



Photos during the Marawi Siege of 2017, Wikimedia Commons.

Declining Adversary or Regenerating Threat?

Imperatives for the Reintegration and Deradicalization of Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group Militants in Mindanao

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Executive Summary

- › Conflict-affected communities in the southern Philippines serve as strategic areas for violent extremist groups such as the Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (DIMG) to operate in Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte.
- › While the threat posed by the DIMG has significantly diminished, state security forces should remain vigilant since the group's ability to regroup and recruit new members, especially among children and the youth, and to spread terror remains formidable and have the potential to disrupt the present stability in the Bangsamoro.
- › Currently, security and economic investments in the Bangsamoro are focused on the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and not on violent extremist organizations, such as the DIMG.
- › The Philippine Government's counterterrorism effort is also heavily led by the military by employing kinetic mechanisms, such as military combat and other forms of directly destructive warfare.
- › To reinforce success, counterterrorism measures must be complemented by non-military strategies, such as the establishment of a tailored local reintegration program, in-prison deradicalization initiatives, equitable distribution of social and economic investments for former terrorist members, and preventive deradicalization for children and youth in schools.
- › Including these additional civilian measures in counterterrorism efforts and implementing tailored programs aimed at DIMG extremists is imperative to reinforce the success of the Philippine Government in preventing and countering the threat of violent extremism, and therefore contributing to stability in the BARMM.

List of Acronyms

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
BIAF	Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces
BIFF	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters
BTA	Bangsamoro Transition Authority
CAB	Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro
DI	Dawlah Islamiyah
DIMG	Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group
DSWD	Department of Social Welfare and Development
E-CLIP	Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program
IS	Islamic State
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
NAP-PCVE	National Action Plan on the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism
CPP-NPA-NDF	Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front
NTF-ELCAC	National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict
PAMANA	<i>Payapa at Masaganang Pamayanan</i>
PRO BAR	Police Regional Office Bangsamoro Autonomous Region
TUGON	<i>Tulong ng Gobyernong Nagmamalasakit</i>
VEO	violent extremist organization

Introduction

Despite significant gains in the peace operation, the peace and security landscape in the southern Philippines remains complex, and the possibility of a conflict relapse is present.¹ Among the major factors that constitute a threat to the current peace process are the rampant proliferation of private militias owned by powerful political clans and the unwillingness of some Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) fighters – the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's (MILF) military wing – to give up their separatist jihadist identity and return to civilian life.² However, the most pressing security concern in the region is still the existence of violent extremist organizations (VEOs). In particular, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) remains a central area of activity for many radicalized armed groups such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Jamaal al-Tawhid Wal Jihad Philippines, Ansar Khalifah Sarangani, Khalifa Islamiyah Mindanao,³ and the Maute Group.⁴ All these groups are variants of the Dawlah Islamiyah claimed to be under the umbrella of the East Asia faction or wilayah of the Islamic State (IS) Khorasan.⁵ These terrorist outfits have the potential of spoiling the fragile state of peace in the region.

According to the 2020 Conflict Monitoring Report of International Alert Philippines, violent extremism remains a primary cause of violence and deaths in the BARMM, especially those involving the remnants of the Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (DIMG). Despite government interventions, military offensives, and intelligence gathering, this Daesh-affiliated terrorist outfit remains resilient and persistent in recruitment and regrouping.⁶

In the 2024 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) published by the Institute of Economics and Peace, the Philippines is ranked 19th out of 163 countries, making it the second country in the Asia Pacific Region to be most susceptible to terrorist threats, only behind Myanmar which garnered the 9th spot overall.⁷ However, it is worth noting that the Philippines was 18th place in the 2023 GTI.⁸ While the decline is minimal, such improvement is still indicative of the success of the Philippines' counterterrorism efforts. Nonetheless, the threat posed by DIMG remains substantial, largely due to the group's ability to regenerate and activate sleeper cells.

