist groups, after a short-lived moment of unity during the siege of Marawi, splintered back into smaller, weaker groups that the military could defeat more easily. Many fighters surrendered. Secondly, the Philippine theatre began attracting fewer foreign fighters, as it was harder to reach than the Middle East or Africa, and the Bangsamoro militants focused on local issues. As Nathan Sales, former U.S. coordinator for counter-terrorism, said in late 2019: "[South East Asia] is not one of the regions that ISIS fighters seem to be heading to in droves".²² Thirdly, foreign financial support for the insurgents declined.²³ Fourthly, the pandemic hampered the militants' capacity.²⁴ Fighting between the army and militants sputtered in 2021, causing fewer than 100 deaths, about half the number in the preceding years.²⁵

¹⁶ The interim government exercises both executive and parliamentary functions. As of September 2021, it had passed three priority bills on administration, civil service and education.

¹⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, op. cit.

¹⁸ "6th Public Report, March 2019 to October 2020", Third Party Monitoring Team, October 2020.

¹⁹ Bai Baraguir, "The Bangsamoro Government's Trial by Fire", Institute for International Political Studies (Milan), 29 May 2020.

²⁰ Normalisation refers to the broader war-to-peace transition in the Bangsamoro. It includes the planned demobilisation of around 40,000 guerrillas, more than half of whom are still under arms. Crisis Group Report, *Keeping Normalisation on Track*, op. cit.

²¹ Engelbrecht, "The Philippines: Three More Years for the Bangsamoro Transition", op. cit.

²² Jeffrey Maitem, "US sees no mass flight of IS fighters toward Southeast Asia", Benar News, 22 November 2019. The number of foreign fighters presently in Mindanao is unclear but most likely quite low, somewhere between two and two dozen. Crisis Group estimate based on military statements, media reports and other open sources.

²³ Crisis Group online interview, Bangsamoro analyst, 17 August 2021.

²⁴ Analysts noticed a "sharp decline" of violence after the pandemic's outbreak. Luke Lischin, "Surviving or Thriving? COVID-19 and Violent Non-state Actors in the Southern Philippines", New Mandala, 9 September 2020. Some observers, particularly in government circles, also contend that the socio-economic impact of the pandemic heightened the risk that people will join militant groups. In May 2021, Carlito Galvez Jr., the presidential adviser on the peace process, told senators at a hearing that the "hard situation brought about by COVID-19" rendered "poor people more susceptible to recruitment". Others have been critical of this narrative, given the low numbers involved. "It is not only poverty", said a youth representative of the MILF. "Islamist militant BIFF's recruitment in Mindanao gains ground amid pandemic: Galvez", ABS-CBN News, 14 May 2021; "Examining Endemic Drivers of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism", webinar, Mindanao State University, 15 July 2021.

²⁵ Data collected by Crisis Group.

Militancy in the Bangsamoro has not disappeared, however. Some militants have grown disillusioned, but the various Islamist outfits retain enough appeal to continue a lower-level armed struggle. Some localities continue to see episodic violence.

A “perennial” hotspot for violence in the BARMM is an area called the SPMS Box in Maguindanao.²⁶ This area, which covers around 90 sq km, has a population of approximately 100,000 spread out among 30-40 villages. BIFF militants live among civilians, in many cases close to military camps. Communal disputes over land and politics intertwine with the drivers of insurgency, leading to violent outbursts between periods of calm.²⁷ Conflict in the SPMS Box regularly uproots hundreds, sometimes thousands, from their homes. In March and April 2021, for example, clashes between security forces and BIFF militants drove out at least 30,000 villagers.²⁸ In early March 2022, thousands of civilians again evacuated in anticipation of ground offensives following military deployment in and near the SPMS Box.²⁹ The – often repeated – displacement of civilians, along with the destruction of property, puts a brake on economic progress and creates uncertainty for residents.³⁰ A relief worker said: “Civilians are always ready to evacuate. Our communities are just not feeling safe”.³¹

Militant activity also extends to areas of Mindanao outside the BARMM. In South Cotabato province, for example, kinship and community ties brought remnants of Ansar al-Khilafah Philippines, a small group founded by the deceased Tokboy Maguid, to Polomolok town, where they linked up with the Nilong Group, a criminal syndicate.³² The militants, operating from Polomolok’s outskirts, tapped into Maguindanaon grievances over land to recruit youth while raising funds through criminal activity.³³ Starting in 2018, and likely because they believed the Ansar remnants posed a threat, the police and military killed several gunmen alleged to be militants; locals, however, claimed that many of the dead had no connection to Ansar.³⁴ The incidents caused a stir among Muslim lawmakers in the interim government and members of civil society, who accused security forces of extrajudicial killings and anti-Moro bias; the police insisted they had followed proper procedures.³⁵ More killings and arrests occurred in the remainder of 2021.³⁶ Local officials organised a dialogue, calming but not entirely defusing tensions.

²⁶ Crisis Group online interview, activist from Maguindanao, 18 July 2021. The SPMS acronym originates in army parlance and stands for the settlements of Salbu, Pagatin, Mamasapano and Shariff Aguak.

²⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, MILF commander, 21 February 2021.

²⁸ Edwin Fernandez, “Maguindanao clashes displace thousands”, *Inquirer*, 8 April 2021.

²⁹ See Facebook post by Magungaya Mindanao Incorporated, 8 March 2022.

³⁰ Some of the villages in or near the SPMS Box are still in ruins months after the clashes.

³¹ Crisis Group online interview, 3 July 2021. Close to 60 per cent of residents are sceptical of the BARMM’s performance to date, according to a survey conducted in mid-2020. See “Rapid Midterm Review of the Bangsamoro Transition Period”, Mindanao Peoples Caucus, October 2020, p. 54.

³² Crisis Group online interviews, MILF sources, 29 December 2020; 15 July 2021.

³³ Crisis Group online interview, human rights activist, 1 July 2021.

³⁴ Crisis Group online interview, independent observer, 16 June 2021.

³⁵ “BARMM seeks probe of Moro killings in South Cotabato”, *Mindanews*, 21 July 2020; “In last 4 years, 80 Moros become ‘EJK victims’ in South Cotabato, groups say”, *Mindanews*, 23 June 2021.

³⁶ Allen Estabillo, “Cop slain, 2 others hurt in SoCot ambush”, *Philippine News Agency*, 5 March 2021; “2 suspected Dawlah Islamiya members killed in South Cotabato op – AFP”, *GMA News*, 8 June 2021.

The cases above show that it is local dynamics in the Bangsamoro that predominantly drive militancy. Two further factors feed into this pattern. Firstly, kinship networks play a critical role. In the past, Abu Sayyaf and other commanders used intermarriages to secure communal acceptance, if not outright support.³⁷ At present, recruitment often follows familial lines and, in some cases, slain militants' relatives have taken up arms themselves.³⁸ Secondly, local politicians, more often than not, are aware of militants operating in their towns but "let them be, as long as they do not cause [them] trouble".³⁹ Some politicians may even be in cahoots with militants. The military fears, for instance, that electoral competition in Lanao del Sur could end in violence as a result.⁴⁰ The local elections forthcoming in May throughout the Bangsamoro will be a litmus test for clan elites' commitment to a peaceful transition.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, source close to an Abu Sayyaf commander, 22 December 2019.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, source from Lanao del Sur, 3 March 2022.

³⁹ Crisis Group online interview, source from Lanao, 18 August 2021.

⁴⁰ Froilan Gallardo, "Election fever begins in Lanao del Sur, Maute Group possible threat", Rappler, 13 September 2021.

III. Militancy in the Bangsamoro

A. Central Mindanao: The BIFF and Its Offshoots

The largest militant group in the Bangsamoro is the BIFF, which is active in central Mindanao. A splinter of the MILF's battle-hardened 105th Base Command in Maguindanao that broke away in late 2010, the BIFF underwent several splits after its founder, Ameril Umbra Kato, died in 2015.⁴¹ Once a coherent group, it is now an amalgam of factions that, though separate, maintain kinship ties and often reinforce one another on the battlefield.⁴² None of the factions controls territory; instead, BIFF guerrillas are often on the move, relying on sympathetic villagers for shelter.⁴³ But they are strong enough that many local politicians use their services for various purposes.⁴⁴ Organised crime supplies them with men, guns and money in exchange for the protection they can offer.⁴⁵ At present, there are two main BIFF factions under the leadership of Mohidin Animbang and Esmael Abubakar, respectively.

Animbang, aka Kagi Karialan, leads a faction centred in the village of Kitango in Datu Saudi Ampatuan town.⁴⁶ Some of his followers, many of whom are relatives, come from other places in Maguindanao and Cotabato provinces, including the towns of Midsayap, GSK Pendatun and Datu Paglas. Karialan has emphasised his group's enmity for the Philippine state. In a speech he said: "The Philippine government is our enemy. There is no highway in Mindanao, and there is no road that is not full of government soldiers. All municipalities and *barangays* [villages] are occupied by the military".⁴⁷ As it considers the army an outside aggressor, the group describes its mission as defensive.⁴⁸ Karialan's spokesperson, Abu Jihad, said: "We are living quietly in our area. But if you provoke us, we will fight back".⁴⁹ In late May 2021, Karialan was wounded in battle.⁵⁰ On 29 October, he reappeared on social media, admitting his faction had taken heavy losses but vowing to continue the fight.⁵¹

⁴¹ The BIFF's first split occurred in late 2013, when Mohammad Ali Tambako, a trusted Kato adviser, took advantage of the leader's illness to found the Justice for Islamic Movement. In March 2015, police arrested Tambako. One month later, Kato died and the group separated into two factions led by his lieutenants.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Davao City, 24 October 2019.

⁴³ Residents who are not BIFF members sometimes take up arms to defend the group from military attack. Crisis Group interview, local source close to armed groups in Maguindanao, 1 December 2019.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, military officer, Manila, 21 June 2021. In some cases, mayors have used BIFF fighters as muscle; in others, politicians have paid BIFF commanders to carry out attacks on rivals. Crisis Group interview, source close to armed groups in Maguindanao, 1 December 2019.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group online interview, local source in Maguindanao, 27-29 July 2021.

⁴⁶ Karialan is a cousin of the MILF's influential 118th Base commander, Abdulwahid Tundok.

⁴⁷ "BIFM statement", video, YouTube, 6 July 2020. Karialan's BIFF faction is considered moderate, as it is arguably less aggressive than others, but it does use discourse associated with jihadists. For instance, it characterises the struggle in Mindanao as *jihad fard ayn*, ie, a personal obligation of every Muslim to defend the homeland from invaders.

