



Combating Terrorism Center

AT WEST POINT



# RISING IN THE EAST

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ISLAMIC  
STATE IN THE PHILIPPINES

Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis | December 2020



# Rising in the East: The Evolution of the Islamic State in the Philippines

Amira Jadoon  
Nakissa Jahanbani  
Charmaine Willis

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

United States Military Academy



[www.ctc.usma.edu](http://www.ctc.usma.edu)

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December 2020

Cover Photo: A local government worker uses a phone on October 20, 2017, while in front of an establishment marked with a "Maute ISIS" graffiti during the clean-up drive inside the war-torn city of Marawi in the southern Philippines. (Romeo Ranoco/Reuters)

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---

### CONTACT

Combating Terrorism Center

U.S. Military Academy

607 Cullum Road, Lincoln Hall

West Point, NY 10996

Phone: (845) 938-8495

Web: [www.ctc.usma.edu](http://www.ctc.usma.edu)

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### *About the Authors*

Dr. Amira Jadoon is an assistant professor at the Combating Terrorism Center and the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. She specializes in international security, economic statecraft, political violence, and terrorism.

Dr. Nakissa Jahanbani is an instructor and researcher at the Combating Terrorism Center, where she focuses on the evolution of Iran's relationship with its proxies in Syria and Iraq. A separate vein of her research studies states' support of terrorist and insurgent organizations.

Charmaine Willis specializes in contentious politics with a focus on East Asia. She has an MA in International Affairs from American University.

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## Executive Summary

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's announcement of the caliphate in mid-2014 was followed by a series of pledges of support in the Philippines for the Islamic State,<sup>1</sup> which included an allegiance by Isnilon Hapilon of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The formal acknowledgment and acceptance of this pledge came in 2016 when Hapilon was declared the group's regional emir.<sup>2</sup> It was only in July 2018, though, when there was a clear reference in the Islamic State's weekly newsletter *Al Naba* (issue number 140) to "East Asia"<sup>3</sup> specifically as a wilaya.<sup>4</sup> Despite the ambiguity with regard to the status of "East Asia" as a wilaya, Islamic State-affiliated activity has been observed across the region in the form of attacks and arrests, and there are concerns about inter-country linkages among militants. Even so, the Philippines remains the epicenter of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia. Most notably, the southern Philippines became the location of the five-month "Battle of Marawi" in mid-2017, which was waged by Islamic State-affiliated groups, and resulted in much death and destruction. The battle demonstrated how affiliation with the Islamic State was advantageous for disparate and weakened groups, serving to unite them and posing a new challenge for the local counterterrorism apparatus. But since the recovery of Marawi, the nature of the Islamic State's operations in the country seem to have evolved in ways that has generally made the future trajectory of Islamic State-affiliated groups difficult to foresee.

As the second part in a series of reports that map the Islamic State's presence in Southeast Asia, this study traces the evolution of the Islamic State in the Philippines between January 2014 and July 2019. While the first report<sup>5</sup> sought to provide a broad regional perspective, this report examines the factors that contributed to the rise of the Islamic State specifically within the local context of the Philippines, analyzing how it reshaped local militancy and how the threat evolved operationally after the Battle of Marawi. In examining the Islamic State's presence in the Philippines, this report is attentive to both the preexisting local dynamics within the Philippines that created space for the influence of the Islamic State, as well the effects associated with the latter's influence. The report explores the following key questions: *what socioeconomic and political factors contributed to the rise of the Islamic State's influence in the Philippines? How has Islamic State-linked activity evolved within the Philippines over the years in terms of its geographical focus, tactics, and targets? Finally, what factors may impact the nature of the Islamic State affiliated threat within the Philippines in the future?*

## Key Findings

### ***Most Attacks Between 2014-2019 Occurred in the Southern Region of Mindanao***

- Out of the 50 Islamic State-linked attacks in the Philippines from 2014 to 2019, only four occurred outside of the southern region of Mindanao.
- This is consistent with the comparatively higher levels of militancy in Mindanao, due to years of instability, conflict, and tensions with the central government. It also corresponds with the home bases of the Islamic State affiliates in the data: Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) (Basilan, Sulu, and Ta-

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1 Per a 2017 IPAC report, a video was released on May 26, 2014, with individuals purporting to be Filipinos who swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi, a month before the declaration of the caliphate. See "Marawi, the 'East Asia Wilayah' and Indonesia," *IPAC Report No. 38*, July 21, 2017.

2 Marielle Ness, *Beyond the Caliphate: Southeast Asia* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2017).

3 The terminology used by the Islamic State is "East Asia," however, the report refers to the region as Southeast Asia for a more accurate depiction of the Islamic State's presence in this region, given that East Asia technically includes countries such as Japan, Mongolia, and North and South Korea where the Islamic State does not have a presence.

4 Prior to this, Islamic State media outlets simply referred to events in the Philippines under the category of "East Asia." See "Marawi, the 'East Asia Wilayah' and Indonesia."

5 Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis, *Rising in the East: A Regional Overview of the Islamic State's Operations in Southeast Asia*, (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2020).

wi-Tawi provinces), the Maute Group (Lanao del Sur province), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) (Maguindanao province), and Ansarul Khilafah Philippines (AKP) (Sarangani and Sultan Kudarat provinces).

***Greatest Number of Attacks Were Reported in 2016-2017, but Lethality (Killed and Wounded) Rate per Attack was Highest in 2019***

- Out of the 50 Islamic State-linked attacks in the report's database, 40 occurred in 2016 and 2017. This may be due to stalled negotiations for greater Moro autonomy between the Philippines' central government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2016<sup>6</sup> as well as the Battle of Marawi,<sup>7</sup> a five-month siege of Marawi City in Lanao del Sur province by Islamic State-linked militants in 2017.
- While there were only four attacks in the first half of 2019, the number of deaths and injuries per attack was higher than in all previous years. Deaths and wounded combined, attacks in 2016 and 2017 affected approximately 20 and nine people per attack, respectively. For attacks that took place between January and July in 2019, the lethality rate was about 43 fatalities and wounded per attack. The upward trend in the lethality rate in years 2018 and 2019 is likely driven by militants' use of suicide attacks in the final two years of the data.

***Suicide Attacks Observed in the Philippines for First Time in 2018, Largely Involving Foreign Fighters***

- As depicted in the first report in this series,<sup>8</sup> the use of suicide attacks as a tactical choice is much less common in the Philippines than in Indonesia and Malaysia. However, Islamic State-linked militants in the Philippines began deploying suicide attacks in 2018—an attacker suspected to be a Moroccan detonated an IED near a security check point in Lamitan City in July of that year.
- Three additional suicide attacks occurred since the Lamitan City attack in July 2018, accounting for 75% of the attacks in the dataset in the first seven months of 2019.
- Militant groups have historically not deployed suicide attacks in the Philippines, with the exception of *juramentado* attackers during the Spanish colonial period.<sup>9</sup> The use of suicide attacks by Islamic State-linked operatives thus represents a dangerous tactical and cultural shift in the Philippines' militant repertoire.

***Even Split Between State and Civilian Targets, But Higher Lethality Rates Associated with State Targets***

- In contrast with Islamic State-linked attacks across the region, which tended to be directed frequently toward civilian targets, attacks in the Philippines were split evenly between state and civilian targets. However, across all categories, domestic security and military forces were targeted the most frequently (21 out of 50 attacks).
- The number of casualties attributed to attacks on domestic security and military forces was almost 2.5 times the number attributed to attacks in public spaces, with a total of 435 and 187 casualties (killed and wounded), respectively.

6 "Philippines: Mindanao," Uppsala Conflict Data Program; Anna Tasnim Basman and Steven Rood, "What's next for Mindanao Peace Process Under Duterte Leadership?" Asia Foundation, June 1, 2016; Edwin Enriquez Amadar and Robert W. Tuttle, "The Emergence of ISIS in the Philippines," Naval Postgraduate School (MA thesis), June 2018.

7 See the Methodology section regarding this report's coding of the Battle of Marawi.

8 Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Charmaine Willis, *Rising in the East: The Islamic State's Southeast Asian Front* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2020).

9 Quinton Temby, "Cells, Factions and Suicide Operatives: The Fragmentation of Militant Islamism in the Philippines Post-Marawi," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41:1 (2019): p. 126.



## A Changing Threat in an Evolving Environment

The ability of the Islamic State to generate space for its brand in the Philippines deeply relies on local sociopolitical grievances of Muslim communities and the existing militant infrastructure of its affiliated groups, such as the ASG (pro-Islamic State faction) and Maute Group. The Islamic State has been able to incentivize cooperation among various militant groups aligned along familial and ethnic lines to engage Philippine security forces. While the intense engagement of the Philippine security forces in Marawi decimated Islamic State-linked groups like the Maute Group, many militants escaped or dispersed, and subsequently, the first uses of suicide attacks by militants were observed in the Philippines during the modern era.

At present, perhaps the most dangerous characteristic of the Islamic State threat in the Philippines is its evolving nature and its potential to adapt to the local environment and conduct deadly attacks. This report's findings should be understood in the context of a complex environment that is characterized by numerous other issues, including among others a long-running communist insurgency, issues of poverty, development, political corruption, clan rivalries and criminal violence, a historically unsuccessful peace process between local insurgents and the central government, as well as numerous COVID-19 related repercussions. Whether the Islamic State's presence in the country in the form of its affiliates loses strength or morphs into an even more dangerous phenomenon depends on several factors. Among many, three stand out prominently. First, the extent to which the brand remains attractive enough to sustain recruitment will be shaped by the success of the newly created Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), which seeks to address the concerns of aggrieved communities. The goals of alleviating poverty and reintegrating thousands of former militants pose significant challenges but are critical to address in order to tackle militancy and recruitment. Secondly, the state's efficacy in rebuilding Marawi after the battle with Islamic State-affiliated groups and resettling displaced populations will also determine future outcomes, as is often the case in conflict-affected regions. While the Philippine government has estimated completion of reconstruction work by the end of 2021, similar projections have not been met previously, and COVID-19 has caused further delays.<sup>10</sup> The third factor, in the short- and medium-term, is the ability of the government to adapt to the changing nature of Islamic State-affiliated groups, which seem intent on adapting their fight from a geographically focused one to one that is dispersed and decentralized.

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10 Froilan Gallardo, "Reconstruction of Marawi Delayed till December, Philippine Official Says," BenarNews, August 15, 2019.

## Introduction

On June 22, 2019, the Islamic State released a video recorded in the Philippines, which featured local fighters renewing their oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The released video was part of a campaign of the Islamic State's propaganda entitled, "And The [Best] Outcome Is For The Righteous," designed to underline the Islamic State's global presence and reinforce allegiances around the world in the wake of its significant territorial losses in Iraq and Syria.<sup>11</sup> This video, along with other events, demonstrates that the Philippines remains important to the Islamic State: after al-Baghdadi's death in October 2019, the Islamic State launched a "picture essay campaign" that again sought to reinforce pledges to the organization's new leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi<sup>12</sup> and included both the Philippines and Indonesia branches under the label of Wilayat Sharq Asia, or the East Asia Province.<sup>13</sup>



*Image 1: Fighters of Wilayat Sharq Asia are shown pledging allegiance to the Islamic State's new leader al-Qurashi via photos released through Telegram.*

11 Thomas Joscelyn, "Jihadists in the Caucasus, Philippines renew allegiance to Baghdadi," FDD's Long War Journal, June 27, 2019.

12 The U.S. government has publicly designated and named this individual as Amir Muhammad Sa'id 'Abd-al-Rahman al-Mawla. For more details, see Daniel Milton and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, "Stepping Out from the Shadows: The Interrogation of the Islamic State's Future Caliph," *CTC Sentinel* 13:9 (2020).

13 Aaron Zelin, "After Losses, Islamic State Plots Comeback," Wilson Center, December 13, 2019.



***Image 2: Image from a video released by the Islamic State in 2019 showing Filipino fighters renewing their pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi.***

Taken together, the video not only indicates the importance of the Southeast Asian province to the global campaign of the Islamic State, but also the central role of the Philippines within it. This video is just another in a long list of the affiliate's mentions in Islamic State propaganda.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, during the peak of the Battle of Marawi in 2017, the Islamic State specifically called for its fighters to travel to the Philippines instead of Iraq and Syria, highlighting the Bangsamoro struggle.<sup>15</sup> However, despite Islamic State Central's propaganda surrounding its East Asian province, it is believed that the affiliate has not received much funding nor foreign fighters from the former, especially in light of COVID-19, which has posed a barrier to the flow of fighters to the Philippines in recent months.<sup>16</sup> Despite being limited in absolute numbers, foreign fighters are believed to provide Islamic State-affiliated groups in Southeast Asia important capabilities, including bomb-making, suicide bombing, and attack planning, and remain a concern for Southeast Asian governments more generally.<sup>17</sup>

The Battle of Marawi in mid-2017, in which a group of Islamic State-linked<sup>18</sup> militants led by the Isnilon Hapilon's ASG-Basilan faction and the Maute Group captured the city of Marawi, awakened the world to the growing threat of Islamic State-affiliated groups in the Philippines. Not only did it demonstrate the fluidity between the Islamic State's ideology and local narratives, practically, it also exhibited the grave danger associated with the effect of the Islamic State's ideology in terms of uniting disparate militant groups into a joint effort against the state. This is not to necessarily say that the

14 For more examples of Islamic State propaganda about Southeast Asian affiliates, see Alexander G. Capece, "A Terrorist Story in Three Acts: Dabiq, Rumiyaah, and the Hero's Journey," Naval Postgraduate School (Master's thesis), September 2018, pp. 51-114; Jacob Zenn, "The Islamic State's Provinces in the Peripheries," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:1 (2019), pp. 94, 96.

15 Kirsten E. Schulze, "The Surabaya Bombings and the Evolution of the Jihadi Threat in Indonesia," *CTC Sentinel* 11:6 (2018); Robert Windrem, "ISIS Recruits Fighters for the Philippines Instead of Syria," NBC News, September 12, 2017.

16 "Operation Pacific Eagle – Philippines: Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020- September 30, 2020."

17 Ibid.; "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Philippines," Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State.

18 The use of "Islamic State-linked" is not intended to indicate the nature of the relationship of these militants with Islamic State Central; rather, the intention is to indicate that these militants were either inspired by or pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.