DIMG: a declining but lingering threat in the southern Philippines

Security scholars posit that there has been a significant decline in the number of Dawlah Islamiyah militants after the Marawi Siege in 2017. Nevertheless, security threats from terrorism and violent extremism have not been fully eliminated. Kenneth Yeo, a security analyst from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, claims that “the Philippines has been a hotspot for Islamic terrorism.” Various factions of Dawlah Islamiyah remain operative in some communities of the Bangsamoro.⁹

According to the US Department of State in 2021, the Philippines is a sought-after destination for foreign terrorist fighters from its neighbors Indonesia and Malaysia primarily due to existing terrorist networks and cultural ties.¹⁰ Furthermore, the terrain in the southern Philippines is conducive to the continued proliferation of extremist groups, which makes the region susceptible to threats from terrorism. The porous maritime border in the south, particularly in the Sulu archipelago, provides for relatively easy and undetected movement for terrorist personnel, especially Daesh preachers or Islamic State propagandists from abroad.

Nevertheless, the Philippines, like its neighbors in Southeast Asia, has been successful in counterterrorism. Leadership decapitation appears to be a major factor in the substantial weakening of different Dawlah Islamiyah factions. The death of influential emirs such as Isnilon Toton Hapilon (also known as Abu

Abdullah al-Filipini) – the ASG leader who joined forces with Omar and Abdullah Maute in launching the 2017 Marawi Siege – Owaydah Marohombsar (Abu Dar) and Jer Mimbantas (also known as Faharuddin Hadji Benito Satar or Abu Zacharia) of the DIMG,¹¹ and the eventual surrender of Abu Turaife of the BIFF to the 6th Infantry Division of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have caused collective demoralization among extremists. The death and absence of these leaders pushed many remnants of the DIMG to surrender since 2020.¹²

Desistance and disengagement of extremists can also be attributed to the remarkable efforts of the Philippine Government in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism through legal instruments, especially the enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Act in 2020 and the crafting of the 2019 National Action Plan on the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism (NAP-PCVE).¹³ Research also found that security guarantees and economic assistance from local chief executives have reinforced the effectiveness of the AFP's counterterrorism campaigns.¹⁴

However, despite the Philippine Government's efforts, VEOs have persisted, especially as military intelligence is still limited in ungoverned spaces in the BARMM,¹⁵ including the SPMS Box in Maguindanao province, which pertains to the locales of Shariff Aguak, Pagatin, Mamasapano and Shariff Saydona, and some localities in the provinces of Lanao. This predicament makes detection of the presence and apprehension of terrorists in some communities in the Bangsamoro region difficult and challenging.

Notable implementation gaps also persist. First, managing the threats posed by VEOs fall outside the scope of peacebuilding efforts established after the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2014. Although post-CAB stabilization efforts have been bolstered through various security mechanisms, including the PCVE, community policing, and public safety programs of the BARMM Ministry of Public Order and Safety, which are implemented alongside the national government's *Payapa at Masaganang Pamayanan* (PAMANA) program, it should be noted that these initiatives are primarily aimed at supporting members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and their families.¹⁶ It is also evident that the peace and security investments made by the Philippine Government, donor countries, and numerous peacebuilding organizations, particularly non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are heavily focused on members of the MNLF and MILF. These groups benefit from incentives rooted in their political settlements with the Philippine Government.

Meanwhile, the Philippine Government offers reintegration opportunities to rebels and violent extremists under the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP) following the whole-of-nation approach of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). Yet, the NTF-ELCAC was originally designed to end communist insurgency in the country through amnesty and provision of reintegration packages for former members of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF) and not for violent extremists.¹⁷

Mindful of these gaps and prevailing contexts, Philippine authorities should be wary of the capacity of the DIMG to regenerate and pose a threat by activating its sleeper cells in different parts of the country. The DIMG reportedly has a substantial economic largesse of \$38 million, which it looted from Marawi City. The group is using this money to provide cash incentives to recruits and their families.¹⁸ Furthermore, there are alarming signs that children and young people have become strategic targets for enlistment by these extremist groups. Violent extremists are known for their skills in radicalizing people by taking advantage of their frustration, feelings of alienation, marginalization, and discrimination.¹⁹ Terrorists in Southeast Asia are known to exploit kinship ties in the radicalization of their own family members. Therefore, their children are likely to pursue a so-called "inherited jihad," and hence, they are groomed to embrace the

militant outlook in life.²⁰ The Philippine military has also reported that the DIMG, especially under the leadership of Abu Zacharia, has been enlisting child soldiers.²¹ The combination of factors contribute to the group's high resilience.