⁴⁸ Karialan has not pledged allegiance to ISIS and has reiterated that his faction is separate from the jihadists. Statement posted to Facebook, 29 January 2020.

⁴⁹ "Abu Jihad, interviewed by Balita TV", video, YouTube, 20 July 2020.

⁵⁰ Reports have emerged that both Karialan and Abu Jihad were killed at around the same time. But most sources Crisis Group spoke to think these rumours were part of an elaborate ruse to divert

Esmael Abubakar, or Bungos, leads the other core faction. In his sermons, he often says his group represents the remaining “true practitioners” of the Moro struggle in Mindanao.⁵² Bungos’ men operate inside the SPMS Box, as well as in the surrounding mountains and other parts of Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat. He is critical of the MILF, though he has softened his rhetoric of late.⁵³ In a statement, Bungos said his movement will not be a “hindrance in seeking peace” and stressed the legitimacy of its cause as opposed to that of foreign fighters.⁵⁴

The original BIFF emerged as a self-proclaimed “movement” that did not believe in the peace process as an effective avenue to resolve Bangsamoro grievances, but over time, other factors fed into the insurgency. Several BIFF fighters, for example, joined the group for protection during conflicts with other clans or with Christians over land.⁵⁵ More broadly, the inefficiency of the justice system, and the resultant sense of insecurity, motivates some to join the group. A MILF cadre said: “Some [militants] are still looking for justice. That is why they turn to violence”.⁵⁶ One BIFF commander also accused religious scholars of meddling in BARMM politics instead of staying neutral.⁵⁷

The BIFF’s overall strength has eroded, with hundreds of fighters from both major factions surrendering throughout 2020 and 2021, and the army killing many more. A recent Philippine military estimate put the two factions’ combined manpower at 80, a large drop from the several hundred fighters the BIFF had a few years ago.⁵⁸ Dozens of Karialan’s followers have reportedly been contemplating a return to the MILF.⁵⁹ But even in their weakened state, these BIFF factions could still be a threat to peace in Maguindanao. Over the last year, attacks in the province, including the Karialan faction’s raid on a police station in Datu Piang town in December 2020 and another incident in Datu Paglas in early May 2021, attracted attention from the media and the Philippine leadership.⁶⁰ Moreover, powerbrokers could be tempted to tap BIFF fighters as proxy enforcers in disputes during local elections forthcoming in 2022.⁶¹

the military’s attention. Crisis Group online interviews, journalist, 19 September 2021; source close to the group, 30 October 2021.

⁵¹ Statement posted to Facebook, 28 October 2021.

⁵² Bungos says he is the BIFF’s legitimate leader, claiming that Kato anointed him as his successor on his deathbed.

⁵³ Bungos, like Karialan, criticised the MILF’s decision (through the BARMM) to suspend Friday prayers at the height of the pandemic. In this and other ways, he says, the MILF has let “faith” weaken in the Bangsamoro.

⁵⁴ Esmael Abubakar, statement posted to Facebook, 3 June 2021.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group analyst’s interviews and observations in a previous capacity, 2018-2019.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group online interview, MILF Sharia lawyer and official, 3 July 2021.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group online interview, source from Maguindanao, 31 October 2021.

⁵⁸ Ferdinandh Cabrera, “BIFF now only has 80 armed members remaining, says Army commander”, *Mindanews*, 28 July 2021.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group online interviews, sources from Maguindanao, 18 June and 1 July 2021. Reintegration into the MILF would be complicated, as the BIFF was not included in President Duterte’s 15 February 2021 proclamation of amnesty for MILF and other Moro fighters.

⁶⁰ Neither attack caused civilian casualties. Ferdinandh Cabrera, “Armed clash in Datu Paglas averted by talk between mayor and BIFF leader”, *Mindanews*, 8 May 2021. Several sources suspect the moves were “politically motivated”, part of attempts by powerful Maguindanao figures to discredit the BARMM by using the BIFF. Karialan’s spokesperson acknowledged that the faction’s fighters were

Two other outfits originally tied to the BIFF now operate on their own, to the extent that they may be considered separate splinters. Both have pledged allegiance to ISIS, and their modus operandi includes attacks on civilians, in contrast to the above two factions that primarily target government forces.

Esmael Abdulmalik, or Abu Toraiife, the former vice chair for internal affairs of the original BIFF, is the leader of the most hardline splinter, known as Jama'atul al-Muhajireen wal Ansar or Daulah Islamiyah-Toraiife.⁶² The military and MILF look at his faction as the most ideologically inflexible because of its strident rhetoric and incorporation of foreign fighters, whom it has sheltered in exchange for training in finance and logistics.⁶³ On social media, Abu Toraiife has accused the ex-rebels of abandoning the original Bangsamoro cause of Islamic governance, even calling them apostates, and blasted the national government for its continuous military presence.⁶⁴ His group has remained mobile, periodically attacking government forces but losing its impetus from 2019 onward.⁶⁵ Abu Toraiife himself appears to be in poor health.⁶⁶

Over the last two years, another member of the original group that split from the BIFF, Salahuddin Hassan, mounted a challenge to Abu Toraiife as the pre-eminent BIFF dissident leader.⁶⁷ Thanks to his links to other groups, such as Abu Sayyaf, as well as to foreign elements, ISIS apparently designated him as its new emir in the Philippines after the death of Sulu-based militant Hatib Sawadjaan.⁶⁸ Yet despite his efforts to coordinate action with other jihadist groups, such as in the Sulu archipelago, Salahuddin failed to extend his reach outside central Mindanao.⁶⁹ On 29 October 2021, the military killed Salahuddin during an operation in Talayan town, Maguindanao.⁷⁰ Two days later, armed men (presumably his or Abu Toraiife's followers) retaliated

in Datu Paglas, but said they fired in self-defence. Edwin Fernandez, "Army retakes Maguindanao town after 6-HR BIFF occupation", *Inquirer*, 9 May 2021. Crisis Group online interviews, sources from Maguindanao, 23 June 2021; 1 July 2021.

⁶¹ Crisis Group online interview, source in Maguindanao, 23 August 2021.

⁶² Abu Toraiife broke with the Bungos-led BIFF faction, perhaps due to differences over his allegiance to ISIS and perhaps for other reasons. His group launched a first wave of attacks in Maguindanao in 2017 and attempted to raise the black ISIS flag at a town hall. The MILF, alongside the military, defeated Abu Toraiife's fighters in a series of fierce battles in swamplands near the villages of Tee and Andavit in Maguindanao. Further military pressure forced the militants to move around repeatedly in remote parts of Cotabato province.

⁶³ "Peace Conversations for the Bangsamoro", webinar, Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, 23 September 2020. The MILF has described Abu Toraiife as "difficult to influence". "Committee on Local Government Session by the Senate of the Philippines", video, Facebook, 14 May 2021.

⁶⁴ Abu Toraiife's speech airing these accusations appeared on Facebook but has since been taken down.

⁶⁵ His group moves around the Ligawasan marsh in south-eastern Maguindanao. Crisis Group online interview, source from Maguindanao, 31 July 2021.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group online interview, security analyst, 7 May 2021.

⁶⁷ It went by the name of *moasaseen* (Arabic for "founders").

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, international security analyst, Manila, 1 October 2020; Crisis Group online interview, analyst, 23 June 2021.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group online interview, source close to the BIFF, 18 June 2021.

⁷⁰ Jairo Bolledo, "Army kills Daulah Islamiyah leader in Mindanao – AFP", *Rappler*, 29 October 2021.

against an army detachment in the SPMS Box.⁷¹ Soldiers then killed Salahuddin's successor, Abu Azim, in Maguindanao on 2 December.⁷²

Overall, the BIFF and its offshoots appear to be a dwindling force yet one that is still potentially disruptive and capable of gaining strength in the right conditions. Militants in Mindanao have previously found ways to regroup when the military has killed subleaders.⁷³

B. *The Sulu Archipelago and the Abu Sayyaf Group*

In similar apparent decline is the Abu Sayyaf Group, a loose network of militant and criminal cells operating in the Sulu archipelago. Despite the military's success in eliminating dozens of its leaders and hundreds of its combatants over the years, it has always found ways to regroup. Part of the reason for its resilience lies in abiding governance problems across the archipelago that successive authorities have failed to address.⁷⁴ Yet the group is now in disarray, with only a handful of subleaders still alive.⁷⁵ While the group is notorious for kidnapping and piracy, two tactics that have historically set it apart from other Bangsamoro outfits, its activity on both these fronts has also declined.⁷⁶

The province of Basilan, known in the past as an Abu Sayyaf stronghold, has increasingly managed to escape the group's influence. Following heavy battles between Abu Sayyaf fighters led by Isnilon Hapilon and the military in 2016, provincial officials stepped in to tackle the insurgency.⁷⁷ They outsourced some security tasks to village militias, who blocked new members from joining Abu Sayyaf and worked closely with the Philippine army.⁷⁸ The campaign gained even more ground after government forces killed Hapilon and dozens of his men in Marawi, paving the way for local authorities to sustain their peacebuilding efforts in Basilan.⁷⁹ Local bureaucrats used this momentum to push forward development projects and improve public services.⁸⁰

But even with only a handful of militants left in the province, peace in Basilan should not be taken for granted. On 12 September 2021, a small number of Abu Sayyaf fighters ambushed Philippine soldiers in the village of Baguindan, Tipo-Tipo town,

⁷¹ Crisis Group online interview, sources from Maguindanao, 31 October 2021.

⁷² Rommel Rebolledo, "Military, police on high alert following death of Dawlah Islamiya leader in Maguindanao", Rappler, 4 December 2021.

⁷³ Some commanders, for example the religious scholar Hassan Indal, have been moving between factions. Indal was a Karialan lieutenant at first, but the military now considers him a Daulah Islamiyah affiliate, given that his followers reinforced Salahuddin Hassan's troops in battle.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group online interview, former senior military commander, 1 July 2020.

⁷⁵ Only Mundi Sawadjaan, Radullan Sahiron, Radzmil Jannatul and a few other subleaders remain.

⁷⁶ Thomas Stimlen, "South-east Asia: Is the Abu Sayyaf Group a spent force?", Risk Intelligence, 11 March 2021. Piracy is still a concern for regional governments, however. Malaysia has imposed a "dusk-to-dawn" curfew on the shores of seven coastal towns in Sabah state due to "continuous threats from cross-border criminals". Al Jacinto, "Sabah prolongs curfew due to Sayyaf threats", *Manila Times*, 12 October 2021.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, local MILF leader, Zamboanga City, 21 December 2019.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, journalist, Cotabato City, 27 November 2019.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group online interview, local researcher, 18 June 2021.