Islamic State directed or dictated the actions of groups that pledged allegiance; but rather, the siege of Marawi demonstrated the *instrumental* value of various groups employing the Islamic State's ideology to create cohesion among disparate groups. As noted above, the presence of foreign fighters, although limited, has also been a growing concern, since such fighters can potentially bring new skills and tactics, which can take local forces by surprise.<sup>19</sup> One such outcome is the emergence of the use of suicide attacks, which has not been a part of the Philippines' militant landscape in the modern era. Moving beyond the Battle of Marawi, affiliates' renewed pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State's new leader al-Qurashi indicate the commitment of affiliated militant groups to keep waging jihad under the black flag, for a variety of reasons. However, given that the threat is now more dispersed, Islamic State-affiliated groups' tactics and targets are likely to evolve.

Although this report's main focus is the examination of the specific threat posed by the Islamic State in the Philippines, it is important to remember that the threat arises within a context, which is plagued by various other challenges. Among others, this includes problems of poverty, corruption, and development; a long-running threat from the communist insurgency (which is often perceived to be the top domestic security threat by local officials and experts);<sup>20</sup> and a historically challenging peace process between insurgents and the central government. To put this into broader perspective, in 2019, the Philippines continued to be the only Southeast Asian country ranked in the top 10 list of countries most impacted by terrorism, due to a combination of communist and Islamist violent extremist attacks.<sup>21</sup> The uncertainty surrounding the broader impact of the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in 2019,<sup>22</sup> which hopes to alleviate grievances of local Muslim populations, and questions about the ability of the Philippines' security apparatus to adapt to the changing nature of the Islamic State's affiliates means that much remains uncertain about the trajectory of Islamic State influence within the Philippines.<sup>23</sup>

Against this backdrop, this report seeks to answer the following main questions:

- *How did the existing militant infrastructure, sociopolitical factors, and security structure within the Philippines contribute to the emergence and rise of the Islamic State there?*
- *What were some of the motivations of local militant groups to align themselves with the Islamic State?*
- *What do trends in Islamic State-linked activity in the Philippines reveal about the current and future status of the Islamic State in the region as a whole?*

## Components and Layout of the Report

In an attempt to shed light on the factors that contributed to the rise and evolution of the Islamic State in the Philippines, the analyses presented in this report examine both the context of the Islamic State's

19 "Operation Pacific Eagle – Philippines: Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress."

20 Priam Nepmuceno, "CPP-NPA still PH greatest security, dev't threat: Esperon," Philippines News Agency, September 12, 2020. For more information about the communist insurgency in the Philippines, see Ashley L. Rhoades and Todd C. Helmus, *Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020), pp. 8-10; Jim Gomez, "Philippine communist rebel mark 50th year with new attacks," Associated Press, March 29, 2019; and JC Gotinga, "Military vows more offensives as Duterte insists NPA top terror threat in PH," Rappler, June 23, 2020.

21 The most active organization in the country was the communist New People's Army, responsible for over 35% deaths and 38% of terror-related incidents, although there has been a declining trend since 2018. See "Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism," Institute for Economics & Peace, November 2020.

22 Zachary Abuza and Luke Lischin, "The Challenges Facing the Philippines' Bangsamoro Autonomous Region at One Year," United States Institute of Peace, June 10, 2020; "Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)," UNFPA Philippines, n.d.

23 The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the continued communist insurgent threat within the Philippines have potential implications for the state's future efforts against jihadi terrorism and the Islamic State's influence in the country. However, a detailed comparative analysis of the communist versus jihadi threat is beyond the scope of this study.

rise as well as the accompanying operational trends within the Philippines. These analyses draw on an original dataset on Islamic State-affiliated attacks covering the time period January 2014 to July 2019 using open-source materials. Outlined below are the key components of the report:

*Chapter 1: Factors Contributing to the Islamic State's Emergence*

This chapter provides background information on various factors that provided a space for the emergence and influence of the Islamic State in the country. The chapter discusses the Battle of Marawi, preexisting militant infrastructure, the role of foreign fighters, the sociopolitical landscape, and the Philippine security infrastructure.

*Chapter 2: Overview of the Islamic State's Operational Trends in the Philippines*

The second chapter of the report provides an overview of Islamic State-linked activity in the Philippines between January 2014 and July 2019, focusing on overall number of attacks, lethality, suicide attacks, and target selection. It also highlights how Islamic State-linked activity shifted across the country over the years.

*Chapter 3: Conclusion*

The final chapter contextualizes the findings of the report within the broader context of the Philippines, including a discussion of the evolution of the Islamic State threat in the country. The chapter highlights key challenges in countering the threat in the short- and medium-term, and the potential future trajectory of Islamic State affiliates.

## Methodology and Definitions

The data presented in this report is based on an original database compiled by the authors. The database analyzes and codes Islamic State-linked attacks (defined as all attempted attacks regardless of outcome) in the Philippines from January 2014 to July 2019. Leveraging the attacks database, the authors also identified Islamic State operational alliances or affiliates (i.e., groups involved in the planning or execution of attacks that were linked to the Islamic State). The sections below provide an overview of the methodology used for this report, the structure of databases, coding decisions, and finally data limitations.

### Islamic State-linked Attacks, and Operational Alliances

Overall, the study's data gathering approach is similar to other databases that collect incident-level information on various militant groups operations, such as the Global Terrorism Database, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), and Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). The event-level data is coded using English-language, open-source materials on Islamic State-linked attacks in the Philippines through LexisNexis (including BBC Monitoring, which supplies text of local news reports), including international news sources and local sources, including non-English ones. Overall, the data is based on publicly accessible sources, and of course, it is possible that there are some events that went unreported. Each incident reported is reviewed by multiple coders and draws upon multiple sources to document a given incident.

Attacks included in the database are those in which the Islamic State was reported to have some level of involvement (i.e., where the Islamic State either directly claimed the attack or was suspected to be linked to an attack by local officials).<sup>24</sup> As discussed in the regional report of this series,<sup>25</sup> the Islamic State operated primarily through its affiliates in Southeast Asia. The methodology used to collect data on Islamic State-linked attacks, as such, accounts for attacks that were linked to the Islamic State, but also at times claimed by or linked to other local militant groups. Attacks that were linked to Islamic State *and* another local group are identified as “jointly claimed or linked attacks” and were used to map the operational links between the Islamic State and local organizations.

The above components were developed in several stages. First, Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines were identified through open-source research. For this, the authors reviewed reports from regional experts, academics, and think-tanks, such as the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) and The Asia Foundation, among others. This was followed by news searches (primarily through LexisNexis) to obtain relevant news articles of reported Islamic State-affiliated attacks to identify which local groups were involved in the planning or execution of such attacks. Details of how relevant articles were coded are provided below. After a landscape of Islamic State activity and affiliates were collected, research assistants coded Islamic State and Islamic State-linked attacks in the Philippines per the definitions provided below. For the purposes of this study, “Islamic State-linked” and “Islamic State elements” were both acceptable indicators of an Islamic State attack to be coded. Attacks that were framed as “Islamic State-inspired,” in which there was no definitive connection to the Islamic State, were excluded from the authors' database. Additionally, attacks that were only linked to local groups (that have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State) but were not claimed by the Islamic State nor reported to be associated with the Islamic State in media reports, were *excluded* from the report's database. Doing so means that the report's data may result in a more conservative estimate of Islamic

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24 The authors are aware of the potential that at times local officials may incorrectly attribute attacks to the Islamic State, which may lead to overestimates of the Islamic State's presence in the region. However, the authors have no reason to suspect that local officials may intentionally misattribute unclaimed attacks to the Islamic State in significant numbers, and relied on at least two or more sources to document the details of each attack.

25 Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis.

State-linked activity in the Philippines, while avoiding inflated numbers. (See the caveats and limitations section below.)

### *Islamic State-linked Attacks*

The attack database codes several variables that measure the magnitude and nature of attacks in the Philippines between January 2014 and July 2019. As mentioned above, an incident was coded as an Islamic State-linked attack if it was either directly claimed by the Islamic State and/or if authorities suspected it to be linked to the Islamic State. For each of these attacks, variables pertaining to the attack's geography, operations, and lethality were coded to the extent that information was available in the public, open-source domain. Among other variables, *location and date* of the attack were coded at the state, province, and city level. *Outcome of the attack* was coded, specifically successful, failed (i.e., the attack was unsuccessfully executed by attackers), or foiled (i.e., interrupted by counterterrorism forces before or during the attack). Specifics collected about the attacks included: whether or not an attack was a *suicide attack*; *type of weapon* used in the attack (i.e., explosives, direct fire, incendiary/arson, melee, or other); and *attack tactic* (i.e., area attack, direct assault, assassination, kidnapping, beheading, or other). *Attack targets* were coded, including non-combatant targets (i.e., educational institution, media organization, religious institution, health institution, NGO or aid organization, public spaces, or private citizens/property); state personnel (local law enforcement, local government, domestic national law enforcement, domestic national government, or federal government); paramilitary forces (i.e., government-sponsored paramilitary forces, non-governmental sponsored paramilitary forces); or international personnel (i.e., international security forces, including multinational forces, or foreign non-combatants, such as diplomats and international NGOs). The *lethality of each attack* was coded, including low and high estimates for total killed as well as wounded in each attack, and lethality by targeted population, including civilians, domestic security and personnel, and international security and personnel. While it was difficult in some cases to precisely record data on the specific number of civilians killed versus security personnel and militants, the authors were able to find a sufficient number of sources that recorded overarching characteristics of incidents, such as the total numbers killed and wounded, and the primary targets of attacks. As such, the data included in this report only covers variables for which the authors could find the most complete information.

### *Coding the Battle of Marawi*

It is pertinent to note that although this study's database includes the time period of the Battle of Marawi, the report's database codes individual attacks perpetrated by militants during this time, as reported in open sources, rather than codes the entire battle as one attack. This is because the siege of Marawi and direct clashes between the army and militants are not considered to be 'attacks' for the purposes of this report, as many Marawi-related incidents (and associated fatalities) included operations by the state against the militants. By disaggregating the Battle of Marawi into the individual attacks that occurred over the time period, the authors are better able to discern militant fatalities resulting from Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) operations from civilian fatalities.

However, the individual number of attacks that fall within the remit of this battle may be undercounted. Overall, the authors took the approach of coding individual attacks, which amounted to 13 attacks during the Battle of Marawi (May to October 2017) in the Lanao del Sur province. Of these, eight were recorded in May, one in June, and four in July and August. There was much variation in how open-source outlets reported the battle in terms of the number of attacks. Some sources reported the battle as one event, whereas others discussed individual attacks; the authors coded all attacks reported as separate events during the battle. In many cases, it was difficult to ascertain whether any fatalities occurred (e.g., where attacks were reported on medical facilities or the burning down of buildings). In instances where it was not clear if any fatalities occurred, this was coded as unknown. Overall, the

database records Islamic State-linked total fatalities in the tens (excluding militants killed) and total wounded as over just over 100. It is certainly possible that reporters were unable to capture all the individual attacks that took place during the Battle of Marawi, and fatalities were underreported. Per Amnesty International, “restrictions on access to Marawi during the conflict have precluded any independent corroboration of official numbers.”<sup>26</sup> This means that the number of attacks and fatalities during the battle from open-source outlets may be underreported in the authors’ database.

### *The Islamic State’s Operational Alliances*

Borrowing from commonly used definitions of operational cooperation between organizations, the authors conceptualize the Islamic State’s operational alliances in Southeast Asia (and in the Philippines for this report) as those groups that (a) openly expressed support for the Islamic State or pledged allegiance, and (b) were reported to have been involved in some stage of conducting attacks, ranging from the planning stage to the execution stage,<sup>27</sup> which were also linked to the Islamic State. The authors do not include groups that may have expressed support for the Islamic State but were not necessarily reported to have been involved in any Islamic State-linked attacks.

### **Data Sources and Quality Control**

Over the course of several months, two research assistants coded Islamic State-linked attacks, which were then quality controlled by the report authors. Attacks were coded from a variety of English-language open sources, which included news reports, academic studies, and reports by think-tanks and researchers. For news reports, LexisNexis—which included the use of BBC Monitoring, which provides translations of some local sources—was employed to obtain relevant news articles, using search strings for different variations of each group’s name. For example, variations of the Islamic State’s name (e.g., Islamic State, ISIS, Daesh, Da’esh, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, among several others) and attack (e.g., attack\* OR fight\* OR clash\* OR target\* OR bomb\* OR shoot\* OR assault\* OR assassinate\* OR fire\* OR explos\* OR explod\* OR thwart\* OR shot\* OR IED\*, among other related terms) were searched together to identify Islamic State-linked attacks. Other variables were filled in through open-source searches on Google and academic databases. While translated news sources are included in LexisNexis searches, it is possible that LexisNexis did not include the entire spectrum of local language newspapers, especially those not considered to be “mainstream” newspapers. However, given the publicity generated by Islamic State-linked attacks, there are likely to be only a few instances, if any, that may not have been reported in national newspapers. Coders used at least two sources for each event, which were crosschecked in multiple rounds for quality control. The authors cross-referenced and supplemented the attacks coded for the report with other databases, including the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and Jane’s Intelligence. Any events not captured by the report’s methodology were individually researched and included in the database to ensure completeness.<sup>28</sup>

26 “Philippines: ‘Battle of Marawi’ leaves trail of death and destruction,” Amnesty International, November 17, 2017.

27 Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation among Terrorist Actors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

28 Another dataset that the authors considered was the Conflict Alert dataset, which tracks incidents at the subnational level in the Philippines. However, the Conflict Alert dataset does not cover the time period of analysis of this report and tracks data from 2011 to 2016 from the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (including the cities of Isabela and Cotabato) and from 2011 to 2015 from Davao Region (excluding Davao City).