It is also worth noting that there is a growing frustration among Maranaos, the ethnic group of Lanao province and the Maute clan, toward the present peace process and the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA). This frustration appears to stem from the fact that a great deal of development investments are focused on Maguindanaoan communities, which are closer to the seat of the BARMM Regional Government in Cotabato City.²² Such feelings of frustration can be capitalized by the DIMG to recruit more individuals, especially innocent children and youth, to reinforce their tenacity in furthering militant jihad. The failure to stop the regeneration of the DIMG will likely produce more extremists, including potential Filipino suicide bombers in the future.

Imperatives for deradicalization and social integration of DIMG extremists

Achieving a cessation of hostilities and fostering stability are critical for ensuring the swift and effective implementation of normalization mechanisms in the Bangsamoro. Specifically, paying urgent attention to dealing with threats from violent extremists is imperative to counter the prospect of recidivism and regeneration and avert the occurrence of another attack similar to Marawi in 2017. The DIMG remains among the most resilient VEOs currently active in the Philippines. To strategically address the threats from this Daesh-inspired group, this policy brief offers prescriptive measures in the deradicalization of ideologically driven recruits and the social reintegration of non-ideological extremists, which should manifest in the policy space.

1. Establish a formal reintegration program in the Province of Lanao del Sur.

The DIMG has been active in the Lanao provinces because of geographic isolation. The group also has strong family ties to the province and serves as a stronghold of Islamic militant groups. However, unlike Maguindanao del Sur, Cotabato, and Basilan, the Provincial Government of Lanao del Sur has not yet developed its own reintegration program. Given the active presence of DIMG remnants in the province, it is urgent for the Provincial Government of Lanao del Sur to develop a tailored reintegration program that effectively facilitates the transition of these militants back into civilian life.

As of writing, the only functional PCVE structure in the province of Lanao del Sur is the E-CLIP Committee chaired by Governor Mamintal Adiong, Jr. and co-chaired by AFP Brigadier General Rey Barroquillo, Jr. Key national and regional government agencies are also represented in this E-CLIP Committee. Currently, the construction of a halfway house for former violent extremists has been given priority by the Committee.²³ However, the Philippines' successful stride on counterterrorism, particularly in the province of Lanao del Sur, needs to be better reinforced with non-military mechanisms, especially social reintegration and deradicalization of Dawlah Islamiyah personnel. The series of military operations that led to the capture of DIMG militants must be complemented by economic guarantees that are included in the PCVE initiatives of subnational governments in Lanao as it is shown to have encouraged more militants to surrender to the military. In this regard, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) has provided cash assistance to former DIMG militants through the Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situation Program.²⁴

As early as 2017, former National Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana has called for social and spiritual recovery after the Marawi Siege. In this regard, the Task Force *Bangon Marawi* (in English: Rise Up Marawi) under the administration of former President Rodrigo Duterte carried out social healing initiatives to combat the threat of radicalism and violent extremism.²⁵ Such initiatives show that there is recognition

from the military about the importance of civilian measures to counterterrorism.

Furthermore, a key lesson that Lanao del Sur can learn from Maguindanao del Sur, Cotabato, and Basilan is that the sustainability of local reintegration programs depends on strong political guarantees from local chief executives. In this regard, local leaders must ensure the safety of surrenderers and provide economic and livelihood opportunities for former violent extremists seeking reintegration.