⁸⁰ Alexander Douglas, "Order amid chaos: Tracing the roots of Basilan's recent outbreak of peace", The Strategist (blog), 21 June 2018.

killing one and injuring another.⁸¹ ISIS claimed the attack; whether the perpetrators were indeed tied to an ISIS-inspired faction is unclear, but local sources say some foreign links may still exist.⁸²

Circumstances are different in Sulu province. With its largely Tausug population living on numerous small islands, Sulu has long been a battleground between Moro rebels and the military.⁸³ The centre of gravity in the conflict between Abu Sayyaf remnants and government forces lies in the western part of Jolo island, a dense jungle between a mountain range and the sea. Most of the Abu Sayyaf fighters are under the command of either Mundi Sawadjaan, the nephew of the former ISIS-designated emir Hajan Sawadjaan, or Radullan Sahiron, who defected from the old Moro rebels to Abu Sayyaf in 1992. Following deadly encounters with Abu Sayyaf in 2018, the Duterte government responded with a surge of troops. Sulu now hosts the army's 11th Infantry Division, leading some in the Bangsamoro to describe it as a "garrison state".⁸⁴ Fighters under both commanders are on the retreat, with most hiding out in the island's remote mountains.⁸⁵

A concerning trend in Sulu is a string of suicide bombings (three realised and two foiled in 2019 and 2020), a tactic that participants in the Moro struggle had previously considered anathema.⁸⁶ Most of the perpetrators, including the women, have been foreign nationals (Indonesian or Egyptian), but in 2019, Norman Lasuca, a young Abu Sayyaf militant, became the first ever Filipino suicide bomber. One year later, his wife and another woman carried out bombings in Jolo that killed fifteen people and injured another 74.⁸⁷ All the perpetrators, locals and outsiders alike, belonged to

⁸¹ Crisis Group online interviews, journalist, 13 September 2021; source close to armed groups in Basilan, 14 October 2021.

⁸² Crisis Group online interview, source close to armed groups in Basilan, 14 October 2021.

⁸³ Sulu is also dominated by the Moro National Liberation Front, which has been formally at peace with the Philippine government since 1996. Manila has tried to tie this prior peace process to the track led by the MILF. An example of convergence is the "transformation program", a bundle of socio-economic reform projects modelled after the MILF normalisation process. Crisis Group telephone interview, government official, 23 February 2021.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group online interview, BARMM official, 15 July 2021.

⁸⁵ Sources in Sulu suggest that Radullan Sahiron died in the first half of 2021 following encounters with the military. The army has not confirmed his death. Crisis Group online interviews, military officer, 22 February 2022; Sulu activist, 23 February 2022.

⁸⁶ The first suicide bombing in the Philippines – and the only one prior to these three – was carried out in July 2018 by a German-Moroccan national in Lamitan town in Basilan. Abu Sayyaf's founder Janjalani considered resorting to suicide bombings in the 1990s, claiming it was "not a sin" and accepting volunteers for the job. Crisis Group interview, source formerly close to Abu Sayyaf, Cotabato City, 27 November 2019. See also Victor Taylor, "The Ideology of the Abu Sayyaf Group", Mackenzie Institute, 28 February 2017. But Janjalani eventually decided against adopting the tactic, emphasising instead the virtue of directly engaging the enemy. Later Abu Sayyaf leaders also declined to use suicide bombings. Crisis Group online interview, source close to Abu Sayyaf, 27 February 2022.

⁸⁷ Philippine authorities identified the perpetrators as Nanah, Norman Lasuca's wife, and Inda Nay, the widow of Abu Talha, an alleged liaison between Abu Sayyaf and ISIS. Two months later, the military arrested an Indonesian woman and two Filipinas for alleged participation in "planning" the bombing. "Suspected Indonesian suicide bomber, 2 others nabbed in Jolo – military", GMA News, 10 October 2021.

or worked with Abu Sayyaf's Sawadjaan faction.⁸⁸ While it is possible that other militants in the Bangsamoro could embrace this tactic, the Sulu suicide bombings seem to have been the result of a particular confluence of factors, namely the presence of foreigners in larger numbers and desperation after the 2018 surge sent these fighters on the run.

While the female suicide bombers attracted a lot of attention, women's participation in Islamist militancy is not new or confined to Sulu. It does seem that women have taken on more operational roles in recent years after having done mostly logistical support work in the past.⁸⁹ In the Sulu archipelago, local and foreign women appear to have played an important part in Abu Sayyaf's operations, for example by facilitating the flow of funds or directly engaging in hostilities.⁹⁰ They seem to get involved due to kinship links to male militants – as wives, widows or daughters.⁹¹ According to experts, marriage ties make it hard for “the women to get out of the circle” of militancy.⁹² A local activist added: “If a widow [of an Abu Sayyaf fighter] does not get support from the community, another commander will just marry her”.⁹³

Manila's military drive has taken a heavy toll on the Sulu militants, who, contrary to many observers' expectations, were unable to exploit the pandemic to further their goals.⁹⁴ A few escaped as early as 2019, crossing the sea to Malaysia's Sabah region; one year later, Malaysian police killed some in an encounter and arrested others, sending them back to the Philippines.⁹⁵ Mundi Sawadjaan himself faces challenges in keeping the fight going; he and his men live in safe houses and rely on sympathisers for food and shelter.⁹⁶ As of July 2021, only two foreign fighters seemed to be with him,

⁸⁸ There were two failed suicide bombing attempts in September and November 2019, both in Indanan town in Sulu. Three of the four would-be bombers were foreigners.

⁸⁹ In some instances, women and girls supported militants during the Marawi war. One fighter's wife cared for the wounded and later died herself. Crisis Group online interview, source close to fighter's family, 8 August 2021. Eyewitnesses also reported girls staffing checkpoints during the siege. See Nicola Smith, “Philippine matriarch Farhana Maute alleged kingpin in ISIS assault”, *Stuff* (New Zealand), 26 June 2017.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group online interviews, activists and security analysts, July–August 2021. One such financier was Almaida Marani Salvin, one of slain militant Abu Talha's wives. There is also evidence that some Abu Sayyaf commanders trained foreign girls and women in Sulu in basic military tactics, for example Rezkie and Aishya Rullie, young daughters of the Indonesian couple that bombed the Jolo cathedral in January 2019. Aishya, arrested in June 2021, was married to a senior Abu Sayyaf militant who was later killed. See Ana P. Santos, “Women of the eastern caliphate”, *Rappler*, 27 and 28 December 2019; and Criselda Yabes, “Philippines must disarm the child warriors of Sulu”, *Nikkei Asia Review*, 2 August 2021.

⁹¹ Crisis Group online interview, development worker, 19 August 2021.

⁹² Amina Rasul Bernardo, “Women and Violent Extremism”, in “Cross Border Terrorism: Challenges and Solution”, webinar, Pusat Kajian Radikalisme dan Deradikalisasi, 28 September 2020.

⁹³ Crisis Group online interview, peace worker, 13 July 2021.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group online interview, Moro National Liberation Front member, 13 July 2021. Abu Sayyaf fighters have failed to launch attacks for several months now, with the army initiating most encounters.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group online interviews, Malaysian source, 1 July 2021; Sabah-based scholars, 8 September 2021.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group online interview, Sulu-based source, 1 July 2021. The group's main hideout appears to be in the mountains between Jolo and Patikul towns in Sulu. On 5 March, the military arrested Mundi Sawadjaan's second wife, who was also alleged to be his finance officer. “Abu Sayyaf sub-leader's wife arrested with bomb components – AFP”, *GMA News*, 6 March 2022.

including a young Indonesian whom he allegedly “adopted”.⁹⁷ Locals in Sulu report that Abu Sayyaf members who used to roam the streets now avoid showing themselves – even Patikul town, a notorious militant hotspot, has reportedly become “safer”.⁹⁸ The military speaks of a “drastic change”, estimating that Abu Sayyaf has just over 100 fighters left in Sulu.⁹⁹

There are, however, troubling indicators. First, the October 2020 death of Sulu-based MNLF chair Yusuf Jikiri, who led an anti-kidnapping task force, has deprived the government of a precious ally in fighting Abu Sayyaf.¹⁰⁰ His death led to leadership squabbles within his faction, and as some MNLF commanders have kinship ties to militants, there is concern that some may gravitate toward Abu Sayyaf. Secondly, dozens of former Abu Sayyaf militants in the jungles around Indanan town have kept their guns, as they surrendered to the MNLF (which did not take the weapons) rather than the military.¹⁰¹ Contestation in advance of the 2022 local elections could infuse these fighters with a new purpose, should politicians pay them to attack rivals.¹⁰²

Finally, as Abu Sayyaf has always been a network of cells rather than a consolidated force, remnants of its structure – inactive fighters and their kin – could reappear.¹⁰³ A long-time observer of Sulu said: “Abu Sayyaf has been just melting back into the civilian population. But they are still there”.¹⁰⁴ Some locals also worry that a sub-group loyal to slain leader Yasser Igasan, who is regarded in the area as one of the few religiously inclined commanders, could resurge, perhaps supported by fighters from Basilan province who have relocated to Sulu over the past year.¹⁰⁵

C. *Lanao Provinces: Maute Group Remnants after Marawi*

A third set of militants is the Maute Group, which grabbed headlines with its capture of Marawi in May 2017. The group suffered a major setback when the army retook the town five months later. After the military killed its interim leader, Abu Dar, in March 2019, its remnants have been in hiding, only occasionally launching minor attacks on the military.¹⁰⁶ The group also acquired a bad reputation among residents due to the Marawi battle’s devastating impact on civilians, at least 360,000 of whom were displaced by the fighting.¹⁰⁷ The declining popular support hampered its opera-

⁹⁷ Crisis Group online interview, analyst, 1 July 2021.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, civil society leader, 5 March 2021; peace worker, 16 June 2021.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group online interview, military officer, 29 June 2021. “Military says less than half of ASG members remain”, *Sun Star*, 5 May 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, political officers from Sulu, Cotabato City, 27 November 2019.

¹⁰¹ See also Section IV. C. of this report.

¹⁰² Politicians have used Abu Sayyaf fighters in Sulu as muscle in past elections. In 2022, the mayor’s post in at least three towns will be contested, and the campaigns could be tumultuous if candidates likewise decide to rely upon force of arms. Crisis Group online interview, Sulu-based source, 15 October 2021.

¹⁰³ Georgi Engelbrecht, “Violence in southern Philippines highlights resiliency of militant networks”, *The Strategist* (blog), 17 September 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group online interview, long-time Sulu observer, 17 September 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group online interviews, sources from Sulu, 9 August 2021; 23 February 2022.