## Caveats and Limitations

As previously mentioned, this database collects information on Islamic State-linked attacks, which were then used to identify Islamic State's local affiliates with operational links to the Islamic State. As such, the database does not include instances of attacks conducted by Islamic State-affiliated groups before these groups pledged allegiance to Islamic State Central.<sup>29</sup>

Once local groups like ASG pledged allegiance in mid-2014, it is possible that they continued to operate under their original name, as well as in partnership with the Islamic State. The report's database only focuses on attacks that specifically denoted some degree of Islamic State involvement. This is to differentiate from attacks in which affiliates were acting of their own accord versus those in which they were Islamic State partnered or conducting them on behalf of the Islamic State. It is possible that some attacks conducted and claimed by Islamic State affiliates (post pledges of allegiance), which the authors excluded from their database, did include Islamic State involvement 'behind the scenes.' However, if there was no publicly available report of Islamic State involvement, the authors erred on the side of caution and excluded such attacks. It is thus possible that the data presented in this report underestimates the Islamic State's operational influence in the region and presents a more conservative perspective.

Additionally, as mentioned above, to provide a holistic view of Islamic State involvement, the dataset includes attacks that were directly claimed by the Islamic State (as reported by the Islamic State's own news channels such as Amaq or via other media reports) as well those where local officials suspected Islamic State involvement. For the directly claimed attacks, although the authors did not acquire a complete collection of Amaq statements regarding claims of attacks conducted by Islamic State affiliates in the region, cross-references with other databases such as the GTD that do capture all Islamic State-claimed attacks ensured that all officially claimed attacks were included.

As with other terrorism-related data collection efforts, there is a possibility for under- or over-reporting of events. For instance, suicide attacks tend to deviate from the norm, which results in numerous news articles and academic articles. Others, such as those that occurred during the Battle of Marawi in the Philippines, are more commonplace in the conflict context and may be therefore underreported. Relatedly, as this database is compiled from open-source coding, it may be that data from classified sources would illustrate different trends. Additionally, because failed/foiled attacks are coded, it is possible that open-source media failed to capture these foiled/failed attacks that were not deemed newsworthy or were kept out of the public eye.

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29 This report uses the term "Islamic State Central" to refer to the collection of individuals/entities in Iraq and Syria responsible for overseeing the Islamic State and coordinating with its global provinces. These include: 1) the caliph (in the observed period, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), 2) the Shura (Consultative) Council, and 3) the Delegated Committee. "Islamic State Central" does not refer to the leadership of the Islamic State's various *diwan* (Ministerial Departments) or the emirs (leaders) of its recognized global provinces. For more on the Islamic State's leadership structure, see Cameron Glenn, "Al Qaeda v ISIS: Leaders & Structure," Wilson Center, September 28, 2015, and Nick Thompson and Atika Shubert, "The anatomy of ISIS: How the 'Islamic State' is run, from oil to beheadings," CNN, January 14, 2015.

## Chapter 1: The Emergence of the Islamic State in the Philippines

This chapter of the report provides an overview of the general environment, specific factors, and events that likely contributed to the Islamic State's emergence and influence in the Philippines. The exact year that the Islamic State began to emerge in the Philippines is subject to debate, however, by 2014, several commanders in the Philippines began making pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>30</sup> Most notably though, Isnilon Hapilon of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) posted a video of his pledge to the Islamic State and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi mid-2014.<sup>31</sup> This is significant as Hapilon was named the emir (head of the group) of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia by Islamic State Central prior to his death in 2017.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the Maute Group is an important Islamic State affiliate due to its leading role in the siege of Marawi City in 2017, a conflict that lasted for approximately five months.<sup>33</sup> Major Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines also include the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and Ansharul Khalifa Philippines (AKP), as identified in the regional report of this series.<sup>34</sup>

One byproduct of the Islamic State's emergence in the Philippines was cooperation among affiliate groups with different familial or ethnic ties, posing a formidable challenge to Philippines security (as the Marawi siege demonstrated). Lost in many discussions of militancy in Mindanao is the fact that it is home to as many as thirteen indigenous ethnic groups and numerous competing clans.<sup>35</sup> Where militant groups often work alone, cooperation among them can create new security challenges, and prolong their survival in difficult circumstances.<sup>36</sup> Cooperation among various groups under the Islamic State banner has also exacerbated the difficulty of attributing and tracing specific attacks to responsible groups.

Furthermore, the Philippines has proved perhaps to be more fertile for the Islamic State to gain affiliates and territory due to persistent instability within the country, especially in the southern region of Mindanao. Severe socioeconomic and development issues, clan rivalries and disputes, and identity-based armed violence have presented serious and persistent challenges to social and political stability in Mindanao.<sup>37</sup> To put it into perspective, Mindanao accounts for about 37% of the country's poor, and four of the country's five poorest regions.<sup>38</sup> Violent disputes in the region have manifested in various forms, such as armed groups clashes with government forces, communal tensions, as well as religious extremism and criminal violence.<sup>39</sup> Further, the inability of the Philippines central government to convene and implement a peace agreement with major insurgent groups, such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), prior to the 2019 agreement has perpetuated instability, mistrust of the central government, and sustained violence.<sup>40</sup>

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30 For a more detailed analysis of the Islamic State's initial emergence in the Philippines, see "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," *IPAC Report No. 33*, October 25, 2016, and "Marawi, the 'East Asia Wilayah' and Indonesia."

31 Joseph Franco, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi," International Crisis Group, July 17, 2018; Rommel C. Banlaoi, "ISIS Followers in the Philippines: Threats to Philippine Security," *SD Magazine*, October 13, 2015.

32 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

33 Franco, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi."

34 See Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis for more details on these groups.

35 Sidney Jones, "Radicalisation in the Philippines: The Cotabato Cell of the 'East Asia Wilayah,'" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30:6 (2018): p. 936.

36 Tricia Bacon, "Is the Enemy of My Enemy my Friend? How Terrorist Groups Select Partners," *Security Studies* 27:3 (2018).

37 For example, see "Poverty in the Philippines: Causes Constraints and Opportunities," Asian Development Bank, December 2009; "Insecurity in Mindanao: Conflict and State-sponsored Violence," Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, February 2020.

38 "Insecurity in Mindanao: Conflict and State-sponsored Violence."

39 Ibid.

40 The authors discuss the history of negotiations between the Philippine government and the MNLF and MILF in greater detail in Section 1.2.

However, despite collaboration among militants under the banner of the Islamic State, it is important to note that the Islamic State is not a unitary coherent entity across Southeast Asia with a central control and command center. Certainly, the Philippine and Indonesian groups affiliated with the Islamic State remain distinct entities, which operate independently of each other.

This chapter begins with a short discussion of the Battle of Marawi, a five-month siege of Marawi City by Islamic State-linked militants in 2017. This event is arguably the most significant Islamic State event in the Philippines, if not Southeast Asia, and thus, warrants detailed discussion. The authors then highlight the major Islamic State Filipino affiliates (ASG, the Maute Group, the BIFF, and the AKP) as well as the role of foreign militants in the Philippines. They discuss major factors that have facilitated the emergence of the Islamic State in the Philippines including ethno-religious conflict, distrust of the Philippines central government (and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)), and the social and political roles of clans. The chapter ends with a discussion about the counterterrorism structure in the Philippines, led by the AFP, and counterterrorism challenges in the country.

### 1.1 Battle of Marawi

The most significant Islamic State-related event in the Philippines was the Battle of Marawi. The battle, also called the Marawi Crisis, began in May 2017 when a coalition of Islamic State-linked militants, led by Isnilon Hapilon's faction of Abu Sayyaf Group and the Maute Group, captured the city of Marawi. It lasted until the Armed Forces of the Philippines liberated the city in October 2017. As many as 600 militants, which included both local insurgents and external fighters, descended on Marawi, a city of approximately 200,000 people, in the Lanao del Sur province of the Muslim-majority southern region of Mindanao.<sup>41</sup> The Islamic State set its sights on Marawi and Southeast Asia at large as it increasingly lost ground in its home territory in Iraq and Syria and attempted to cast "Mindanao as the hub for a new regional and global jihadi insurgency."<sup>42</sup>

The capture and occupation of the city was accompanied by a rigorous Islamic State propaganda campaign that projected the operation's success (although this seemed to be more oriented toward an external audience rather than internal).<sup>43</sup> For example, the Islamic State released a propaganda video via Al-Hayat Media Center during the siege, showing urban warfare in Marawi, which called on regional fighters to join the fight.<sup>44</sup> Most importantly, the Battle of Marawi marked the first time that Islamic State-aligned militants collaborated to occupy territory in Southeast Asia, using fighting techniques and media strategies reflective of Islamic State operations in Syria and Iraq.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the siege exposed the challenges faced by the AFP to tackle militants in an urban setting; the battle lasted for five months and the recovery of the city left behind a trail of death and destruction.

Militants' funding for the siege of Marawi appears to come from different sources. First, funding was channeled from the Islamic State to Marawi through Dr. Mahmud Ahmad, a Malaysian former professor.<sup>46</sup> Mahmud facilitated the transfer of as much as \$600,000 to Islamic State-linked militants

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41 Zachary Abuza, "Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines? A Hard Look at a 'Success' Story," *War on the Rocks*, June 2018; Franco, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi," Temby, p. 116.

42 Charles Knight and Katja Theodorakis, "The Marawi Crisis—Urban Conflict and Information Operations," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, July 2019, p. 9.

43 Knight and Theodorakis; Franco, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi."

44 Chris Tomson, "ISIS releases English-spoken video about Marawi, calls on foreign fighters to join battle," *Al-Masdar News*, August 21, 2017.

45 Robert Postings, "A Guide to the Islamic State's Way of Urban Warfare," *Modern War Institute*, July 9, 2018.

46 Angelica Habulan, Muh Taufiqurrohman, Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani, Iftekhharul Bashar, Fan Zhi'An, and Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin, "Southeast Asia: Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Online Extremism," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 10:1 (2018): p. 13; "Marawi, the 'East Asia Wilayah' and Indonesia," p. 8.

in Marawi over the course of the five-month siege.<sup>47</sup> Second, funds from new recruits, many of whom came from affluent families, may have contributed to the Marawi operation.<sup>48</sup> Finally, participating militant groups allegedly acquired funding for the siege through transnational drug trafficking and other illicit activities, though evidence remains unclear.<sup>49</sup>

A report by Amnesty International in 2017 states that the “estimated number of militants varied widely, with reports ranging from fewer than one hundred to more than one thousand.”<sup>50</sup> According to some accounts, a large majority of the 1,000 deaths resulting from the clashes between Islamic State supporters and the Armed Forces of the Philippines were reported to be militants.<sup>51</sup> Still, it cannot be stated definitively how many civilians were killed in the process of trying to flee: while many civilians were able to flee the city unharmed, many were reportedly killed while trying to escape. The conflict displaced about 360,000 people, including Marawi and neighboring municipalities.<sup>52</sup> Per official government statistics, “at least 920 militants, 165 soldiers, and 47 civilians were killed during the battle, and 1,780 hostages were rescued.”<sup>53</sup> Further, there is evidence that foreign fighters participated in the battle, although their numbers were relatively small; by official estimates, as many as 40 participated.<sup>54</sup>

Several Islamic State-affiliated leaders were also casualties of the battle, including Isnilon Hapilon of Abu Sayyaf Group-Basilan and the Maute brothers, Omarkayam and Abdullah Maute.<sup>55</sup> As a result, major Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines including the Abu Sayyaf Group-Basilan and the Maute Group entered a rebuilding period following the conflict. At the same time, however, “the money and jewelry looted from the Marawi banks likely continues to be an important financial source to sustain the militants.”<sup>56</sup> There were reports of widespread looting by various parties, including Islamic State-affiliated militants during the siege, but the extent of it remains unknown.<sup>57</sup>

A year after the conflict, as many as 65,000 remained unable to return to their homes.<sup>58</sup> Observers are concerned that the prolonged rebuilding process in Marawi and the grievance of residents over not being able to return home may be exploited by Islamic State affiliates for recruitment.<sup>59</sup> Even though the Philippine government has estimated completion of reconstruction work by the end of 2021, similar projections have not been met previously, and COVID-19 has caused further delays.<sup>60</sup> Any prolonged delays in rebuilding Marawi may be viewed as a propaganda victory for Islamic State-affiliated groups as it legitimizes their actions against the state.

47 Habulan et al., p. 13; “Marawi, the ‘East Asia Wilayah’ and Indonesia,” p. 8.

48 “Marawi, the ‘East Asia Wilayah’ and Indonesia,” p. 10.

49 Ibid., p. 9; Rommel C. Banlaoi, *Marawi City Siege and Threats of Narcoterrorism in the Philippines: Global Lessons Learned and Policy Options for the Duterte Government and Beyond* (Quezon City: Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research (PIPVTR), 2018).

50 “Philippines: ‘The Battle Of Marawi’: Death And Destruction In The Philippines,” Amnesty International, November 17, 2017.

51 Knight and Theodorakis; Franco, “Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi,” Temby, p. 117.

52 “Humanitarian Bulletin Philippines, Issue 6,” United Nations Organization for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), July 2017.

53 “Philippines: ‘Battle of Marawi’ leaves trail of death and destruction.”

54 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines* (Jakarta: Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2019), p. 9.

55 Pieter Van Ostaeen, “OSINT Summary: Suspected SVBIED attack in the Philippines’ Basilan suggests potential shift in Islamic State-affiliated militant tactics,” *Jane’s Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, August 7, 2018.

56 Ibid.

57 “Philippines: ‘The Battle of Marawi’: Death And Destruction In The Philippines.”

58 Temby, p. 117.

59 Joseph Franco, “Detecting Future ‘Marawis’: Considering Alternative Indicators for Assessing the Potential for New Manifestations of Violent Extremism in Mindanao,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14:1 (2020): pp. 3-12; Temby.

60 Gallardo.

## 1.2 Existing Militant Landscape, Foreign Fighters, and Counterterrorism Structure

Several local dynamics within the Philippines landscape have facilitated the Islamic State's growing influence in the country. Firstly, the country hosts a number of local insurgent groups that, for various reasons discussed below, have been eager to adopt the Islamic State brand. Second, foreign fighters have played an important role in forging links between Islamic State Central and Philippines-based groups, and in generally disseminating the Islamic State's ideology. Finally, ethno-religious tensions rooted in historical divisions between the majority Catholic population and the minority Muslim population, as well as high levels of distrust toward the government and Armed Forces of the Philippines, and clan rivalry have contributed to pockets of instability, such as in Mindanao. Such domestic tensions have contributed to conditions conducive to militancy. Each of these factors are discussed in more detail below.