It is timely for the Provincial Government of Lanao del Sur and the military to upgrade the E-CLIP committee into a full-blown reintegration program while the conditions are favorable and many of the DIMG militants have the propensity to surrender. The Philippine Government must also take advantage of the current weakened state of the DIMG and entice its recruits to avail of reintegration assistance and give up their jihadist campaigns. The establishment of a formal reintegration program staffed with qualified personnel is crucial for Lanao del Sur to come up with aptly suited mechanisms for reintegrating DIMG militants. It is likewise strategic for the Project TUGON or *Tulong ng Gobyernong Nagmamalasakit* of the Bangsamoro Regional Government to give preferential attention to reintegrating DIMG personnel in Lanao while accommodating BIFF members in Maguindanao del Sur.

2. Apply a filter between ideological and non-ideological militants.

It is important to categorize surrenderers and captured members of the DIMG into either ideologue or non-ideologue. Specific attention must be directed to radicalized '*balik Islam*' or Muslim converts and ideologically hardened militants who need to undergo deradicalization training and workshops. These Muslim converts, who include child soldiers, are more prone to subscribe to militant Islamic ideology and engage in violent jihad.²⁶ The security sector may partner with faith-based civil society individuals and groups in carrying out a context-specific deradicalization program. Influential religious figures like ulama or Muslim scholars are in the best position to stocktake and process a variety of jihadist thoughts cherished by DIMG militants. By understanding the epistemological foundation of their Daesh ideologies, Islamic scholars will be in the best position to change the mindset of militants through Quranic prescriptions that command Muslims to embrace *wasatiyyah* or moderation.

In this connection, serious and thorough vetting of religious leaders who will be mobilized to perform terrorist rehabilitation is crucial. It is important to make sure that those who will be involved in the deradicalization sessions are Islamic scholars with a high degree of integrity and educated about the nature of hateful philosophies that drive DIMG members into violent extremism. In this regard, the Philippines may learn from the experiences of the Religious Rehabilitation Group, a group of Muslim clerics who are in charge of deradicalizing former Jemaah Islamiyah radicals in Singapore.

Meanwhile, those who are classified as non-ideological recruits may immediately undergo social reintegration because they are less likely to be deeply committed to militant ideologies and extremist beliefs. They also tend to be more open and receptive to undergoing rehabilitation and availing of reintegration programs.

3. Integrate and strengthen deradicalization in penal facilities.

With the unprecedented number of DIMG militants turning over themselves to the military,²⁷ the major challenge now is the absence of concrete reintegration and deradicalization platforms even at the national level. Moreover, terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna warns that the absence of terrorist rehabilitation in the prison system in the Philippines is potentially dangerous. Those militant ideologues who took part in the Marawi Siege and are currently incarcerated are likely to spread IS ideology inside the penal

facilities.²⁸ Hence, the prison system will potentially serve as a theater for the spread of dangerous jihadist ideologies. To avoid this scenario, it is imperative to have immediate disengagement and deradicalization mechanisms, particularly for terrorists in prison and those stationed in halfway houses. Learning from the case of Indonesia, ideologically hardened terrorists tend to recidivate after incarceration. The rate of terrorist recidivism in Indonesia is 11.39%, where 94 of convicted felons from 2002 to 2020 returned to terrorism.²⁹

Two factors facilitate recidivism. First, ex-convicts are likely to rejoin their terrorist organizations because they feel indebted to their group, who provided emotional and financial support to their families while they were in prison. Second, they typically refuse to enroll in government deradicalization programs because of fear that they will be branded by other jihadists as *kafir* or apostate or collaborator of *thaghut* (worshippers of other gods aside from Allah).³⁰ These factors are potent drivers that prevent desistance, pushing ex-convicts to reoffend and resume their terrorist activities.

The success of counterterrorism in the Philippines is likely to continue with the inclusion of deradicalization into the broader peacebuilding structure and framework in the Bangsamoro. A crucial recommendation is for the Police Regional Office Bangsamoro Autonomous Region (PRO BAR) to adopt strategic approaches in the rehabilitation of former violent extremists. Considering the complexity of the violent extremist threat in the region, police personnel should develop specialized skill sets for countering deradicalization. Members of the police forces should undergo special education and socio-psychological training. Investing in the capacity of the police is necessary to make them effective mentors in reducing the risk of reoffending and supporting desistance among arrested DIMG personnel.