¹⁰⁶ “Critical Events Monitoring System Bulletin”, International Alert, September 2019; and “Critical Events Monitoring System Bulletin”, International Alert, October-December 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group online interviews, Lanao-based activists and researchers, August 2021.

tions, and the Maute remnants' appeal eroded further after the BARMM came into being.¹⁰⁸

There are, however, growing signs that the group remains resilient.¹⁰⁹ Relatives of deceased fighters have taken over the leadership.¹¹⁰ Maute militants have remained mobile, moving around the mountainous boundary of Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur, as well as crossing toward Lanao del Sur's hinterland villages.¹¹¹ Training exercises, propagated on social media, seem to be a priority.¹¹² In August 2021, after a lull in hostilities, the group clashed with the military in rugged terrain around Tangcal town, Lanao del Norte, near Madalum in Lanao del Sur. In early 2022, the military launched an assault on a suspected Maute lair in Maguing, Lanao del Sur, declaring that its leader, Fahaudin Satar or Abu Zacariah, is now the designated ISIS emir in the region.¹¹³

Available information indicates that the group continues to recruit, making up for killed or defected fighters.¹¹⁴ After focusing on Marawi evacuees living in displacement camps, recruitment efforts seem to have branched out to far-flung municipalities.¹¹⁵ Recruiters increasingly look for new fighters among clan networks (as opposed to people who were friends and acquaintances before the Marawi siege) and among women (who are harder to track than young men, whom authorities are watching).¹¹⁶ According to the military, the group has drawn recruits from among ex-MILF combatants disillusioned with the BARMM.¹¹⁷ The group is also recruiting online, where it compares the Bangsamoro fight with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹¹⁸ Some observers point out that individual motivations to join appear to have shifted slightly: newer recruits "seem to be more educated and devout" than the rural youth who joined the battle in Marawi, many of whom appear to have been motivated primarily by financial

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group online interview, civil society activist, 20 February 2021.

¹⁰⁹ At the end of 2019, the group organised a training exercise in Poona-Bayabao, a municipality at Lake Lanao. Around that time, local MILF leaders expressed their increasing "concern" about the Maute Group. Crisis Group online interview, security analyst, 22 February 2021.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Iligan/Marawi, 18-20 December 2019.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, MILF commander, 5 March 2021. In the Lanao mountains on the boundary with Bukidnon province, Islamist militants share space with communist rebels who moved there due to increasing military pressure in central Mindanao.

¹¹² See tweet by War Noir, @war_noir, researcher, 4:29 pm, 20 July 2021. The Maute remnants remain active on jihadist social media platforms, which the group was known for in the years preceding the Marawi siege. Analysts believe that the group aims its propaganda at international as well as domestic audiences.

¹¹³ "Philippine military identifies IS extremist group's new regional leader", Benar News, 2 March 2022.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Lanao del Sur, 18-20 December 2019.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, civil society leader from Lanao del Sur, 25 February 2021; source from Lanao, 21 June 2021.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society leader from Lanao del Sur, 25 February 2021.

¹¹⁷ "Examining Endemic Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism", webinar, Mindanao State University, 15 July 2021. Others say a few MILF guerrillas have joined the BIFF in Maguindanao. Crisis Group online interview, army officer, 20 August 2021.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group online interview, academic, 21 June 2021.

incentives.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, evidence suggests that many recruits are still under eighteen years old.¹²⁰

Perhaps more worrying is the slow pace of reconstruction of Marawi City, which is feeding bitterness at the state, which could heighten the risk of militant recruitment. The five-month battle leading to its capture destroyed the historical town centre, and roughly 85,300 people remain displaced almost five years later, living in camps that often lack basic amenities.¹²¹ Other evacuees are living with relatives or friends, scattered as far away as Manila.

The central government's leading agency tasked with reconstruction, the Task Force Bangon Marawi, set a target of late 2021 to rebuild the city's infrastructure, a deadline about which most observers were always sceptical. "They [the government] are fooling the people", said one.¹²² With the deadline now passed, government officials say rehabilitation might not be completed before the end of Duterte's term in June 2022.¹²³ The Task Force is a bureaucratic behemoth trying to coordinate the efforts of 56 national agencies working with provincial and municipal authorities. The agencies working on the ground lost precious time after the siege due to delays in awarding construction contracts and fragmented donor support.¹²⁴ Well aware of rising popular frustration with the delays, the interim government put reconstruction of Marawi on its twelve-point priority agenda for the Bangsamoro transition, but the central government Task Force's mandate means it can play only a supporting role.¹²⁵

While some new housing has gone up, the town is nowhere close to returning to normal.¹²⁶ Parts of the city centre still lack basic services such as electricity and water. There is also discontent with the perceived failures of Marawi's local government, for example its granting of permits to demolish houses without consulting the displaced persons who lived there.¹²⁷ As many damaged or destroyed houses were on private land, responsibility for rebuilding them falls on the owners rather than the state, add-

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group online interview, analyst, 18 June 2021. See also Acram Latiph, "Examining Local Grievances and Militant Groups in the Southern Philippines", U.S. Institute of Peace, 1 February 2022.

¹²⁰ Photographs and video on social media show a large number of children or teenagers with firearms. The group is known to have used child combatants in the past.

¹²¹ "Mindanao Displacement Dashboard", UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), December 2021.

¹²² Crisis Group online interview, 13 June 2021.

¹²³ Dempsey Reyes, "Major housing projects not done yet by June 30 – execs", *Inquirer*, 16 February 2022.

¹²⁴ A complication is that there are two plans for Marawi's reconstruction: one focusing on the damaged core area, as well as 24 nearby villages, and a second encompassing adjacent towns. The plans are not always well coordinated. See Maria Carmen Fernandez, "Ilang Taong Bakwit? A Review of Post-Marawi Crisis Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, 2017-2020", INCITEGov/Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, October 2021.

¹²⁵ Julmunir Jannaral, "Adapting to bureaucracy a big challenge for BTA", *Manila Times*, 11 August 2019.

¹²⁶ Activists said the government has rebuilt only 30 per cent of the hardest-hit areas, not more than 60 per cent, as officials claim. "Civic leader says gov't 'lying' about Marawi rehab being 65% done", *Philippine Star*, 1 June 2021.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group online interview, activist, 17 October 2021.

ing to the burden on displaced residents.¹²⁸ Another issue is the planned establishment of a military camp in Marawi City, an idea endorsed by Duterte and the top brass to ensure that the militant assault will not recur.¹²⁹ For many residents, such a camp would be akin to “occupation”.¹³⁰

It would be wrong, however, to portray all the displaced people from Marawi as potential militants. While the Maute remnants have undeniably found some recruits in evacuation camps, where they can “exploit feelings of resentment”, most displaced persons simply want to return to their homes.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Civil society groups have been pushing lawmakers to pass the Marawi Compensation Bill, which would provide restitution to owners of destroyed properties. Lawmakers approved the legislation early February; it now lacks only Duterte’s signature. Neil Arwin Mercado, “Marawi compensation bill awaits Duterte signature”, *Inquirer*, 3 February 2022.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group online interview, analyst, 2 July 2021. Part of Marawi City, outside the destroyed town core, is already a military reservation area.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group online interview, Marawi source, 21 June 2021. Planning for construction is going ahead. Christia Ramos, “DND seeking P188-M for deferred Marawi City military camp project”, *Inquirer*, 1 October 2021.

¹³¹ Lead Inspector General for Operation Pacific Eagle, “Report to the U.S. Congress, October 1, 2019-December 31, 2019”, U.S. Department of Defense, p. 14. Crisis Group interviews, clan leaders and civil society representatives, Marawi City, December 2019.

IV. Tackling Violence: Manila and the BARMM

Well aware of the threat jihadist groups pose to peace in the Bangsamoro, the Philippine government has tried to complement security operations with non-military initiatives. But the armed forces remain a key driver of several programs, with former generals at the steering wheel of civilian administration. The former rebels leading the interim government, meanwhile, have the arduous task of harmonising their regional approach with Manila's objectives, as well as varying provincial government policies.

A. Manila's Response

1. Military and police operations

The military leads operations against jihadist groups, while the police go after criminals or drug syndicates. Manila's counter-insurgency tactics have grown more diverse over the last few years. The increasing deployment of Muslim recruits in hotspots throughout the Bangsamoro has built trust among residents.¹³² In addition, the military has striven to win "hearts and minds" by pushing local authorities to improve service delivery and publicly distance themselves from militant groups.¹³³ For many young Bangsamoro bureaucrats, the military has even become a partner, although there is a "process of adjustment" given widespread resentment of the army following decades of conflict.¹³⁴

Another vital effort is the "Balik *barangay*" initiative in Sulu. This program, launched in 2020, seeks to allow displaced residents of conflict-affected villages (*barangays*) to return to their homes after military approval.¹³⁵ Villagers seem to welcome the program, but some argue that the displaced had little say in the timing of return and that the military made no arrangements to ensure new sources of livelihood for people who went home.¹³⁶ Some returnees have been unable to reach the land they once cultivated due to security restrictions.¹³⁷ An official in a pilot village spoke of worries about returnees' economic well-being due to "lack of clarity" in the program, coupled with the economic challenges brought by the pandemic.¹³⁸ There are villages in Sulu and Basilan where part of the population is hesitant to come back due to security concerns.¹³⁹

¹³² Crisis Group online interview, relief worker, 3 July 2021. In some cases, they are former MNLF guerrillas integrated into the army following the 1996 peace. In Sulu, locals are enlisting in paramilitary groups called Citizen Armed Force Geographical Units. Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Manila, 17 September 2020.

¹³³ In some places, civilian officials have designated militants as *personae non grata*.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group online interview, youth leader, 31 July 2021.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group online interview, security analyst, 15 June 2021. As of August 2021, villagers had returned to nine locales.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group online interview, development worker, 16 June 2021.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group online interview, Sulu-based source, 10 August 2021.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group online interview, 16 June 2021. For a broader picture of displacement in the island municipalities of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, see also "Profiling of Internal Displacement in the Island Provinces of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao", UNHCR, March 2021.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group online interviews, sources in Sulu and Basilan, 18 August 2021.