### *Preexisting Militant Groups*

One of the major ways that the Islamic State changed the insurgent landscape in the Philippines was by uniting previously unconnected groups under the Islamic State brand. Whether these relationships will endure is uncertain, but the shared alignment with the Islamic State provided incentives for disparate groups and militants to collaborate, pooling resources and expertise, at least at the operational level. Many local groups such as Abu Sayyaf had previously been connected to transnational militant organizations such as al-Qa`ida.<sup>61</sup> However, ethnic and familial differences among local groups often dissuaded groups from cooperating with other local Islamist groups.<sup>62</sup>

As demonstrated by the Battle of Marawi, pledging allegiance to the Islamic State seemingly allowed groups to overcome traditional divisions and create a formidable collective challenge to counterterrorism in the Philippines.<sup>63</sup> In other words, aligning with the Islamic State became a mechanism for Islamic State-affiliated groups operating with their own goals and aspirations to cooperate under the Islamic State banner for practical benefits (such as resources and media attention). Additionally, a facilitating factor is the Islamic State's use of foreign fighters, many from Indonesia and Malaysia, who "have the advantage of not being bound by Philippine clan and family links, and they can move easily among different groups. They can provide expertise, international contacts and perhaps funding."<sup>64</sup> Estimates of the number of Islamic State-affiliated foreign fighters in the Philippines vary widely, but generally tend to be conservative. For example, as mentioned above, Philippines authorities believe that approximately 40 foreign fighters were involved in the Battle of Marawi.<sup>65</sup>

As will be discussed more thoroughly in Section 2.6 of Chapter 2, connections to the Islamic State has had a profound impact on local affiliates' tactics, most notably the use of suicide bombings for the first time in the Philippines in recent history.<sup>66</sup> Despite the long history of insurgency and violence within the country, it was only in July 2018 that the first suicide bombing using an improvised explosive device (IED) occurred in Lamitan City, Basilan.<sup>67</sup>

There are several groups with links to the Islamic State in the Philippines. In this section, the authors discuss the four major affiliates (Abu Sayyaf Group, Maute Group, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom

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61 Franco, "Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi."

62 Ibid.

63 This is not to say that the Islamic State played any direct meaningful role in promoting cooperation among groups.

64 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," p. 10.

65 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 9.

66 Temby.

67 Ibid.

Fighters, and Ansharul Khalifa Philippines), focusing primarily on their relationship with the Islamic State. These groups were identified in the authors' first report in the Islamic State in Southeast Asia series as operational alliances of the Islamic State in the Philippines.<sup>68</sup> For the purposes of this study, a group is considered an Islamic State operational alliance if it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and claimed an attack that was concurrently claimed by the Islamic State. While the first report in the series employed a regional review and provided the background on the Islamic State's alliances, the following sections delineate the motivations of these groups to align themselves with the Islamic State and their roles in the Battle of Marawi.

### Abu Sayyaf Group Factions

Factions of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), one of the major insurgent groups in the Philippines, declared allegiance to the Islamic State. There are several different ASG factions with different leaders and, as such, should be understood as "a network of networks, an alliance of smaller groups around individual charismatic leaders who compete and cooperate to maximize their reputation for violence."<sup>69</sup> The overall leader of ASG is Radullon Sahiron, who continues *not* to support the Islamic State.<sup>70</sup> However, the faction led by Isnilon Hapilon based in Basilan and later Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan's<sup>71</sup> faction out of Sulu/Jolo have declared allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>72</sup> Some recent reports suggest that despite their differences in terms of alignment with the Islamic State, Sahiron may be collaborating with the Sawadjaan faction at a tactical level.<sup>73</sup>

As with other groups, ASG leaders such as Hapilon were motivated to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State in order to 'cash in' on the Islamic State 'brand,' demonstrated by the group's use of the iconic Islamic State black flag in its ransom pictures and videos.<sup>74</sup> The allegiance with the Islamic State lends credibility to the group's threats and has helped the group extract greater ransoms for its kidnapping victims.<sup>75</sup>

Arguably the most important of these factions in reference to the Islamic State, especially in the Islamic State's early years in Southeast Asia, was Isnilon Hapilon's faction based in Basilan province. Reports indicate that the Basilan faction of the group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State as early as 2014.<sup>76</sup> Importantly, it is Hapilon whom Islamic State Central declared the emir of its operations in Southeast Asia, viewed by some as a step toward declaring an Islamic State Wilayat (province) in Southeast Asia.<sup>77</sup> Given Basilan province's location and history, it is perhaps unsurprising that many

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68 Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis.

69 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 3.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

71 In August 2020, the Philippines Army's commanding general, Cirilito Sobejana, stated that Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan was wounded and likely killed in a July 6 gun battle in Sulu province. See Jim Gomez, "Army chief: Militant leader likely killed in Philippines," *Washington Post*, August 25, 2020. Per U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Sawadjaan's leadership was not acknowledged by rival faction leaders in the Philippines nor by Islamic State Central. See "Operation Pacific Eagle – Philippines, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress." Ongoing AFP efforts have targeted other ASG ranking members, such as Mundi Sawadjaan and Arsibar Sawadjaan in September 2020. For more information, see "Aby Sayyaf sub-leader killed in Sulu clash – military," CNN, September 28, 2020, and "Operation Pacific Eagle – Philippines: Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress."

72 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, pp. 2-3.

73 John Foulkes, "Radullon Sahiron—Is the Abu Sayyaf Leader Partnering with Islamic State in the Philippines?" Jamestown Foundation, December 4, 2020.

74 Banlaoi, "ISIS Followers in the Philippines;" "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

75 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

76 Okkie Tanupradja, "Groups Pledging Allegiance/Support to Islamic State in Southeast Asia," International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, July 2017.

77 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," p. 7.

“foreign fighters” under Hapilon were from Malaysia.<sup>78</sup> Many people from Basilan work as plantation or construction laborers in the state of Sabah, Malaysia, creating the infrastructure for personnel and funding networks for ASG-Basilan.<sup>79</sup> Hapilon’s faction also received foreign fighters from peninsular Malaysia, especially dangerous from a counterterrorism perspective due to these fighters’ higher levels of education and deeper Islamist ideology.<sup>80</sup> However, the group was dealt a huge blow in the aftermath of the Battle of Marawi in 2017, when Hapilon was killed by the AFP.<sup>81</sup> There is speculation that Hapilon’s deputy, Furuji Indama, was leading the Basilan faction, though it is unclear whether he would be inclined to continue the faction’s alliances with the Islamic State.<sup>82</sup> Recently though, there have been reports that the Philippine military believes that Indama may have been killed in an encounter in September 2020.<sup>83</sup>

An increasingly important ASG faction is Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan’s (see footnote 70) group based in Sulu province. Sawadjaan did not directly participate in the Marawi siege, although some members of his ASG faction may have.<sup>84</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that Sawadjaan was elected Hapilon’s successor as emir in May 2018, although others recognized Sawadjaan’s key rival, Abu Dar, as emir;<sup>85</sup> per some sources, Sawadjaan’s leadership was not acknowledged by rival faction leaders nor by Islamic State Central.<sup>86</sup> Among several groups under Sawadjaan’s command is the Ajang-Ajang group, composed of “fighters [including children] whose relatives were killed in military or police operations and who wanted to avenge their deaths.”<sup>87</sup> Ajang-Ajang claimed responsibility for the Jolo Cathedral bombings in January 2019.<sup>88</sup>

#### Maute Group

Another major Islamic State ally in the Philippines is the Maute Group, whose membership is primarily composed of Maute family members.<sup>89</sup> Based in the town of Butig, the group was founded in 2015 by brothers Omarkayam (Omar) and Abdullah Maute, who both studied in the Middle East.<sup>90</sup> The group is alternatively named Islamic State-Ranao, Daula Islamiya Fi Ranao, or the Islamic State of Lanao due to its base in the southern province of Lanao del Sur.<sup>91</sup> The group declared allegiance to the Islamic State via a video posted online in April 2016.<sup>92</sup> As with the Abu Sayyaf Group, the key reason for the Maute family’s *bay`a* to the Islamic State was “less because of any particular affinity for

78 Ibid., p. 2.

79 Ibid., p. 8.

80 Ibid., p. 9.

81 Van Ostaeyen.

82 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 3.

83 “Military believes Abu Sayyaf subleader Furuji Indama is dead,” Rappler, October 30, 2020; “Abu Sayyaf Leader in Basilan Killed, Philippine Military Says,” BenarNews, October 30, 2020.

84 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 3.

85 Ibid., pp. 2-4. Abu Dar was killed in a counterterrorism operation in April 2019. Carmela Fonbuena, “Leader of Isis in Philippines Killed, DNA Tests Confirm,” *Guardian*, April 14, 2019.

86 See “Operation Pacific Eagle – Philippines, Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress.”

87 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 4.

88 Cathrine Gonzalez, “Ajang-Ajang Suspects in Jolo Cathedral Blasts Surrender,” *Inquirer News*, February 4, 2019.

89 For more details on the background of this group, see Joseph Franco, “Preventing Other ‘Marawis’ in the Southern Philippines,” *Asia & The Pacific Policy Studies* 5:2 (2018): pp. 362–69; Julie Chernov Hwang, “Relatives, Redemption, and Rice: Motivations for Joining the Maute Group,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:8 (2019); Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis; and “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia.”

90 Franco, “Preventing Other ‘Marawis’ in the Southern Philippines,” p. 363; “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia,” pp. 14-15.

91 Jones, “Radicalisation in the Philippines;” “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia;” Hwang.

92 Jones, “Radicalisation in the Philippines.”

ISIS's ideology than to burnish its fading image as a tough enforcer."<sup>93</sup>

Like many other insurgent groups in the country, the Mautes had connections to the MILF. For example, the MILF's renegade Commander Bravo allowed the Mautes access to one of the group's training camps.<sup>94</sup> After a falling out between the two, however, the Maute Group established its own camp and allegedly began recruiting dissatisfied younger MILF members.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, the Mautes exploited universities such as Mindanao State University "as a recruiting ground for disaffected youths."<sup>96</sup> While there are several reasons that new recruits joined the group, major ones include material benefits and economic mobility.<sup>97</sup>

The Mautes played a central role in several Islamic State-linked attacks after pledging allegiance, including the Davao night market attack in September 2016.<sup>98</sup> Further, the group was key in orchestrating the capture of Marawi City in 2017. It was the Maute Group, in concert with the Islamic State, that was responsible for building the coalition that overtook Marawi, "bringing together Maranao, Tausug, and Maguindanao, and that included Isnilon Hapilon's faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group; an Islamic State cell from the town of Cotabato; and Ansharul Khalifa Philippines (AKP) based in Sultan Kudarat."<sup>99</sup> Additionally, the Maute Group, deeply tied into the local shadow economy, formed several hideouts in Marawi City, which helped to draw the AFP into an urban battle.<sup>100</sup> The group exploited its "homefield advantage" and the traditional reinforced concrete homes in the city to keep the AFP on the ropes for several months.<sup>101</sup> As with Hapilon's faction of ASG, however, the Maute Group suffered key leadership losses as a result of the battle, namely the deaths of Omar and Abdullah Maute.<sup>102</sup>

#### Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) is a splinter group of the MILF formed in 2010 and based in Maguindanao.<sup>103</sup> The group, under the command of Ustadz Ameril Umbra Kato, split from the MILF over its dissatisfaction with the slow progress in the negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF for an autonomous region in Mindanao.<sup>104</sup> Shortly after Kato's death in 2015, the group split into three factions.<sup>105</sup> Two factions, under Imam Bongos and Imam Karialan, have not declared allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>106</sup> However, a third faction, led by Esmael Abdulmalek,

93 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

94 Hwang, p. 24; "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," p. 16.

95 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," p. 17.

96 Franco, "Preventing Other 'Marawis' in the Southern Philippines," p. 365.

97 Ibid., p. 367.

98 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia," p. 10.

99 Hwang, p. 24.

100 Mona Kanwal ed., *Global Jihad in Southeast Asia* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019); Knight and Theodorakis.

101 Temby, p. 117.

102 Van Ostaeyen.

103 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

104 "Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, August 2018; "Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters; Peter Chalk, "The Islamic State in the Philippines: A Looming Shadow in Southeast Asia?" *CTC Sentinel* 9:3 (2016).

105 Jeffrey Maitem, "BIFF has split into 3 factions – MILF," *Inquirer Mindanao*, November 6, 2014; John Unson, "Hostility between MILF, BIFF faction escalates," *Philippine Star*, September 7, 2017; John Unson, "Troops go after BIFF raiders in Maguindanao," *Philippine Star*, August 31, 2017.

106 Noel Punzalan, "BARMM negotiating with 2 BIFF factions for possible surrender," *Philippines News Agency*, September 4, 2019; "Hostility between MILF, BIFF faction escalates."



alias Abu Torayfe, pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State in 2016.<sup>107</sup> As with other Islamic State affiliates, Torayfe was motivated to use the Islamic State brand to bolster his faction's image locally.<sup>108</sup>

The extent to which Torayfe's faction participated in the Battle of Marawi is unclear: official sources<sup>109</sup> claim that the group supported the Maute-ASG coalition that overtook the city while the group itself denies this allegation.<sup>110</sup> Torayfe's BIFF faction has arguably played a bigger role as an Islamic State affiliate post-Marawi siege, particularly in the wake of key leadership deaths in the Maute Group and ASG-Basilian faction. After the deaths of Hapilon of ASG and the Maute brothers, the network of Islamic State-linked militants in the Philippines has become increasingly decentralized. One of the key nodes of this network has become Torayfe's BIFF faction based out of Maguindanao province.<sup>111</sup> The group is suspected of being behind the Cotabato City bombing in December 2018.<sup>112</sup>

#### Ansarul Khilafah Philippines (AKP)

Another Filipino Islamic State affiliate is Ansarul Khilafah Philippines (AKP), based in Sarangani and Sultan Kudarat provinces. The group, led by a former MILF member Mohammad Jaafar Maguid (alias Tokboy), was founded in 2008.<sup>113</sup> The AKP had strong ties to foreign fighters, particularly those from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Syria, some of whom helped with AKP strategy and funding.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, Tokboy had direct connections with Islamic State Central, which may have facilitated recruitment.<sup>115</sup>

The AKP was among the first groups in the Philippines to give *bay`a* to the Islamic State when it did so in September 2014.<sup>116</sup> The AKP's base in Sultan Kudarat served as a military training camp for recruits from neighboring provinces and other parts of the Philippines.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, providing a training camp for new recruits has been one of the group's key roles as an Islamic State affiliate. However, one of the AKP's training camps was attacked in December 2015 and Islamic State training moved to the Maute Group's base in Butig, Lanao del Sur.<sup>118</sup>

The group was the smallest Islamic State affiliate to participate in the Battle of Marawi in 2017, through providing operational support.<sup>119</sup> The AKP's major setback occurred a few months prior in January 2017: Tokboy's death.<sup>120</sup> While the AKP is now fewer in number, the group is still operational and was

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107 "No Activities Monitored after BIFF Pledge of Allegiance to ISIS – Army Official," GMA News Online, September 30, 2014; "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

108 Michael Hart, "Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters Assume ISIS' Mantle in the Philippines' Troubled South," Geopolitical Monitor, February 12, 2018.