On the other hand, to prevent incarcerated DIMG personnel from recruiting others, there is a need to put in place a collective deradicalization within the prison system.

Some strategies for deradicalization that police and jail personnel may consider are the enlistment of recanting ideologues and containment of jihadi militants. Firstly, former extremists who abandoned their jihadist identity may serve as lecturers in terrorist rehabilitation programs. Their narratives can have persuasive value to radical Islamists to rethink their militant understanding of Islamic teachings and forego the pursuit of violent jihad. It is crucial to implement a thorough vetting of lecturers, coupled with robust support systems, to prevent recidivism. Secondly, longer prison terms for extremist leaders charged with criminal offenses, particularly those who refuse to undergo deradicalization, are crucially important. When extremist leaders are imprisoned, it facilitates hopelessness among supporters, which eventually leads to a “strategic crisis” followed by an “ideological crisis.”³¹ These strategies are likely to lower recidivism.

4. Safeguarding the children and youth from radicalized content.

One alarming trend is the DIMG’s targeted recruitment of children and youth and indoctrinating them with militant ideologies, often using disturbing online videos. To counter this strategy, preventive deradicalization must be integrated into the educational system, ensuring that children are shielded from exposure to subversive content and hateful propaganda. The BARMM Ministry of Basic, Technical, and Higher Education (MBTHE) could introduce innovative strategies into the education curriculum, particularly in regions like Bangsamoro.

One effective approach is including and using videos and comics that depict heroic characters advocating for peace and justice. As children are highly resilient and easily inspired by stories of heroes, such materials can help steer them away from radicalization even after exposure to extremist content. The MBTHE could

also collaborate with the Ministry of Public Order and Safety, non-government organizations like Save the Children, and Mindanao universities to co-create child-friendly content for films and comics.

5. Boost safety nets and create economic opportunities in affected communities.

Most members of Dawlah Islamiyah who have surrendered to state authorities are non-ideological militants. Their enlistment in the group is primarily driven by their frustration toward the peace process and the allure of economic incentives upon enlistment which stems from their economic deprivation.³² As such, the presence of socio-economic reintegration packages can appeal to militants and motivate them to cut ties with the terrorist outfit. Moreover, improving the quality and access to social services and governance in Lanao provinces is the best deterrent to radicalization and violent extremism.

According to psychologist Fathali Moghaddam, when individuals who experience deprivation and unjust treatment do not have the voice to express grievances, they are likely to ascend the “staircase to terrorism,” where they can find legitimacy from terrorist organizations.³³ Therefore, giving access to political representation, democratic structures, and social protection services to ordinary people through the local, regional and national governments is an important component of counterterrorism. Providing security guarantees and basic social services such as education, scholarships, health, and public infrastructures like roads and bridges to remote localities is a strategic measure to boost the government’s legitimacy.

Furthermore, deradicalization efforts should extend beyond penal facilities and should not be viewed solely as the responsibility of the security sector. Civilian agencies, particularly the BARMM Government and its constituent local government units involved in providing social services, need to take a more active role in supporting security personnel in counterterrorism initiatives. Equitable resource distribution and social investments among provinces in the BARMM are crucial to countering the threats of terrorism.

Lastly, the regional government must focus on strategies that promote social integration, such as generating employment opportunities that provide sustainable income for the local population. Additionally, offering programs that mentor budding entrepreneurs and provide skills development aligned with the region’s labor market demands will further enhance economic participation and community cohesion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, neglecting the threat of violent extremism, especially from the DIMG, is likely to facilitate a resurgence of conflict and undo the progress made in the current peace process. The inclusion of additional civilian measures to counterterrorism efforts and implementing tailored programs aimed at DIMG extremists is imperative to reinforce the success of the Philippine Government in preventing and countering threats of violent extremism and, therefore, contributing to the stability of post-CAB Mindanao.

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