The military's battles with militants can inspire trepidation among locals. The military tends to cite numbers – fatalities, surrenders and confiscated weapons – as indicators of success, which residents who often suffer the collateral damage of its campaigns resent.¹⁴⁰ One of the biggest concerns in Maguindanao remains the danger of mortars and airstrikes. More often than not, military offensives lead to displacement of civilians, and occasional civilian casualties have stirred further discontent.¹⁴¹ In Lanao, where counter-insurgency operations are limited, perceptions vary depending on particular units' actions and even the personalities of battalion and brigade commanders.¹⁴² But even there, the military has used airstrikes against suspected militants, putting civilians at risk.¹⁴³ Militants often nurse an antipathy or even a hatred for the military, including a desire for revenge.¹⁴⁴

To counter negative views among the population while further weakening militants, the security forces have employed two tactics. First, they have focused on high-value targets, achieving some success in disrupting militant networks, for example in Maguindanao.¹⁴⁵ Secondly, the police have augmented military campaigns with their own operations, arresting Abu Sayyaf figures in cities such as Manila and Zamboanga. These efforts have made it difficult for militants to regain momentum.

2. Anti-terrorism legislation and other initiatives

On 3 July 2020, President Duterte signed Republic Act No. 11479, known as the Anti-Terrorism Act.¹⁴⁶ Considered to be the “brainchild of retired military and police generals”, the law expanded state powers in combating Islamist militancy.¹⁴⁷ It allowed longer detention periods for suspects arrested without a warrant, lengthened the duration of legal wiretapping and surveillance, and strengthened measures for freezing funds of groups that the Philippine state classifies as terrorist.¹⁴⁸ Under this law, the

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group online interview, military commander, 21 June 2021.

¹⁴¹ “20 dead, over 50,000 displaced by Maguindanao clashes”, *Daily Tribune*, 25 March 2021; Ferdinandh Cabrera, “2 die as mortars hit Maguindanao village”, NDBC News, 29 April 2021.

¹⁴² Crisis Group online interview, source from Lanao, 21 June 2021.

¹⁴³ A military operation in the town of Maguing in early March displaced more than 1,000 villagers. Crisis Group telephone interviews, 1 March 2022. See also Catherine Gonzales, “Gov't troops launch air strike against Daulah Islamiyah in Lanao del Sur”, *Inquirer*, 1 March 2022.

¹⁴⁴ “Violent Extremism in the Philippines: Endemic Conflict, Volatile Politics and the Struggle for Identity”, International Republican Institute, Winter 2018, p. 17. Crisis Group online interview, military officer, 21 June 2021. On 26 January 2022, for example, Abu Sayyaf commander Ellam Nasirin ambushed the military in Tugas village in Patikul town to get “revenge for the death of his relatives”. Crisis Group online interview, source from Sulu, 3 February 2022. Julie Alipala, “Soldier killed, 2 others wounded in Abu Sayyaf attack in Sulu”, *Inquirer*, 26 January 2022.

¹⁴⁵ Joseph Franco, “Examining the Military's Soft Power Challenge in the Southern Philippines”, U.S. Institute of Peace, 16 February 2022. The Philippine military also claims that followers of Salahuddin Hassan reinforced the Maute Group remnants in the March 2022 fighting in Lanao. See the Facebook page of the 1st Infantry Division of the Philippine Army, 2 March 2022.

¹⁴⁶ The law replaced the Human Security Act of 2007.

¹⁴⁷ Carmela Fonbuena, “The First Year of the Anti-Terrorism Act: An Assessment”, Institute for Autonomy and Governance, July 2021. The law features a rather broad definition of terrorism and bans “material support” for designated individuals and organisations.

¹⁴⁸ Republic Act No. 11479, known as the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, Department of Justice, Anti-Terrorism Council, and its 2020 Implementing Rules and Regulations.

Court of Appeals may “proscribe” individuals and groups as terrorists; the Anti-Terrorism Council, a presidentially appointed body created by the law, can similarly “designate” terrorists, drawing on existing UN Security Council lists but also its own initiative.

Several human rights groups have challenged this act in the Philippine Supreme Court, mostly on the grounds that it defines terrorism so vaguely that the state could abuse it to outlaw legitimate forms of dissent.¹⁴⁹ Many observers consider it directed at leftist groups associated with the communist rebellion rather than Islamist militants. So far, the government has in fact used the law to prosecute leftist figures but not in the Bangsamoro.¹⁵⁰ Several Muslim leaders, however, told Crisis Group they fear it could be used to target Moros as well.¹⁵¹ Development workers in the Bangsamoro also spoke of the “chilling effect” the law has had on civil society activists, who are increasingly “reluctant” to engage with certain people for fear of judicial retribution.¹⁵²

Despite the petitions questioning the bill’s legality, the Supreme Court upheld most of the law, removing only two provisions.¹⁵³ Human rights groups lodged a round of appeals following this decision, though the chances that the court will revise the law further seem slim.¹⁵⁴

Prompted by the Marawi conflict, the Philippine government has also embraced the language of “preventing and countering violent extremism” as part of its policies addressing Islamist militancy. The Department of Interior and Local Government drafted a national action plan based on these concepts.¹⁵⁵ The document lays out root causes of militancy, ranging from poverty to repeated displacement, and organises government agencies into clusters to tackle them. But the action plan muddles the exact definition of “extremism”, putting all the Islamist militant groups outside the peace process – meaning all but the MILF and the MNLF – under one umbrella

¹⁴⁹ Thirty-seven petitions were filed, mostly by human rights groups. Pursuant to the court challenges, Manila added Implementing Rules to clarify certain issues. “IRR explains: When can protests be considered terrorism?”, CNN Philippines, 17 October 2020. U.S. military observers described the law as “sound”. They said “how the law is implemented” should come in for scrutiny but not the text itself. Lead Inspector General for Operation Pacific Eagle, “Report to the U.S. Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020”, U.S. Department of Defense, p. 4.

¹⁵⁰ Fonbuena, “The First Year of the Anti-Terrorism Act”, *op. cit.*

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group online interview, 19 July 2021. Carolyn Arguillas, “Mindanawon reps warn anti-terror bill won’t eradicate but exacerbate terrorism”, *Mindanews*, 4 June 2020. The BARMM urged President Duterte to give it representation on the Anti-Terror Council, but he refused.

¹⁵² Crisis Group online interview, 11 August 2021.

¹⁵³ The court struck two provisions: a half-clause it deemed “overbroad and violative of the freedom of expression” and a clause giving the Anti-Terrorism Council power to designate groups as terrorist based on requests from other countries or international organisations. For the full text of the decision, see Supreme Court of the Philippines, *En Banc Decision on G.R. Nos. 252578 et al., Atty. Howard M. Calleja et al. vs. Executive Secretary et al.*, 17 May 2021.

¹⁵⁴ On 2 March, 26 groups of petitioners filed a “joint motion for reconsideration”, hoping to convince the court to remove or weaken other contentious provisions of the law. See Lian Buan, “Appeals roll for another shot to void feared anti-terror law”, *Rappler*, 2 March 2022.

¹⁵⁵ Through an Australian grant, the UN Development Programme provided support in crafting the plan.

together with communist guerrillas.¹⁵⁶ In other words, it appears to equate extremism with armed opposition to the state, irrespective of ideology.

Opinions about the action plan vary in the Bangsamoro. While some BARMM officials consider it sound, critics call it “militaristic” due to its top-down and security-driven approach.¹⁵⁷ Many initiatives under the plan seem disconnected from one another, with no real unifying vision, raising concerns not so much about the harm it could do as about its effectiveness at doing much of anything.¹⁵⁸ There are also worrying signs of misuse, such as attempted profiling of Muslim youth in metropolitan Manila by the police.¹⁵⁹ Some Lanao residents also felt that the state’s programming unfairly singled out displaced Maranaos from Marawi as “potential” militants who would harbour an “element of mistrust” in the state.¹⁶⁰

Non-governmental organisations also run “countering extremism” programs, which are often donor or state-driven.¹⁶¹ While locals say they appreciate the plethora of seminars and trainings they are exposed to, some question their utility. A participant from Maguindanao commented: “There are so many activities, and we are thankful. But does it really have an impact?”¹⁶² Another observer said many NGOs seek funding for these projects because they are popular with donors, but not all activities “make sense or are appropriate”.¹⁶³ Programs that aim to engage militants and their families and supporters are rare, on the other hand, on account of staff security concerns but also because NGOs are nervous that the state could come after them citing the 2020 anti-terror law.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group online interview, BARMM official, 15 July 2021.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group online interview, civil society leaders, 13 June and 20 July 2021. The department’s director is a retired army chief. Moreover, a leitmotif of the plan is “radicalisation”, a lens that may unduly narrow the diverse list of reasons why people might take up arms against the state. There are also concerns about the absence of a gender angle, as well as the lack of civil society involvement.

¹⁵⁸ Joseph Franco, “The Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi”, Crisis Group Commentary, 17 July 2018.

¹⁵⁹ In January 2020, a police station in Manila issued a memorandum requesting that officers submit a list of all Muslim students in high schools, colleges and universities. Three weeks later, authorities rolled back the order. “Sinascalls order profiling Muslim students in metro Manila”, Rappler, 21 February 2020.

¹⁶⁰ “An Explosive Cocktail: Counter-terrorism, Militarisation and Authoritarianism in the Philippines”, Saferworld, June 2021, pp. 25-26.

¹⁶¹ One analyst said such programs make up a disproportionate part of interventions. Crisis Group online interview, 17 August 2021.

¹⁶² Crisis Group online interview, official, 15 July 2021.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group online interview, source from Lanao region, 20 July 2021.

¹⁶⁴ Donors’ sanctions lists further discourage interventions. Some of the existing programs are run by local NGOs, with international funding, and focus on uncontroversial issues such as civilian protection and humanitarian action. Among international actors, Geneva Call and the International Committee of the Red Cross seek to promote awareness of humanitarian norms among armed actors, including some outside of the peace process.

B. *BARMM and MILF Responses*

Bangsamoro leaders recognise the challenge that militants pose to the nascent autonomous region. As the chief minister and MILF chair, Ahod Balawag, said himself: “This is our only home, and we cannot let a few individuals destroy it from within”.¹⁶⁵

At its onset in 2019, the interim government followed two strategies in tackling militancy. First, it acknowledged the grievances of MILF splinter groups – particularly the BIFF – with the peace process and encouraged them to take up their complaints with the central government.¹⁶⁶ Hundreds of fighters from the Karialan and Bungos factions showed interest in doing so, but they grew wary of arrest when Manila was unable to dispense with criminal cases that are pending against many combatants.¹⁶⁷ Secondly, the interim government aimed to improve local authorities’ capacity throughout the BARMM so that municipal and village officials could provide better services and reduce the appeal of militant groups criticising their performance. More broadly, it identified priority development projects under its “moral governance” agenda, to deliver the promised peace dividends.¹⁶⁸

The autonomous region’s development track record is uneven. The interim government has launched projects whose impact will likely become more apparent only with the passage of time. Examples include construction of town halls, better distribution of health services, education reforms and small infrastructure projects to some of the region’s most remote towns. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has considerably slowed many programs.¹⁶⁹ There are too few programs in place to tackle poverty and create jobs.¹⁷⁰ In May 2021, the interim government organised a Peace and Security Summit, which resulted in more plans to “decisively” address the situation in the SPMS Box, though the projects remain unfinished.¹⁷¹

BARMM officials are aware of the need to align their policies with those of President Duterte’s Task Force to End Local Armed Conflict.¹⁷² Set up in 2019, this body

¹⁶⁵ “Bangsamoro Peace and Security Summit”, video, Facebook, 24 May 2021.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior MILF commander, Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao, 29 November 2019. The MILF, however, has found it challenging to engage Abu Sayyaf, as the group does not have a “command structure”. Ahod Balawag, cited in “Pressure on the Bangsamoro”, Facts First with Christian Esguerra (podcast), 13 November 2020.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group online interview, source close to the process, 8 August 2021. Over the last few years, the Philippine government and private individuals have filed cases against members of militant groups such as the BIFF, Abu Sayyaf and the coalition that attacked Marawi.