109 Michael Hart, "A Year After Marawi, What's Left of ISIS in the Philippines?" Diplomat, October 25, 2018; Peter Chalk, "The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters: The Newest Obstacles to Peace in the Southern Philippines?" *CTC Sentinel* 6:11 (2013).

110 Jeffrey Maitem, "Autonomy Could Strip Foreign Fighters of Southern Philippine Sanctuaries: MILF Chief," BenarNews, July 25, 2017.

111 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 2.

112 Temby, p. 130.

113 Joseph Jubelag, "Police Arrest Suspected Islamic State-Linked Militant in Southern Philippines," BenarNews, September 18, 2019; "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia.," p. 10.

114 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

115 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

116 "Marawi, The 'East Asia Wilayah' and Indonesia," p. 2.

117 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 2.

118 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*.

119 Hart, "A Year After Marawi, What's Left of ISIS in the Philippines?"

120 "Ansarul Khilafah Philippines (AKP) / Islamic State Philippines (ISEA) | Terrorist Groups | TRAC," Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium, accessed March 21, 2020.

allegedly being led by Jeffrey Nilong, also known as Commander Momoy.<sup>121</sup> In September 2020, some sources reported that security forces had allegedly killed two brothers in the town of Surallah in South Cotabato province, who were identified as “Jeffrey Nilong alias Momoy,” and his younger brother “Amen.”<sup>122</sup>

### *The Role of Foreign Fighters*

Foreign fighters play a key role in facilitating the linkages between Islamic State Central and endemic militant groups in the Philippines. While the estimated number of foreign fighters in the country varies widely, most tend to be modest with estimates between 10 and 40.<sup>123</sup> The foreign fighters linked to the Islamic State that infiltrated the Philippines came both from other states in Southeast Asia (predominantly Indonesia and Malaysia) and other regions including East Asia, Central Asia, Northern Africa, and the Middle East.<sup>124</sup> It is estimated that as many as 40 foreign and foreign-trained fighters fought under the command of Isnilon Hapilon in the Battle of Marawi.<sup>125</sup> A key reason that Islamic State-affiliated foreign fighters travel to the Philippines, specifically Mindanao, is that it is arguably the only place in the region where they may be able to claim territory and establish a physical wilaya. Furthermore, Islamic State militants from Southeast Asia are more likely to stay in the region than to travel to Iraq and Syria in the wake of al-Baghdadi’s death and the Islamic State’s loss of territory.<sup>126</sup>

Arguably the biggest impact that foreign fighters have made on the militant landscape in the Philippines is the proliferation of suicide attacks. Most of the suicide bombers in the Philippines are believed to have been foreign fighters, including the Lamitan City bombing in July 2018, the Jolo Cathedral bombings in January 2019, and the September 2019 bombing in Indanan, Sulu.<sup>127</sup> However, the suicide attack in Indanan in June 2019 is thought to have involved Filipino assailants.<sup>128</sup> This is a concerning trend in part because it may inspire Filipino militants to become suicide bombers in the future, a trend that will be hard to reverse even after the Islamic State’s influence in the country wanes.<sup>129</sup>

### *The Sociopolitical Landscape*

There are several factors that have facilitated both militancy in the Philippines in general and linkages with the Islamic State specifically, primarily in the southern region of Mindanao, including historical ethno-religious conflict, distrust of the government and AFP, political corruption, and conflict related to clans. As illustrated in the proceeding sections, most Islamic State-linked militancy, and militancy in general, in the Philippines is concentrated in Mindanao. Islamic State recruitment in the Philippines is distinct from that in Indonesia and Malaysia in that it is not an appeal to Islamist ideology,

121 Rommel C. Banlaoi, “Terrorism In The Philippines During The Pandemic: Persistent Threats Three Years After Marawi Siege,” *Eurasia Review*, May 15, 2020; “ISIS-inspired terror group kills 2 cops,” *Tempo*, April 30, 2020; “Terror group member nabbed in SoCot raid,” Philippine News Agency, March 15, 2019.

122 “Philippine General Says Bomb Makers Killed in Gun Battle,” BenarNews, September 2020.

123 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*; Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Carmela Fonbuena, “Philippines: scores of Islamic State fighters on Mindanao island,” *Guardian*, November 11, 2018.

124 Kenneth Yeo, “Philippines’ Foreign Fighter Phenomenon,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 11:7 (2019): 16-21; Rommel Banlaoi, “The Maute Group and Rise of Family Terrorism,” *Rappler*, June 15, 2017; *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*.

125 Van Ostaeyen; *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 9; Temby, p. 120.

126 Zachary Abuza, “Suicide Bombings Take Root in the Southern Philippines,” BenarNews, November 12, 2019.

127 *Ibid.*; Temby.

128 Jim Gomez, “Philippines: 1st known Filipino suicide attacker identified,” Associated Press, July 2, 2019; Abuza, “Suicide Bombings Take Root in the Southern Philippines.”

129 *Ibid.*

such as promises of reward in the afterlife, but rather the prospects of gaining material benefits.<sup>130</sup> Mindanao has high levels of crime and poverty, and low literacy and life expectancy rates.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, as detailed below, the historic inability of the Philippine central government to strike and enact an agreement with major insurgent groups (the MNLF and MILF) prior to the 2019 agreement has perpetuated social and political instability in the region. This environment, marked by different types of conflict and violence, has proven fertile ground for insurgents and has attracted the attention of the Islamic State.<sup>132</sup>

One of the key long-term drivers of violence in Mindanao is ethno-religious conflict and the marginalization of the Muslim community. Most of the country's Muslim population, about 11% of the total population, is located in central Mindanao and the Sulu Islands.<sup>133</sup> The roots of the animosity between the majority Catholic population and the Muslim population can be traced back at least as far as the Philippines' colonial period, if not earlier. Under American rule, "the American policy of economic development and political alliance with local 'big men' or *datus* successfully stabilized Mindanao, but also encouraged large-scale immigration of Christian settlers to that relatively underpopulated island—settlers who frequently displaced local Muslim peasants."<sup>134</sup> The Muslim population in Mindanao subsequently declined as an increasing number of Christians acquired land, prompting Muslim protests.<sup>135</sup> This uneasy social dynamic led to conflict over land between the two groups.<sup>136</sup> Tensions worsened when former President Ferdinand Marcos implemented repressive measures from 1968 to 1972.<sup>137</sup> These measures included violence toward Muslims, most notably the Jabidah massacre where Christian soldiers killed as many as 28 Muslims in 1968.<sup>138</sup> The situation in Mindanao eventually deteriorated into a separatist insurgency, which saw the emergence of groups such as the MNLF and the declaration of martial law in Mindanao in 1972.<sup>139</sup> The result of decades of ethno-religious conflict and marginalization is that Filipino Muslims tend to identify primarily with their clan and ethnolinguistic group, rather than as part of the Filipino nation.<sup>140</sup>

Frustrations with the Philippine government over the slow negotiation and implementation of political autonomy in Mindanao has created an atmosphere of governmental distrust, a factor that facilitates Islamic State recruitment in the region. Following decades of ethno-nationalist conflict and the repression of Muslims, the Philippine government created the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in 1989, which included the southern provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi.<sup>141</sup> The creation of the ARMM granted the region semi-autonomy from the Philippine central government, including a regional government with the ability to levy its own taxes and limited application of sharia.<sup>142</sup> However, this did not cease instability and insurgency in the region. Subse-

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130 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

131 Melissa Etehad, "How Militants Linked to Islamic State Took Hold of a City in the Philippines," *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 2017; Alan Tidwell, "Duterte, Mindanao, and Political Culture," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, East-West Center, November 9, 2016; "Insecurity in Mindanao: Conflict and State-sponsored Violence."

132 Zachary Abuza, "Duterte Thinks He Can Bomb Islamists Into Submission. He Cannot," *New York Times*, June 21, 2017; Chalk, "The Islamic State in the Philippines: A Looming Shadow in Southeast Asia?"; Amadar and Tuttle.

133 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

134 Stuart J. Kaufman, "The Limits of Nation-Building in the Philippines," *International Area Studies Review* 16:1 (2013): p. 11.

135 *Ibid.*

136 *Ibid.*

137 *Ibid.*

138 Etehad.

139 Kaufman.

140 *Ibid.*

141 The province of Basilan and the city of Marawi were added during the 2001 expansion. See "ARMM history and organization," GMA News Online, August 11, 2008.

142 *Ibid.*

quently, the Philippine government has attempted to negotiate peace deals with insurgent groups such as the MNLF and MILF, with limited success. The government reached a peace agreement with the MNLF in 1996, but the agreement was not accepted by the MILF.<sup>143</sup> The Philippine government eventually made an agreement with the MILF in 2008, but it was deemed unconstitutional by the Philippine Supreme Court.<sup>144</sup> However, the Philippine government and the MILF signed the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro in 2014, which gave the region (and the MILF) more political autonomy and “more equitable resource sharing.”<sup>145</sup> The agreement was ultimately not implemented due to hesitations both on the part of Philippine legislators and militants.<sup>146</sup> Frustration with both the Philippine government and MILF leadership “led to a proliferation of radical militant groups,” and many commanders who had doubted the government’s intentions began to provide cover to Islamists.<sup>147</sup> Further encouraging extremist violence was a failed counterterrorism operation in 2015. While the government was negotiating a peace agreement with the MILF, it also attempted a raid on militants in Maguindanao province, resulting in the deaths of 44 officers.<sup>148</sup> This operation raised questions about the government’s intentions, and was exploited as propaganda for recruitment purposes by the country’s Islamist insurgents.<sup>149</sup>

It is in the context of failed peace negotiations between older groups like the MNLF and MILF and the central Philippine government that the Islamic State began to garner support in the Philippines. While the central government has traditionally been the target of individuals’ grievance over the delayed peace process, the MNLF and MILF are increasingly drawing ire from the younger population, which feels alienated and considers the Moro cause to have been betrayed through collaboration with Manila.<sup>150</sup>

Negative perceptions of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) also impact insurgency in Mindanao. Local distrust of the AFP is bolstered by some of its heavy-handed tactics, such as the use of field artillery in counterterrorism operations.<sup>151</sup> During the Battle of Marawi, for example, the sheer devastation of the city as a result of aerial bombing has resulted in accusations of excessive and indiscriminate force by the AFP.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, even when the AFP is successful in its counterterrorism operations, its impact is short-lasting because the conditions that facilitate insurgency (such as grievances and distrust of the AFP) continue to attract new recruits and support.<sup>153</sup> Additionally, the imprisonment of militants may perpetuate insurgency, as the prisons are crowded, prone to jail breaks, and ripe for new recruits.<sup>154</sup> In light of COVID outbreaks in prisons, the Philippines—and neighboring countries—has committed to early release initiatives to mitigate the spread of the virus.<sup>155</sup>

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143 Kaufman.

144 Ibid.

145 “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia.”

146 Ibid.

147 Abuza, “Duterte Thinks He Can Bomb Islamists Into Submission;” Chalk, “The Islamic State in the Philippines.”

148 Carlo Muñoz, “Islamic State Fighters Add Complications to U.S. Counterterrorism Mission in Philippines,” *Washington Times*, September 30, 2018.

149 Ibid.

150 Temby, p. 130.

151 Abuza, “Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines?”; Scott McKay and David Webb, “Comparing Counterterrorism in Indonesia and the Philippines,” *CTC Sentinel* 8:2 (2015).

152 Knight and Theodorakis, p. 5.

153 Abuza, “Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines?”; McKay and Webb.

154 Abuza, “Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines?”; Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Anna Sheveland, Maxim Babush, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi, Michele Ng Bonto, and Rohan Gunaratna, “What a Difference Two Years Make: Patterns of Radicalization in a Philippine Jail,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 9:1-3 (2016).

155 “Operation Pacific Eagle – Philippines: Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress,” p. 18.

Weak governance is another underlying factor that contributes to Islamic State support in Mindanao. Mindanao is politically dominated by clans, which has led to corrupt practices such as vote-buying for clans to gain or maintain power and influence.<sup>156</sup> Clans have incentives to ally with a large organization such as the Islamic State that not only can provide funding but also elevate the clan's status vis-à-vis other clans. Relatedly, feuds between clans, or *rido*, also perpetuate regional instability.<sup>157</sup> Perhaps the best example of this is the Maute family of Lanao del Sur, whose familial militia later became the Maute Group, a key Islamic State ally.<sup>158</sup> It may have been an escalated *rido* that led to the emergence of the Maute Group as a militant organization.<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, the prevalence of *rido*, especially in densely populated urban areas like Marawi, have led families and clans to amass caches of firearms and reside in homes with reinforced concrete walls known as *buhos*.<sup>160</sup> Taken together, clan influence and *rido* have enabled a sense of lawlessness in the region that facilitates Islamic State recruitment.

It is in this context that insurgency has flourished in Mindanao. The Philippine government, like the colonial governments of the Spanish and Americans before it, has been largely unable to exert control and stability over the region due to the prevalence of strong clans.<sup>161</sup> As a result, Mindanao remains in “a state of recurring hostilities between families and kinship groups characterized by a series of retaliatory acts of violence carried out to avenge a perceived affront or injustice.”<sup>162</sup>

### Counterterrorism Structure in the Philippines

Although the counterterrorism apparatus in the Philippines includes the involvement of multiple agencies and organizations, and some operations have involved joint military-police forces, the bulk of operations against militants have been led by the AFP instead of law enforcement, due to the nature of the insurgent threat.<sup>163</sup> There have been efforts though to improve the training of the Philippine National Police Special Action Force and other specialized law enforcement units to improve their capacity to tackle terrorist threats.<sup>164</sup>

The AFP's counterterrorism efforts have been supported by the United States through funding, training, logistical support, and the deployment of U.S. soldiers, primarily in Mindanao.<sup>165</sup> A key issue for the AFP, especially with Islamic State-linked attacks such as the siege of Marawi, is its relative unpreparedness for urban combat.<sup>166</sup> The AFP is trained for counterinsurgency operations in jungle settings as most clashes with insurgents have typically taken place in rural Mindanao.<sup>167</sup> Tactics such as the use of airstrikes and heavy artillery to combat militants, which may be effective counterinsurgent tools in the jungle, are less effective in urban settings and can result in civilian casualties and infrastructure damage. Indeed, while the AFP was ultimately able to liberate Marawi from Islamic State militants, much of the city was destroyed and many people were displaced as a result.<sup>168</sup> The use of heavy artillery and airstrikes during conflicts with Islamic State-affiliated militants such as in the Battle of Marawi is

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156 Franco, “Detecting Future ‘Marawis,’” pp. 4-5.

157 For a detailed discussion of the formation of the Maute Group due to *rido*, see *Ibid.*, pp. 4-6.

158 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

159 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

160 Franco, “Preventing Other ‘Marawis’ in the Southern Philippines,” p. 364.

161 Tidwell.

162 *Ibid.*

163 McKay and Webb, p. 20.

164 “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Philippines.”

165 McKay and Webb.

166 Knight and Theodorakis, p. 4.

167 Temby, p. 117.

168 *Ibid.*

problematic partially because it feeds support for the Islamic State's cause and lessens trust in the AFP. In fact, groups such as the Maute Group may try to draw the AFP into such urban conflicts knowing that it will use tactics that will likely result in civilian casualties, furthering the narrative of mistrust toward the AFP that the Islamic State pitches to potential supporters.<sup>169</sup> This is important for the AFP to consider, given that it has reportedly been working with local partners to encourage defections from militant groups in order to reintegrate them, and the use of strategic communications can be one way to combat the spread of support for the Islamic State.<sup>170</sup>

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169 Knight and Theodorakis.

170 "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Philippines;" Knight and Theodorakis; "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

## Chapter 2: The Islamic State’s Operational Trends in the Philippines

This chapter of the report provides an overview of the nature of the Islamic State’s presence and activity in the Philippines. The data is presented through analyses of six categories: a geographic overview of attacks, the lethality of attacks (including fatalities and injuries), the outcome of attacks (categorized as successes or foiled attacks), the types of targets attacked (broken down into civilian and state categories), and the types of tactics deployed (with a focus on suicide attacks). Each subsection contains a variety of views of the data such as over time, province, and rates.

The first Islamic State-linked attack in the Philippines occurred in late 2015, thus there is no data for 2014. There appear to be two distinct periods overall. The first period, 2016-2017, is characterized by a high number of attacks, all almost entirely in Mindanao, which culminated in the Battle of Marawi from May to October 2017. Islamic State-linked groups entered a rebuilding period after the clash with the AFP due to the high number of militant deaths, including ASG-Basilan and Maute Group leadership. While there are a lower number of attacks in the 2018-2019 period, the high fatality rates (killed and injured per attack) are likely driven by the advent of suicide attacks in the Philippines. These trends are discussed in greater detail in the subsections below.

### 2.1: Geographic Overview of the Islamic State Presence in the Philippines

This section provides a geographical depiction of Islamic State-linked attacks in the Philippines between January 2014 and July 2019. As mentioned earlier, an incident was coded as an ‘Islamic State-linked attack’ if it was either directly claimed by the Islamic State and/or if authorities suspected it to be linked to the Islamic State. Table 2.1 (a) displays the total number of attacks across the Philippines, broken down by year and province, while Table 2.1 (b) shows the breakdown of attacks and number of people affected by year and province. Figure 2.1 (a) depicts all attacks in the country over the time period, while graphs 2.1 (b)-2.1 (f) show the yearly geographical distributions of Islamic State-linked attacks across provinces.

*Table 2.1 (a): Total Islamic State-Linked Attacks across the Philippines, 2014-2019*

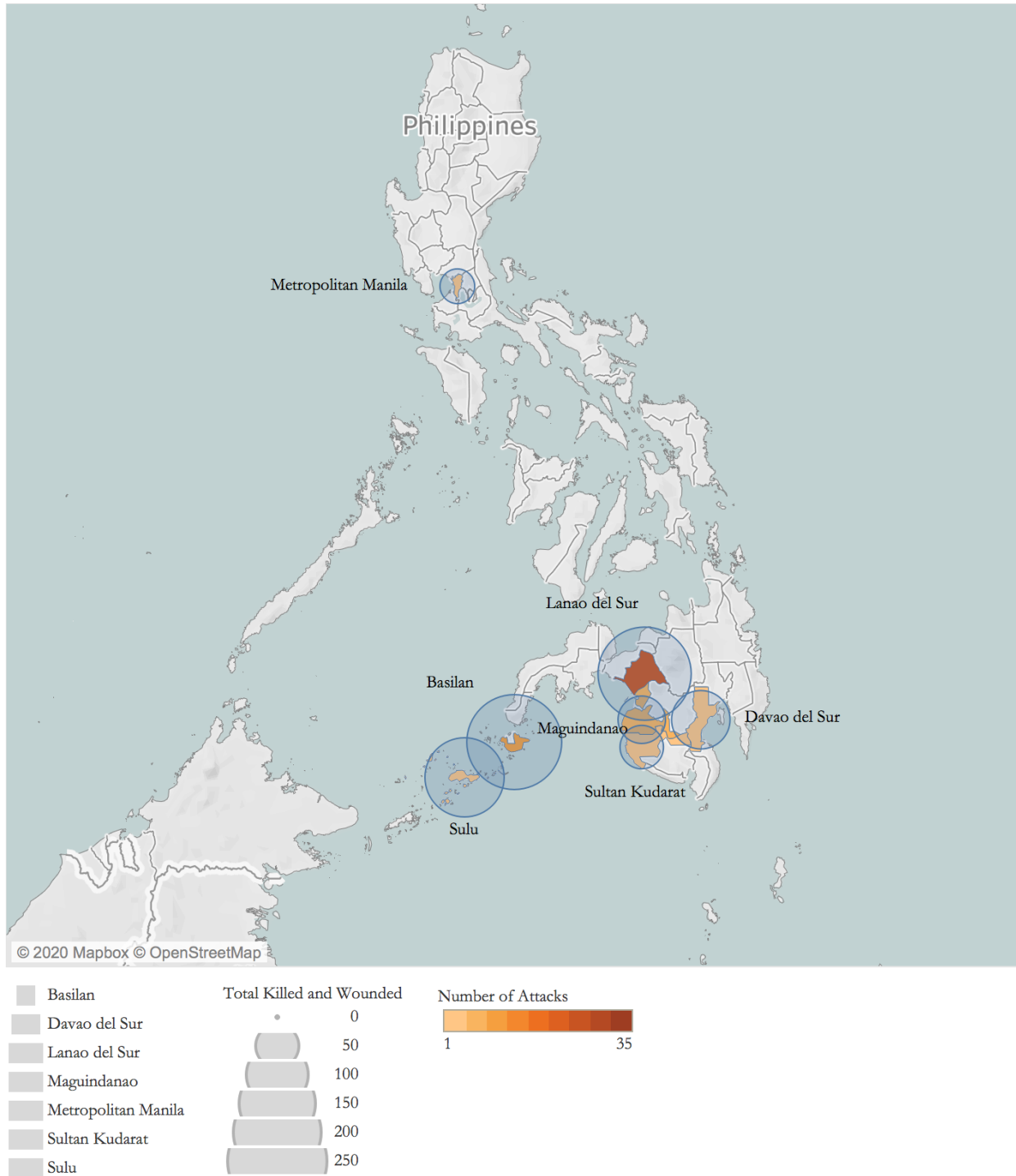
Province	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Basilan	0	7	0	1	1	9
Davao del Sur	0	1	0	0	0	1
Lanao del Sur	0	9	14	0	1	24
Maguindanao	0	0	4	3	0	7
Metropolitan Manila	0	0	4	0	0	4
Sultan Kudarat	1	1	0	1	0	3
Sulu	0	0	0	0	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>50</b>

*Table 2.1 (b): Total Islamic State-linked Attacks and Individuals Killed and Wounded in the Philippines, 2014-2019*

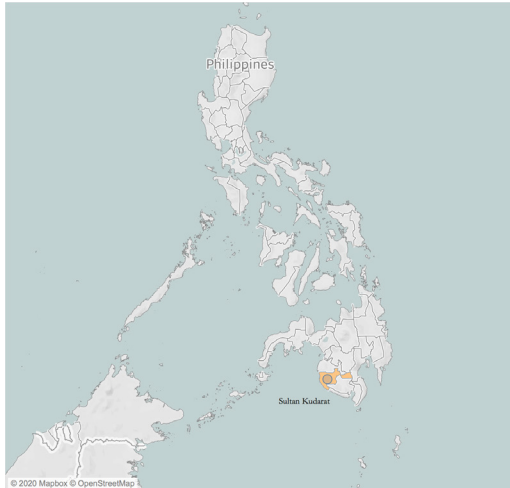
<b>Year/ Province</b>	<b>Attacks</b>	<b>Total Killed and Wounded</b>
<b>2015</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>
Sultan Kudarat	1	8
<b>2016</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>353</b>
Basilan	7	204
Davao del Sur	1	85
Lanao del Sur	9	62
Sultan Kudarat	1	2
<b>2017</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>193</b>
Lanao del Sur	14	148
Maguindanao	4	15
Metropolitan Manila	4	30
<b>2018</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>88</b>
Basilan	1	10
Maguindanao	3	41
Sultan Kudarat	1	37
<b>2019</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>172</b>
Basilan	1	10
Lanao del Sur	1	6
Sulu	2	156
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>814</b>



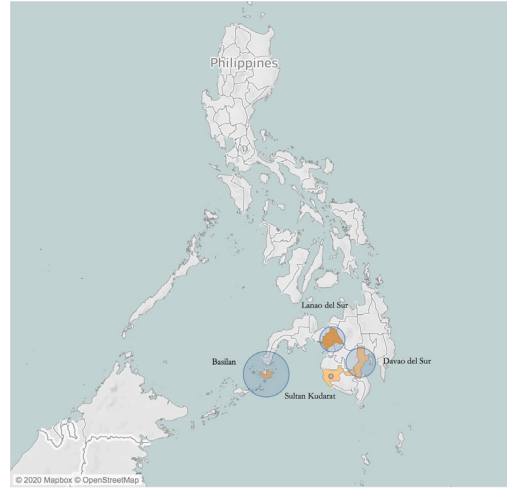
**Figure 2.1 (a): Islamic State-Linked Attacks and Numbers Killed and Wounded in the Philippines, 2014-2019**



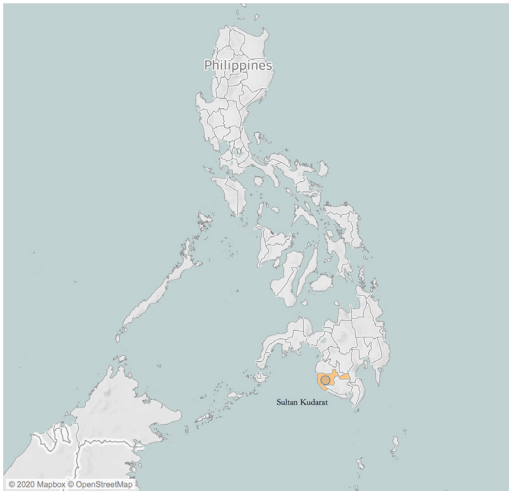
**2.1 (b): 2015**



**2.1 (c): 2016**



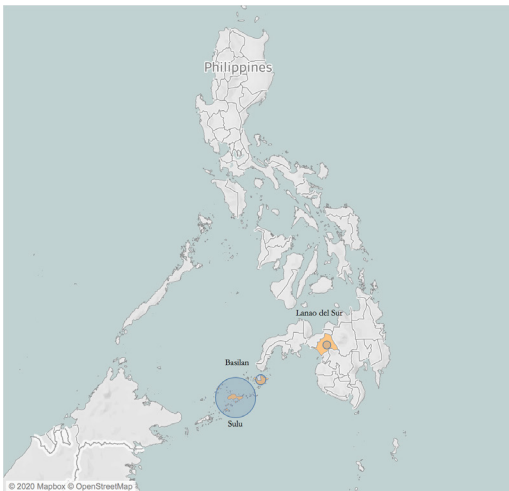
**2.1 (d): 2017**



**2.1 (e): 2018**



**2.1 (f): 2019**



*Note: Full-size figures are provided in the Appendix.*

Figure 2.1 (a) indicates that there are essentially two regions that have experienced Islamic State-related attacks in the 2014-2019 time period: Metropolitan Manila and Mindanao. As mentioned, Islamic State affiliates are concentrated in Mindanao, though Manila may be a target of attacks due to its status as the capital and the seat of national political power in the Philippines. Of the 50 attacks that occurred in the Philippines, only four occurred in the vicinity of Manila; the other 46 occurred in Mindanao. All four attacks in Manila occurred in 2017. It should be noted that for three of those attacks, there is debate over to whom the attacks are attributable. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attacks while police credited the attacks to personal disputes between residents. If these attacks are indeed Islamic State-linked, the perpetrators do not appear to be linked to any other Filipino militant group. The other attack in Manila was a foiled attack in April 2017 where police arrested a foreign couple linked to the Islamic State who allegedly were planning a “bombing operation.”<sup>171</sup> Finally, the data excludes the June 2017 Manila casino attack.<sup>172</sup> Although the Islamic State claimed the attack (without much detail), the Philippine government strongly denied any such links and called the incident a robbery rather than a terrorism-related incident. The authors decided to exclude the event as a more robust connection to the Islamic State could not be ascertained from open-source research.<sup>173</sup>

Table 2.1 (a) further shows that most of the attacks occurred in the province of Lanao del Sur in Mindanao, with 24 attacks total over the five-year period. This pattern largely aligns with the Battle of Marawi in 2017, which took place in Lanao del Sur province. (See the Methodology section on how the authors coded attacks during the prolonged battle.) However, Table 2.1 (b) shows that more people were killed and wounded by attacks in the southern province of Basilan (224), the majority of which were observed in Basilan in 2016 (204 out of 224). This is likely because Hapilon, declared head of Islamic State operations in “East Asia” in 2015, and his ASG faction were based in Basilan at the time, as a result of which the region became a “nerve center” of the Islamic State in the Philippines.<sup>174</sup> Basilan was generally considered to be easily accessible, as militants could make their way to Basilan undetected via small boats.<sup>175</sup> Additionally, there have been reports of foreign operatives in the Basilan jungle camps: for example, local authorities reported that a Spaniard with bomb-making materials and an Egyptian carrying cash were arrested in 2018.<sup>176</sup> Basilan also experienced the first suicide attack in the country, which was reportedly carried out by a German-Moroccan suicide bomber.<sup>177</sup>

### *Progression of Islamic State Activity*

The first Islamic State-related attack in the Philippines occurred in November 2015 in the southern province of Sultan Kudarat, resulting in eight deaths. The local group involved was Ansar al Khalifa Philippines (AKP), one of the first groups in the country to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State. Attacks attributed to the Islamic State increased in 2016, spreading to other provinces including Davao del Sur, Lanao del Sur, and the island province of Basilan, despite remaining isolated to Mindanao. The number of attacks increased exponentially, from one in 2015 to 17 in 2016, resulting in 158 deaths

171 “Philippines Nabs Kuwaiti Man, Wife over Daesh Links,” PressTV, April 6, 2017.