¹⁶⁸ MILF leaders introduced this concept in 2019, at the start of the transition period. It can be summed up as good governance underpinned by Islamic principles.

¹⁶⁹ As of late July 2021, for example, only 14.4 per cent of annual-budgeted public works projects in the Bangsamoro had been completed. Presentation of Engineer Mohajirin T. Ali, Director General of the Bangsamoro Planning and Development Authority, at “Bangsamoro Governance Summit”, video, Facebook, 23 July 2021.

¹⁷⁰ The pandemic exacerbated economic troubles in the BARMM, though the economy grew overall and the overall poverty incidence declined. Crisis Group online interview, economist, 28 June 2021. See, Edwin Fernandez, “BARMM head cites gains as region marks 3rd anniversary”, Philippine News Agency, 21 January 2022.

¹⁷¹ Minister Naguib Sinarimbo, quoted in “BARMM Updates on Regional Development and Security”, video, Facebook, 2 July 2021.

¹⁷² “BARMM gov’t crafts work plan in ending insurgency in the region”, press release, Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, 26 March 2021.

is a steering mechanism tasked with coordinating different national agencies' policies aimed at resolving local insurgencies.¹⁷³ Yet it remains unclear if the interagency channel, which mimics another intended for communist rebels, is well suited to the Bangsamoro, where the plethora of armed groups that remain outside the peace process complicate the picture. The leftist rebels are often easily identified by their insignia and there is only one predominant communist rebel group.¹⁷⁴ But Moro armed groups are fluid and opaque in their composition, with fighters often harbouring multiple loyalties and – apart from MILF and MNLF members – hardly wearing uniforms, raising questions about the Task Force's ability to target the right people.

The MILF, as the party leading the interim government, plays a crucial role in dealing with militancy throughout the BARMM. Its religious guide, the Bangsamoro mufti, issued a fatwa condemning jihadist groups in 2017 and has frequently reiterated this position.¹⁷⁵ The MILF's military leadership went further by labelling members of the BIFF and other armed groups as *bughat*, or political rebels, following the BIFF's raid on Datu Paglas in May 2021.¹⁷⁶ Field commanders and local MILF leaders also play a role in monitoring the situation in various locations, particularly where ISIS-inspired groups are active.¹⁷⁷ Some have been outspoken in their advocacy. Abdullah Macapaar, known as Commander Bravo, a former rebel and now regional parliamentarian, said: "We are telling everyone – fathers and mothers of our male and female children ... not to join ISIS. They have made ideological innovations that have led them astray."¹⁷⁸

C. Reintegration Programs

Programs to demobilise militants are in place throughout the Bangsamoro. They reward surrendered fighters who turn in their guns with money or in-kind assistance for new livelihoods, such as seeds and machinery for farming. Provincial authorities lead the initiatives, although the military, which is in charge of vetting candidates for disarmament, sometimes spearheads the work on the ground. A clear distinction

¹⁷³ This body is a replica of another aimed at neutralising communist rebels, known as the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict. Crisis Group online interview, military official, 29 June 2021.

¹⁷⁴ Even the communist rebellion presents challenges, however, as the Philippine military and police often consider leftist activists and politicians to be part of the communist front.

¹⁷⁵ In some of his pronouncements, the mufti has said dialogue and reconciliation should be the main tools of engagement. In other instances, however, he has said defensive action against "extremists" is permissible.

¹⁷⁶ Crisis Group online interview, MILF commander, 7 July 2021. The declaration stops short of embracing military offensives against militant groups but says defensive action may be required.

¹⁷⁷ In Maguindanao, for example, Islamic scholars, some of whom are from the MILF, are part of an advisory body to the local government that promotes "counter-messaging" to clerics supportive of ISIS-inspired groups. Crisis Group online interview, 18 August 2021. Some observers, however, think that while jihadism may be losing its appeal, the Bangsamoro could grow still more socially conservative, as illustrated by a surge of violence against LGBTIQI people. Crisis Group online interview, scholar, 18 September 2021. On the notion of conservatism, see, for example, "The Growing Influence of Salafism in Muslim Mindanao", Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 8 January 2020.

¹⁷⁸ "Get to know more Abdullah Goldiano Macapaar", video, Facebook, 7 May 2021.

between the two is difficult, given that the armed forces are everywhere present in Mindanao.¹⁷⁹

One of the first initiatives, which remains one of the most successful to date, was Basilan's Program Against Violence Extremism. The governor's brother, Mujiv Hataman, launched this program in 2018 after most militants had suffered military defeat. The provincial government ran it in partnership with the army. It offered militants incentives such as housing, livelihood support and social services to get them to surrender. The program has demobilised around 290 Abu Sayyaf fighters so far, significantly eroding the network's capacity in the island province.¹⁸⁰

Other provinces followed suit. In Sulu, a campaign led by the military and supported by Governor Sakur Tan and mayors loyal to him also cut into Abu Sayyaf ranks, with over 200 members laying down their weapons since 2019.¹⁸¹ Governor Mariam Sangki-Mangudadatu runs Maguindanao's Agila-Haven program, which has been targeting both the Karialan and Bungos BIFF factions with some success.¹⁸² In Lanao del Sur, surrenders by Maute remnants are less frequent but continue nonetheless, under the provincial government's leadership.

The interim government is also striving to play a role in reintegrating militants. Its flagship Project Tugon, launched in late 2020, aims to provide socio-economic assistance to members of all Moro armed groups outside the peace process who are willing to give up their weapons.¹⁸³ For 2021, it earmarked a budget for 250 fighters through cash aid, housing, livelihood packages and skills development. Manila seems to recognise Tugon's role as the "central coordinating body" for reintegration, though in practice the provinces remain in the lead.¹⁸⁴

It is important that "hungry and tired" militants in the BARMM know they have a way out without having to fear for their lives, but all the various programs under way face similar challenges.¹⁸⁵

- First, many national and regional officials look at reintegration exclusively from an economic perspective.¹⁸⁶ Material incentives, however, might have unintended consequences as militants could simply take the one-time cash payment and then return to insurgency.¹⁸⁷ Interventions such as psycho-social support for underage

¹⁷⁹ In almost all cases, the military plays a prominent role in integration, since its intelligence assessment, together with police input, helps vet the fighters. Crisis Group online interview, source privy to the process, 18 August 2021.

¹⁸⁰ Governor Jim Hataman-Saliman, cited in "Bangsamoro Governance Summit", op. cit.

¹⁸¹ Data gathered by Crisis Group.

¹⁸² As of 27 October 2021, the program had disarmed 297 former militants. Crisis Group online interview, 4 November 2021.

¹⁸³ John Unson, "BARMM earmarks P100 million for community, peace-building programs", *Philippine Star*, 14 December 2019.

¹⁸⁴ Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, cited in "Bangsamoro Peace and Security Summit", op. cit.

¹⁸⁵ Crisis Group online interview, security analyst, 15 June 2021. Kenneth Yeo, "Hungry and tired: The decline of militancy in Mindanao", *The Strategist* (blog), 11 June 2021.

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Maguindanao local officials, Isulan, Sultan Kudarat Capitol, 24 November 2019.

¹⁸⁷ Maguindanao province provides only livelihood assistance, not cash, so that combatants cannot use the compensation money to purchase weapons. Crisis Group online interview, local government official, 23 August 2021. One source said a former BIFF commander surrendered to the military but

fighters or conflict resolution trainings are scarce; those programs that do exist owe more to individual leadership by a mayor or battalion commander than to uniform government policy.¹⁸⁸

- ❑ Secondly, even though vetting is in place to ensure that only bona fide militants demobilise through the program, hiccups occur. In Sulu, for example, some of those who surrendered turned out not to be Abu Sayyaf members but were labelled as such by national or local authorities, in order to showcase the program's success or as a result of local political rivalries.¹⁸⁹ In Lanao del Sur, militiamen working under the local government somehow entered the program.¹⁹⁰ Authorities should strengthen screening to avoid such cases of mistaken identity.
- ❑ Thirdly, the various reintegration initiatives lack cohesion. A development official said: "There is not much consistency [in the programs] and the initiatives are piecemeal".¹⁹¹ Depending on the location, provincial and municipal governments, the BARMM and the military all play different roles.¹⁹² The interim government's Project Tugon and Maguindanao's reintegration program, for example, appear to work in parallel and sometimes in competition with each other.¹⁹³ In Sulu, the reintegration task force operates with support from provincial authorities, without much coordination with the BARMM or a clear structure.
- ❑ Fourthly, many fighters have criminal cases pending against them, which can make them reluctant to surrender for fear of prosecution. In Maguindanao, militants have turned themselves in anyway, going to prison so that their families can receive the social benefits on their behalf.¹⁹⁴ At times, local governments and the military have lobbied state prosecutors or private plaintiffs to drop charges, particularly when the fighters in question were not involved in large-scale attacks.¹⁹⁵
- ❑ Finally, Sulu has its own particular issues.¹⁹⁶ Some surrendered Abu Sayyaf fighters, for example, allege they never received the financial compensation they were

reconnected with the insurgency and remains a power player in his hometown. Crisis Group online interview, 18 July 2021. Fighters may also surrender in order to leave one faction and move to another.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group online interview, military analyst, 15 June 2021; policy evaluator, 19 August 2021.

¹⁸⁹ Crisis Group online interview, source in Sulu, 1 July 2021.

¹⁹⁰ Crisis Group online interview, source in Lanao, 17 August 2021. Official militias in the Philippines fall into two broad categories: Civilian Voluntary Organisations under the command of local police, and by extension the mayor, or the aforementioned peacekeepers organised at the village level under the village head's command.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group online interview, international expert, 13 July 2021.