172 “Resorts World Manila: At least 36 bodies found at casino complex,” BBC, June 2, 2017.

173 While, in general, the report’s dataset does include Islamic State-claimed attacks, the 2017 casino attack diverged from the more typical attacks in the dataset, where multiple points of information—whether perpetrators, sources, or investigations—refer to an incident or a perpetrator as connected to the Islamic State. Having said that, it is possible that the attacker was linked to or inspired by the Islamic State, even if PNP failed to identify a link.

174 Jones, “Radicalisation in the Philippines,” p. 934.

175 Hannah Beech and Jason Gutierrez, “How ISIS is Rising in the Philippines as it Dwindles in the Middle East,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2019; Jeffrey Maitem and Mark Navales, “Philippines: Egyptian Arrested on Suspicion of Islamic State Links,” *BenarNews*, February 26, 2018.

176 *Ibid.*

177 *Ibid.*; Sidney Jones, “Don’t ‘crush’ Abu Sayyaf perpetrators, debrief them,” Lowy Institute, January 31, 2019; “Philippines Defense Chief: Latest Suicide Bombing in South ‘Very Important’ Development,” *BenarNews*, July 1, 2019.

and 195 wounded. Relatedly, attacks were attributed to various Islamic State affiliates in 2016. One of the major attacks in the country that year occurred on September 2, when militants detonated a bomb in the Davao City Night Market, resulting in 15 deaths and 70 casualties. The perpetrators were identified as three members of the Cotabato cell of the Maute Group (Islamic State-Ranao): T.J. Tagadaya Macabalang (alias Abu Tufael); Wendell Apostol Facturan (alias Muraimin); and Musali Mustafa (alias Abu Hurayra).<sup>178</sup> This attack demonstrated cooperation between Islamic State-aligned groups in the country: the perpetrators testified that the attack was ordered by Isnilon Hapilon and that the AKP was also involved.<sup>179</sup>

The year 2017 was key for the Islamic State in the Philippines due to the siege of Marawi City in Lanao del Sur, a five-month-long armed standoff led by the Islamic State affiliate the Maute Group, described in Chapter 1 of the report.<sup>180</sup> Per official estimates, during the battle, “920 militants, 165 soldiers and 47 civilians were killed in the fighting, and more than 1,780 hostages were rescued from the IS-linked militants,”<sup>181</sup> although these figures have been difficult to corroborate due to restrictions on access to affected areas. Attacks attributable to the Islamic State also occurred in the neighboring province of Maguindanao, conducted by both ASG and the Maute Group, resulting in as many as four deaths.

The number of attacks in 2017 remained comparable to the number in 2016 (17 vs. 14), although the total number of casualties decreased substantially from 353 in 2016 to 193 in 2017. Also of note is that 2017 is the first and only year in the data that Islamic State attacks occurred outside of Mindanao: four attacks occurred in the vicinity of Manila, resulting in four deaths and 26 wounded. Islamic State Central claimed these attacks, which occurred around the beginning of the siege of Marawi in early May. As previously noted, police contested the Islamic State’s claims in three attacks, stating that they were a result of personal feuds between individuals. As mentioned above, the data excludes the June 2017 Manila casino attack, which was claimed by the Islamic State.<sup>182</sup>

The year 2018 was marked by a significant decline in the number of Islamic State-related attacks in the Philippines, likely due to the aftermath of the Marawi siege and affiliates’ need to rebuild. As mentioned in the section on the Battle of Marawi, many key leaders and fighters died as a result of the conflict. Therefore, groups such as the Maute Group were significantly undermined. There were only five attacks, and these were limited to the provinces of Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, and Basilan. However, the attack in Lamitan City, Basilan, on July 31 is significant in that it was the first suicide bombing conducted by militants to occur in the Philippines, despite the country’s long history of insurgency.<sup>183</sup> The attack was conducted by an Islamic State affiliate, ASG-Basilan, despite the loss of the group’s leader, Hapilon, during the Battle of Marawi in the previous year.<sup>184</sup>

Attacks in the first seven months of 2019 continued affiliates’ increasing efficiency rates: the four attacks in that period resulted in 50 fatalities and 122 people injured. The biggest attack in terms of number of people affected is the Jolo Cathedral bombings in January 2019, which resulted in the deaths of 27 people and 100 people wounded. This attack included two sets of explosions conducted by suicide bombers.

In addition to continuing the troubling trend of suicide bombings in the Philippines, the attack is also significant because it demonstrates the importance of foreign fighters in the Islamic State’s operations in Southeast Asia. The attack was conducted by an Indonesian couple affiliated with Jamaat Asharud

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178 “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia,” p. 15.

179 Ibid.

180 Banlaoi, “The Maute Group and Rise of Family Terrorism;” “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia.”

181 “Philippines: ‘Battle of Marawi’ leaves trail of death and destruction.”

182 “Resorts World Manila: At least 36 bodies found at casino complex.”

183 Temby.

184 Van Ostaeyen.

Daulah (JAD), another Islamic State affiliate.<sup>185</sup> The couple, Rullie Rian Zeke and Handayani Saleh, had previously attempted to enter Syria from Turkey but were deported to Indonesia in 2017.<sup>186</sup> Zeke, alias Abu Huda, allegedly arrived in the country some time before the attack but Saleh arrived only a few days prior.<sup>187</sup> The attack was claimed by Ajang-Ajang, a group under Sawadjaan's ASG faction in Sulu.<sup>188</sup>

## 2.2 Temporal Trends

This section presents the overall trajectory of Islamic State-related attacks in the Philippines. The data suggests that the period from June 2016 to June 2017 was the most volatile, with the highest number of attacks in July 2016 and May 2017. These levels correspond with the Battle of Marawi, which began in May 2017 and ended five months later, and the failed peace negotiations between the MILF and the Philippine government in 2016, which would have granted Mindanao (and the MILF) more autonomy. It should be noted that despite the country's long history of insurgency, 2017 was the first time that the U.S. State Department named the Philippines among the top five countries with the most terrorist attacks, the other countries being Afghanistan, India, Iraq, and Pakistan.<sup>189</sup>

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185 JC Gotinga, "AFP Confirms Report: Indonesian Couple behind Jolo Cathedral Bombing," Rappler, July 24, 2019; Ana P. Santos, "Who Were the Indonesian Husband and Wife behind Jolo Bombing?" Rappler, December 27, 2019.

186 Gotinga, "AFP Confirms Report."

187 "Indonesian Suicide Bombers behind Jolo Blasts - Año," CNN Philippines, March 6, 2019.

188 Gonzalez.

189 Ibid.

**Figure 2.2 (a): Temporal Trends in Islamic State-linked Attacks in the Philippines**

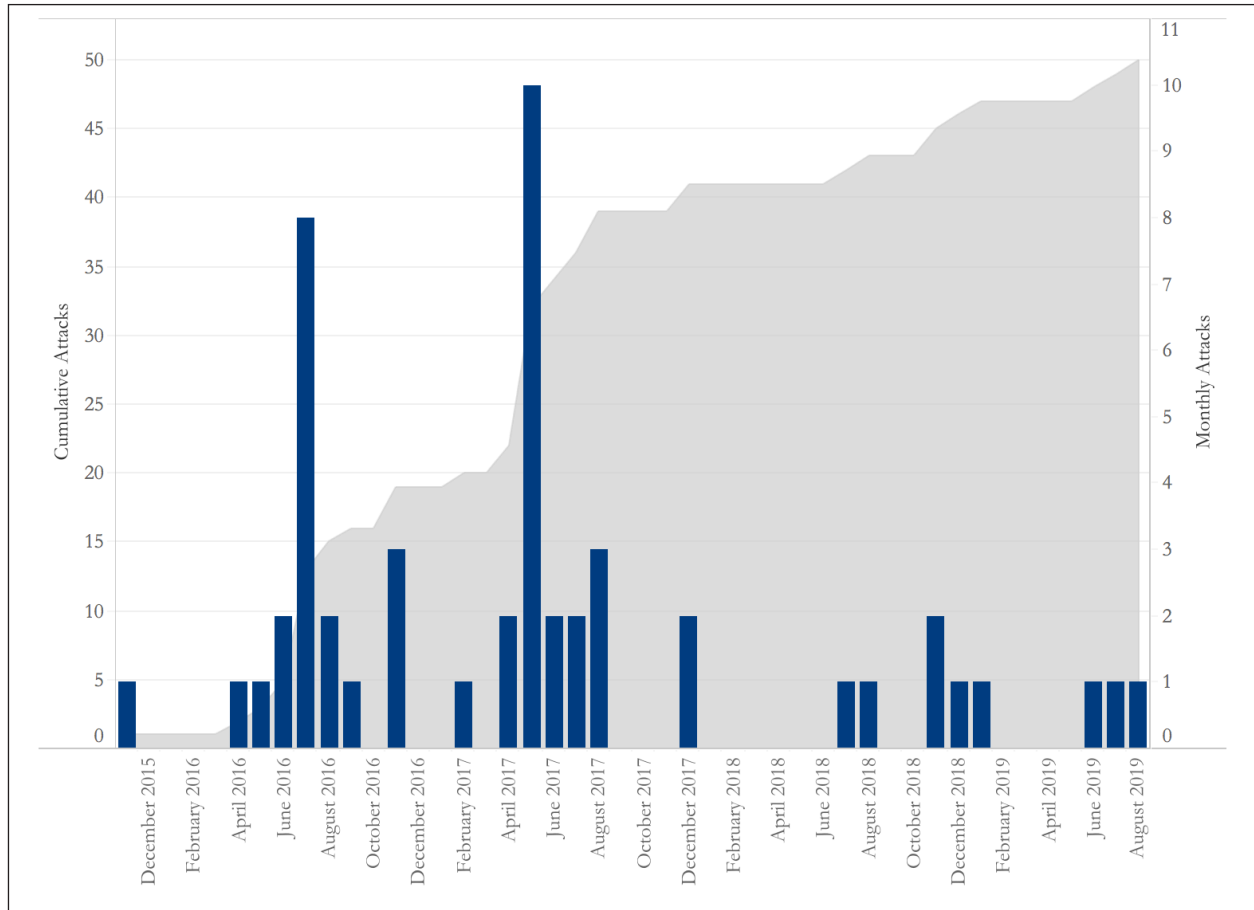


Figure 2.2 (a) depicts the monthly trends in Islamic State-linked attacks in the Philippines against a background of the cumulative Islamic State-related attacks from January 2014 to July 2019. The overall trend suggests that the period between June 2016 to June 2017 was the most volatile. The volatility in the period is interesting because it seemingly corresponds with Ramadan in 2016 and 2017.<sup>190</sup> The two crests (June to August 2016 and April to June 2017) overlap with the Muslim holy month in those two time periods, which tends to be “a time of renewed militancy among extremists.”<sup>191</sup>

The peaks in Islamic State-related attacks in 2016 and 2017 correspond with several major events. Two important events occurred in 2016 that not only help account for the increase in attacks but also set the stage for the siege of Marawi in 2017, the major Islamic State-related event in the Philippines during that year. First, Islamic State Central was becoming weaker in 2016 due to Iraqi, U.S., and allies’ success in retaking territory in Iraq and Syria.<sup>192</sup> At the same time, Islamic State Central began to recognize pledges of allegiance from various groups in Southeast Asia, going so far as to as to declare Hapilon of Abu Sayyaf Group’s Basilan faction its “regional emir.”<sup>193</sup> The result was that Islamic State Central directed its supporters to travel to the region, specifically to Mindanao, especially if they could

190 In these two years, Ramadan was June 6 to July 5, 2016, and May 26 to June 24, 2017.

191 Sidney Jones, “How ISIS Has Changed Terrorism in Indonesia,” *New York Times*, May 22, 2018.

192 “Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State,” The Wilson Center, October 28, 2019.

193 Zachary Abuza, “In Organizational Shake-Up, Islamic State Names New Province in Southeast Asia,” *BenarNews*, July 23, 2018; “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia.”

not travel to Syria.<sup>194</sup> Together, these simultaneous developments may be responsible for the decrease in attacks near the end of 2016 and the rise in early 2017.

Second, in 2016, the Philippine legislature failed to pass the Bangsamoro Basic Law, which sought to establish a new autonomous Muslim-majority political entity in Mindanao. (The bill was signed by President Duterte in July 2018.<sup>195</sup>) As mentioned in Chapter 1, this failure came in the context of negotiations between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), with both parties preferring peace over the resumption of conflict in the battle-scarred region. One consequence of the failed legislation was that members of the MILF, disillusioned with negotiations and uncertain about the prospects for peace and autonomy, joined Islamic State affiliates.<sup>196</sup> These events not only increased the Islamic State's appeal to new recruits and the likelihood of Islamic State-related attacks, but also set the stage for the siege of Marawi in 2017.