¹⁹² Some sources said there is occasional "competition" between military commanders who want to receive credit for surrendered militants and their weapons. Crisis Group online interviews, 17-18 August 2021.

¹⁹³ Crisis Group online interview, local government official, 23 August 2021. Some BIFF combatants "choose" their preferred program, regional or provincial, based on expected benefits.

¹⁹⁴ Crisis Group online interview, local government official, 23 August 2021.

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group online interviews, military commanders, 21 June and 18 October 2021.

¹⁹⁶ After the reintegration program's success, the Philippine military tried to expand its scope to Sulu and Tawi-Tawi in late 2019. The initiative lost momentum, however, due to the coronavirus and other reasons, particularly that Sulu's leaders did not seem to fully embrace it. Crisis Group interview, Manila, 28 November 2020.

promised; other sources say regional authorities have not supported the province's program in earnest, highlighting that mayors had to pay for parts of it, either from municipal budgets or out of their own pockets.¹⁹⁷ Some militants also hesitate to disarm out of fear they will be used as informers or will face revenge from clans they have attacked in the past.¹⁹⁸ Sometimes, fighters prefer to surrender to the MNLF rather than the military, as that allows them to keep their weapons, even if it means foregoing compensation.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Crisis Group online interviews, international observer, 25 June 2021; source from Sulu, 13 October 2021; army officer, 22 February 2022.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group online interviews, Sulu-based peace workers, 13 July 2021.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

V. Thinking Local

A. Adjusting Security Operations

With militant groups still operating in pockets of the Bangsamoro, there is no sign of the army vacating the BARMM anytime soon, as the 2014 peace agreement foresaw.²⁰⁰ Given that the Philippine National Police remains ill equipped to handle security in the region, it is unrealistic for now to advocate for the army to leave.

Manila would have much to gain, however, by limiting the adverse impact of military operations on civilians, which feed popular resentment of the Philippine state. For starters, the military should only use mortars or airstrikes as a last resort, and it should be more systematic in observing the humanitarian precaution principle.²⁰¹ It should also carry out more “surgical” strikes and fewer of the large-scale raids that now make up the bulk of its activities.²⁰² Such strikes would cause fewer civilian casualties and less displacement.

In addition, a holistic response that complements security measures with other interventions would likely be more effective. Even some army commanders acknowledge the need to go beyond military initiatives.²⁰³ One step would be to invite civilian participation in designing the modalities of programs for returnees, such as the “Balik *barangay*” initiative in Sulu. More generally, dialogue with residents about their concerns could build trust with the armed forces and further sensitise army commanders to the ground realities these people face. Law enforcement officials should also avoid using excessive force during counter-narcotics and other law enforcement operations.

The Philippine government should also consider non-military ways of tackling the small insurgencies outside the peace process. Police operations to arrest Abu Sayyaf members could be useful in the Sulu archipelago and Zamboanga Peninsula, where many militants are on the run.²⁰⁴ Agencies such as the police or the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency should cooperate with their Malaysian and Indonesian counterparts in gathering intelligence to pressure the network’s remnants and disrupt recruitment.²⁰⁵ In central Mindanao, it is unlikely that the police can play a large role because it usually does not take part in counter-insurgency operations.

²⁰⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Keeping Normalisation on Track*, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

²⁰¹ Some observers remarked that the military could show greater cultural sensitivity by avoiding artillery strikes and shelling on Muslim holidays. Crisis Group online interview, humanitarian worker, 8 August 2021.

²⁰² In the past, civilian casualties have often eroded the military’s influence in the vicinity and also led to retaliation. Crisis Group online interviews, military officer, 21 June 2021; source close to a family with Abu Sayyaf links, 20 April 2020.

²⁰³ Crisis Group online interviews, army officers, 21 June and 20 August 2021.

²⁰⁴ See Sidney Jones, “Don’t ‘crush’ Abu Sayyaf perpetrators, debrief them”, *The Interpreter*, 31 January 2019; and Ann Bajo, “Saving Lupah Sug: A Proposal to End Local Armed Conflict in Sulu”, *Philippine Strategic Forum*, 4 March 2021.

²⁰⁵ Georgi Engelbrecht, “Bangsamoro’s Potential for Regional Gains”, *Philippine Strategic Forum*, 10 February 2021. Malaysian officials have regularly alerted Manila that Abu Sayyaf members are hiding in Sabah. Abu Sayyaf’s subleader Amah Patit, a former worker in Sabah, lives in Tawi-Tawi. He and Ahadin Hussein, another subleader, are conduits for the network’s kidnapping operations. Crisis Group online interview, source close to Abu Sayyaf, 23 February 2022.

Yet the military and the MILF can jointly fill the gap by deploying more joint peacekeeping teams in key areas.²⁰⁶ They could take such action in the SPMS Box, for example, but also in other zones outside Maguindanao, both to deter militants and to send a message of unity to the Bangsamoro's people. The joint teams comprise a mix of government and MILF forces, showcasing a concrete outcome of the peace process.²⁰⁷

B. *Fostering Conflict Resolution*

As militants in the Bangsamoro often take advantage of local, clan-based conflicts to gain sympathy or to support relatives or friends against adversaries, it remains imperative for the BARMM to strengthen its conflict resolution capacities.²⁰⁸ Integrating community efforts with existing institutional mechanisms would help tackle the pervasive violence in the region.²⁰⁹

In an area such as the SPMS Box, where insurgency and clan feuds intersect, the BARMM's ministry of public order and safety, as well as the ministry of interior and local government, could do more. They should, for example, follow up on ideas discussed at the May 2021 Peace and Security Summit by identifying conflict hotspots, expediting settlement of protracted feuds therein and tapping local MILF commanders' knowledge of feuds in their areas.²¹⁰ They should also engage with non-MILF communities, particularly those associated with the BIFF and its splinters, quietly if required. The interim government could thus hear out militants' legitimate grievances, for example over land disputes, and if applicable, register their complaints in order to act on them.²¹¹ At this juncture, isolating militants might make them even more determined insurgents.²¹²

More broadly, local government bodies tasked with dispute resolution in the Bangsamoro, including municipal and village peace and order councils, should ensure stronger community participation.²¹³ Local MILF, but also MNLF commanders, who traditionally play a role in mediating conflicts in their towns and villages, should work with the local governments to advance peacemaking efforts. Where the interests of commanders and local politicians collide, for example because of political disagree-

²⁰⁶ The 2014 peace treaty established Joint Peace and Security Teams comprised of military, police and MILF personnel.

²⁰⁷ According to senior government officials, there is also a plan to establish a peacekeeping post in the town of Sumisip, Basilan, in addition to a station in Tipo-Tipo town, a former Abu Sayyaf lair. Crisis Group online interview, 27 January 2022. In Lanao del Sur, peacekeepers stay in Balindong town; in Maguindanao, they are in the municipality of Datu Saudi Ampatuan.

²⁰⁸ United Bangsamoro Development Plan 2019-2030, p. 20.

²⁰⁹ See Crisis Group Report, *Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

²¹⁰ The clan feuds are known as *rido*. As of July 2021, the ministry of public order and safety had settled 52 *rido* cases and trained 1,523 local mediators. "BARMM Updates on Regional Development and Security", op. cit.

²¹¹ The MILF has a body tasked with speaking to members of militant groups but in the absence of formal ties to government agencies, its capacity to develop policies or mechanisms beyond mere dialogue is limited.

²¹² Crisis Group online interview, source in Maguindanao, 8 August 2021.

²¹³ In some areas, such as a cluster of towns and villages at the Maguindanao-Lanao del Sur boundary, residents manage conflicts capably with recourse to traditional mechanisms. This communal approach kept militants from taking hold there in the Marawi battle's aftermath.

ments in SPMS Box villages or adjacent towns in Maguindanao, the BARMM administration, particularly the Office of the Chief Minister and the public order and safety ministry, should take the lead in overcoming differences.²¹⁴

C. *Calibrating Reintegration Programs*

Reintegration programs in the Bangsamoro are full of potential, but so far remain largely ad hoc and overly security-oriented. Such initiatives, and development interventions in support thereof, should be grounded in community needs rather than following a top-down agenda, as is presently the case. While actual fighters should logically remain the focus of demobilisation efforts, programs should also aim to address the groups' social support base.

The interim government has the mandate and budget to step in in a more meaningful way. In partnership with local government units, it could help fund existing provincial programs, thus ensuring both their sustainability and a certain level of consistency throughout the region. To begin with, a joint review mechanism of existing initiatives would allow for identifying best practices in order to streamline them. Donors could assist with technical expertise.²¹⁵ The military will necessarily continue to play a role, particularly when it comes to vetting militants wishing to surrender, but civil society should be involved in project design, for example in supporting needs assessments or training module development. The civil society role should surpass the present "token participation" of village and municipal officials.²¹⁶ In Sulu, the interim government should coordinate existing local programs with development interventions designed by national authorities for facilitating MNLF fighter's reintegration. If initiatives remain disjointed, they could lead to duplication, or worse, encourage some who surrender to buy new weapons.

Programmatically, vocational training for former fighters would be a welcome supplement to the financial assistance presently provided. Livelihood support and psycho-social interventions should also be strengthened and include militants' kin whenever possible. Seminars on conflict transformation, through the public order and safety ministry, could also help reduce the risk of friction with neighbours upon ex-fighters' return by raising awareness of non-violent paths to conflict resolution. Spurring dialogue in villages with a high percentage of returnees, using Islamic and indigenous lenses on transitional justice that emphasise values of unity, may further contribute to reconciliation.²¹⁷ Interventions, however, should not happen at the expense of residents who have suffered abuses at the hands of armed groups; victims should be able to speak freely about militants who have committed serious crimes in the past.²¹⁸

Tailored programs for women and orphans are also crucial.²¹⁹ Interim government bureaucrats, as well as international donors, should work on better understanding

²¹⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, op. cit., p. 28.

²¹⁵ For example, by helping the regional government generate data and feedback from integration programs so far.

²¹⁶ Crisis Group online interviews, NGO representative, researcher, 19 August 2021.

²¹⁷ Crisis Group online interview, local mediator, 13 July 2021.

²¹⁸ Crisis Group online interview, UN official, 23 February 2021.

²¹⁹ Confidential webinar with local gender expert, 19 July 2021.

the motivations of women participating in Bangsamoro militancy.²²⁰ Merely “removing” female fighters from militant groups might not suffice, as experience shows they tend to fall back into such networks without a proper support system in place. Policymakers should tap women to be educators, village leaders and entrepreneurs, as well as draw on female militants’ experiences to improve existing reintegration plans. Helping women and their kin with employment that is feasible and socially acceptable would likely help them shift away from militancy. Likewise, the interim government should develop programs for orphans, for example through setting up orphanages, scholarships and other financial support for children bereft of parents due to past conflicts in the BARMM.

D. *Paying Local Peace Dividends*

Ensuring that economic development reaches the Bangsamoro, one of the Philippines’ poorest regions, will take time, but close to three years into the transition, it is urgent to provide residents with a bigger peace dividend. The MILF leaders running the interim government are well aware of how instrumental employment opportunities are in stopping disgruntled fighters from breaking away or joining militant groups opposed to the peace process. More generally, the BARMM’s largely young population badly needs access to jobs and basic services.²²¹ Crafting plans and committing more resources to troubled areas, such as the SPMS Box or the remote municipalities of Lanao del Sur, is a start, but the announcements need speedy follow-up.²²² The interim government and local authorities throughout the Bangsamoro need to cooperate more closely to complete development projects such as village halls and health facilities, rehabilitate villages damaged by protracted violence and increase infrastructure support to far-flung towns.²²³

The transition authority should also strive to better distribute economic development across the BARMM, with a special emphasis on areas where militants are most active.²²⁴ For example, it could build connectivity between economic centres in Maguindanao, such as Datu Piang and Shariff Aguak, and in isolated areas in and near the SPMS Box, by constructing more roads and improving river transport.²²⁵ Similarly, the interim government should develop the largely stable Iranun corridor, using the towns of Parang in Maguindanao and Malabang in Lanao del Sur as economic hubs.²²⁶ Development in this area would give nearby farming communities, including those in

²²⁰ Crisis Group online interview, senior NGO staff member, 19 August 2021.

²²¹ According to a census released in July 2021, the BARMM experienced annual population growth of around 3.26 per cent in the last five years, with even higher rates in Basilan and Sulu.

²²² For more on how international actors can contribute to development in the Bangsamoro, see Crisis Group Report, *Keeping Normalisation on Track*, op. cit., pp. 18, 20-21.

²²³ In Maguindanao, that could include projects in the towns of Shariff Saydona Mustapha, Datu Salibo, Datu Saudi Ampatuan and Datu Unsay that bore the brunt of army-BIFF hostilities. In Lanao del Sur, projects could focus on the towns in the province’s second legislative district.

²²⁴ Crisis Group online interviews, economists, 5 March 2021; 17 August 2021.

²²⁵ The interim government should also urgently address the issue of recurrent flooding in low-lying areas of the province that regularly upends residents’ lives. Crisis Group online interview, local engineer, 23 June 2021.

²²⁶ The Iranun area covers a number of towns in Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur (and some adjacent villages in Cotabato) that are populated by the ethno-linguistic group of the same name.

and near MILF strongholds, better access to markets and ports.²²⁷ The interim government should also not neglect the island provinces, in particular Sulu, while planning infrastructure and other development projects.²²⁸ Private-sector involvement in such efforts is crucial, for example through social enterprises or cooperatives, and could be supported by international donors with grants or technical assistance to local grassroots organisations.

E. *Rebuilding Marawi*

Rehabilitating the city of Marawi has become a vital precondition for genuine reconciliation between the national government and the Maranao people, which constitute a sizeable part of the Bangsamoro population. As described, it would be wrong to see all Marawi inhabitants, absent the city's reconstruction, as militants in waiting; the vast majority are more likely to express discontent in ways other than turning to jihadism. Still, reconciliation between Manila and the Maranao could be important in reducing the risk of militancy resurging. The prime duty of reconstruction lies with Manila and its Bangon Marawi task force, which urgently needs to expedite the process in order to regain locals' trust.²²⁹ It should be transparent about the exact state of reconstruction efforts in proactive updates to Marawi's displaced population, through public meetings but also channels such as social media and radio. Consultations should ensure that planners take into account community preferences, as some locals perceive certain aspects of reconstruction, such as the planned stadium, as useless.

The interim government, which identified Marawi's rehabilitation as a vital policy goal in its 2019 twelve-point priority agenda, should also be more proactive in plugging the gaps in national plans.²³⁰ Initiatives such as a project to rebuild water systems in areas not covered by the national task force are a good start and should be replicated. The regional government should also work with the task force and Marawi's city authorities to resolve the competing land claims that exist all over town, hampering rehabilitation efforts. Support for municipalities in Lanao del Sur, especially those that have suffered the worst violence prior to the Marawi battle, such as Piagapo and Butig, should also be a priority. As an interim government official said: "To help surrounding municipalities is to help Marawi".²³¹

International donors should also keep supporting smaller projects that address shortcomings in existing plans.²³² Such assistance could include grants for livelihood projects to ensure food security in places with numerous displaced persons or to build health clinics. A more coordinated approach among donors would also contribute to smoother rollout of projects, avoiding duplication and fragmentation.

²²⁷ Crisis Group online interview, development official, 16 February 2021.

²²⁸ See Crisis Group Report, *Southern Philippines: Fostering an Inclusive Bangsamoro*, op. cit., p. 24.

²²⁹ Crisis Group online interview, Maranao civil society representative, 25 June 2021.

²³⁰ Katrina Auditor, "Marawi rehabilitation delays could cast a dark shadow over Duterte's peace legacy", *The Diplomat*, 7 December 2020.

²³¹ Crisis Group online interview, 19 July 2021.

²³² Crisis Group online interview, interim regional government official, 22 September 2021.

VI. Conclusion

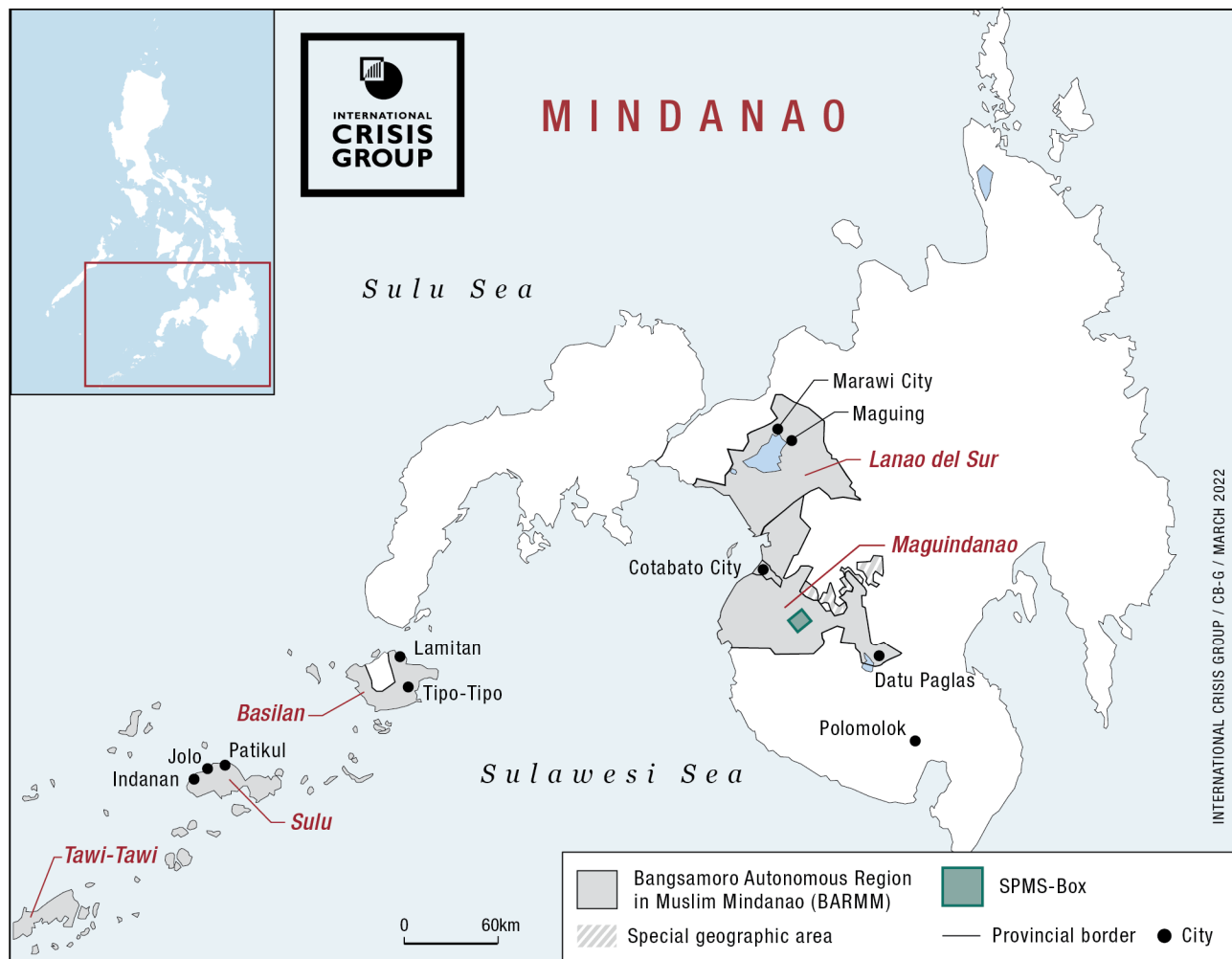
Dealing with armed groups that remain outside the peace process and bringing development to communities from which they gather support were key objectives of the newly created autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao. Four years after the conflict in Marawi, the Bangsamoro authorities, together with the Philippine government, have so far managed to contain the militants. At least for now, it appears the allure of insurgency for the Bangsamoro's people is fading.

But the fact that there is no second Marawi siege in the making is not a success in itself; militants do not need to be ISIS-inspired to continue fighting the Philippine state. Local grievances contribute to the resilience of militant groups more than their international or ideological aspirations. Militant groups were able to tap into the frustrations of young, angry Moros in the past, and could do so again, should the transition falter in delivering the promised peace dividends. Frustration with the slow pace of the peace process was the main factor leading the Moro rebels to splinter in the first place. Failure to build on the transition's momentum could alienate disappointed MILF fighters and average residents alike, pushing them toward their kin, neighbours or friends who still believe in armed struggle.

Both the central and regional governments can do more to seize the opportunity the transition presents for curbing Islamist militancy. Military pressure, even if it carries short-term gains, is insufficient. As elsewhere, the best strategy remains to tackle underlying local causes while diversifying the current set of security operations to include better policing and intelligence gathering in order to disrupt militant networks. Absent these steps, the spectre of militancy will continue to haunt the Bangsamoro.

Manila/Brussels, 18 March 2022

Appendix A: Map of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindano (BARMM)



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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 80 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. 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 co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. Ero first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director and Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, UN Mission in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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