The siege of Marawi City in 2017 in the southern province of Lanao del Sur was arguably the most significant event for the Islamic State in the Philippines, and perhaps the region at large.<sup>197</sup> At the center of the attack was the Maute Group, a group among the first to pledge Islamic State allegiance in the Philippines.<sup>198</sup> The siege lasted for several months partially due to the number of fighters involved and funding for the operations.<sup>199</sup> The Mautes were aided by factions from Abu Sayyaf, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, Ansharul Khalifa Philippines, and the Khilafa Islamiyah Mindanao, among others.<sup>200</sup> The operation received funding primarily through drug trafficking, human trafficking, small arms trafficking, and money laundering, both from groups in the Philippines and groups in Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>201</sup> While the amount of support that participants of the siege received from Islamic State Central is unclear, the Islamic State did proclaim its support for the operation through its official media.<sup>202</sup> The siege not only demonstrated the combined capabilities of Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines and the region, but also the difficulty of counterterrorism operations in an urban setting.<sup>203</sup> When the siege was finally lifted by the AFP, the city was in ruins. However, local militant groups incurred significant losses in the aftermath of the siege: many leaders were killed, most notably Hapilon of Abu Sayyaf Group and the Maute brothers.<sup>204</sup>

### 2.3 Lethality and Outcomes

Figure 2.3 (a) depicts the total number of deaths and injuries inflicted by Islamic State-linked attacks per year, while Figure 2.3 (b) displays lethality per attack over the year. The most notable trend is that while 2016 witnessed the highest number of casualties by Islamic State attacks in the data, the attacks in 2018 and 2019 had the highest lethality rate. This may be due to a shift in tactics: the first suicide

194 Abuza, "Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines?"; Shashi Jayakumar, "The Islamic State Looks East: The Growing Threat in Southeast Asia," *CTC Sentinel* 10:2 (2017): pp. 27-33.

195 Richard Javad Heydarian, "Philippines' Peace Process in Tatters," *Al Jazeera*, February 7, 2016.

196 Amadar and Tuttle, p. 30; "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

197 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

198 Banlaoi, "The Maute Group and Rise of Family Terrorism;" "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

199 "Philippines: IS funded siege through Malaysian militant," *Associated Press*, June 23, 2017; Ben C. Solomon and Felipe Villamor, "In City of Ruins, Philippines' Battle Against ISIS Rages On," *New York Times*, September 1, 2017; Abuza, "Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines?"

200 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia;" Amadar and Tuttle, pp. 47-49; Banlaoi, "The Maute Group and Rise of Family Terrorism."

201 "High-Level Open Debate of the UN Security Council addressing linkages between Terrorism and Organized Crime," Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Philippines to the United Nations, August 6, 2020.

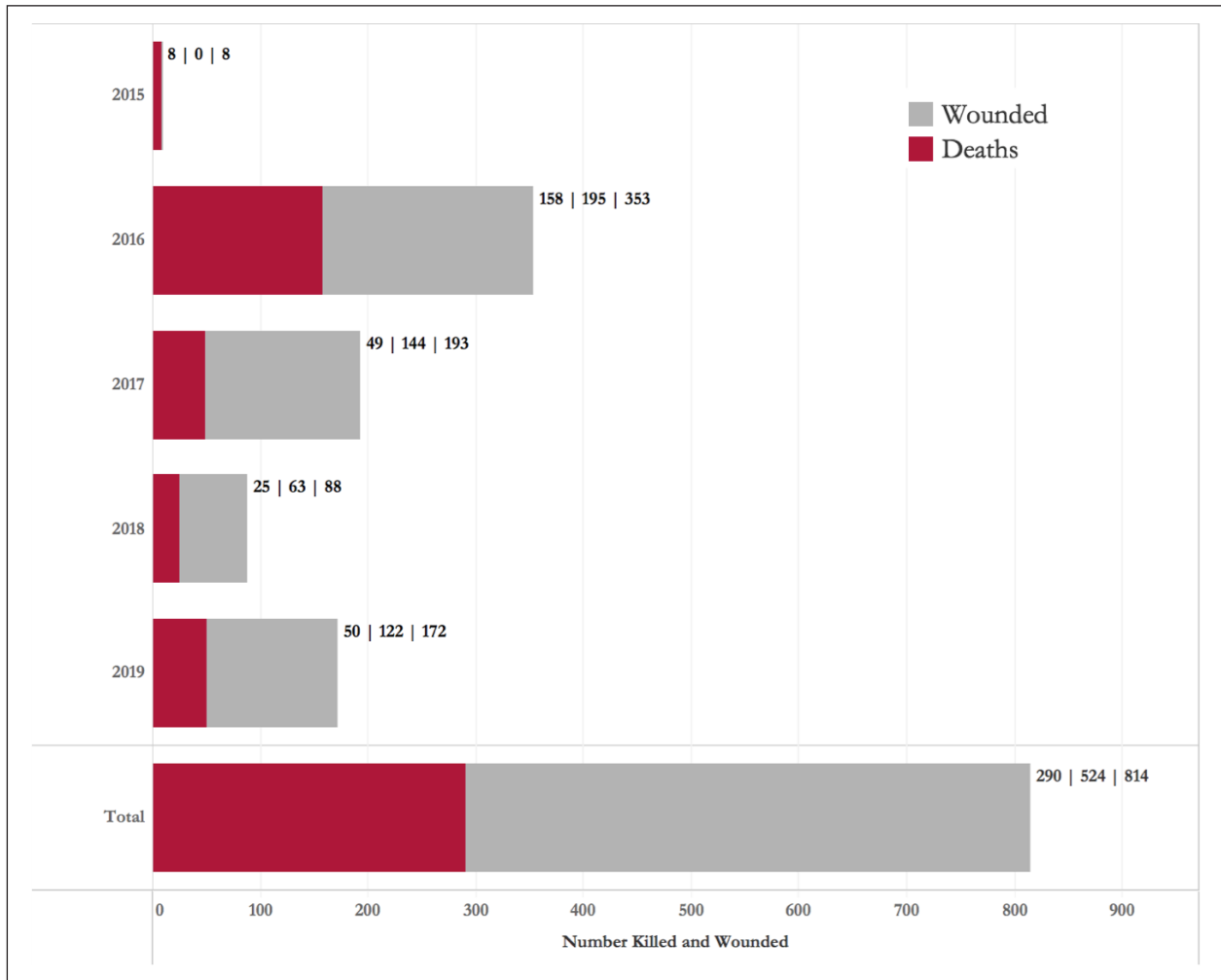
202 Knight and Theodorakis; "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

203 Knight and Theodorakis.

204 Van Ostaeyen.

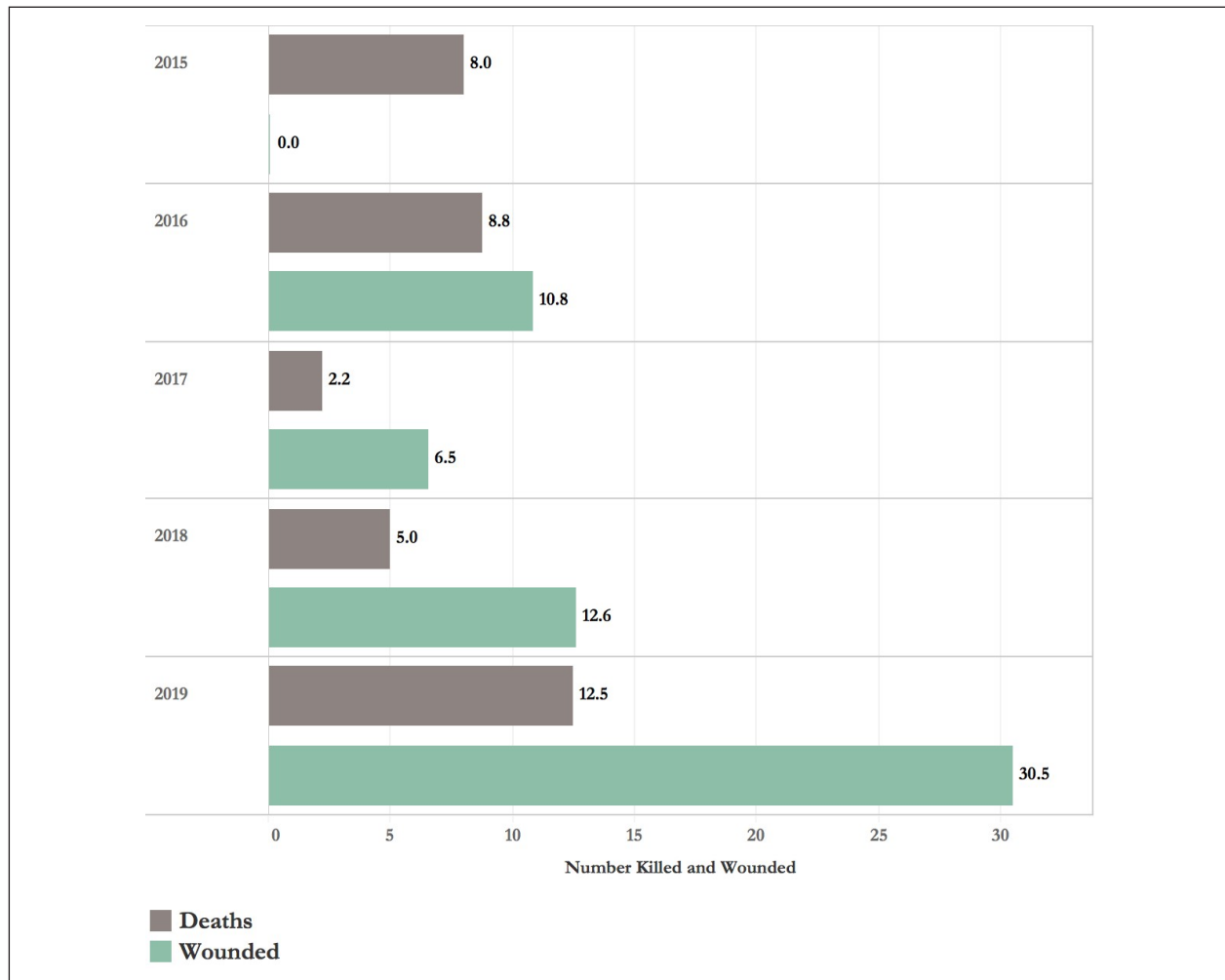
bombing conducted in recent times in the Philippines occurred at the end of 2018, and most attacks in 2019 were suicide attacks.

*Figure 2.3 (a): Total Lethality over Time (Deaths | Wounded | Total)*





*Figure 2.3 (b): Lethality (Killed and Wounded) per Attack over Time*



There was only one Islamic State-related attack in the Philippines in 2015, in November, with eight deaths and zero wounded. The highest number of people affected (killed and wounded) by Islamic State-related attacks occurred in 2016, with 158 deaths and 195 people wounded. Most attacks in 2016 incurred few fatalities or injuries. The worst attacks in 2016 in terms of casualties were a firefight between Islamic State-linked militants and the AFP in April, where as many as 23 AFP soldiers and 28 militants died, and the bombing of the night market in Davao City in September, with 15 civilian fatalities and 70 injured. Both attacks were claimed by ASG, likely Hapilon’s Basilan faction.

Despite the lengthy duration of the Battle of Marawi in 2017 (from May until October) and the spread of Islamic State attacks into Manila, the number of people affected by attacks decreased to 193 that year, with 49 deaths and 144 wounded. Many attacks in 2017 incurred few casualties.<sup>205</sup> The largest attack that year in terms of total number of people killed and wounded was an attack that occurred in July during the Battle of Marawi, which resulted in nine deaths (all civilians) and 49 injuries. The

<sup>205</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 1 and the Methodology section, the Battle of Marawi was coded using open-source event data of individual attacks rather than counting it as one attack. The direct combat between the AFP and militants are not considered to be ‘attacks’ for the purposes of this report, as many Marawi-related incidents (and associated fatalities) included operations by the state against the militants. This method enables the authors to distinguish more clearly militant casualties from civilian ones. However, the number of casualties may be underreported in this database.

attack was attributed to the Maute Group.

Besides the year when Islamic State-related attacks began in the Philippines (2015), 2018 marked the lowest number of people affected in a total of five attacks, with 25 deaths and 63 wounded (a total of 88 affected). This was at least partially due to the lower number of attacks that year in the aftermath of the Marawi siege, where many Islamic State affiliates' leaders were killed.<sup>206</sup> Finally, the attacks in the first eight months of 2019 affected 172 people in total, with 50 deaths and 122 wounded (in a total of four attacks). These numbers rival the totals from 2017, suggesting that Islamic State affiliates were recovering from their losses after the siege of Marawi and launching deadlier attacks.

In contrast to Figure 2.3 (a), Figure 2.3 (b) depicts the lethality rate per attack per year. The lethality rates in terms of fatalities in 2015 and 2016 are similar, with rates of eight and nine per attack, respectively. However, there were no people wounded during the sole Islamic State-related attack in 2015, while 2016 witnessed about 11 people wounded per attack. The lethality rates declined between 2016 and 2017, decreasing to rates of two deaths and six people wounded per attack, respectively. One of the most striking changes in the data occurred in the lethality rates between 2017 and 2018. Despite a lower number of attacks and casualties, the lethality rates increased nearly two-fold. It may be that groups had to change tactics as a result of losses in the Battle of Marawi and to indicate resolve. In fact, it is in July 2018 that the first Islamic State-related suicide bombing occurred in the Philippines, in Lamitan City.<sup>207</sup>

The first seven months of 2019 continue the trend of increasing attack efficacy, with the highest lethality rates in the data: 12 deaths and 30 people wounded per attack, respectively. The largest attack in the study's dataset for 2019 in terms of casualties is the Jolo Cathedral attack in January, which resulted in as many as 27 deaths and 100 injured. This was a suicide attack claimed by ASG. ASG conducted another suicide attack in June 2019 in Indanan, also on the island of Sulu, which resulted in as many as seven deaths and 22 wounded. The increase in the efficacy of Islamic State-linked militants in the Philippines appears related to the adoption of suicide bombings, given that three of the four attacks recorded in 2019 were suicide attacks.

## 2.4 Outcome of Attacks

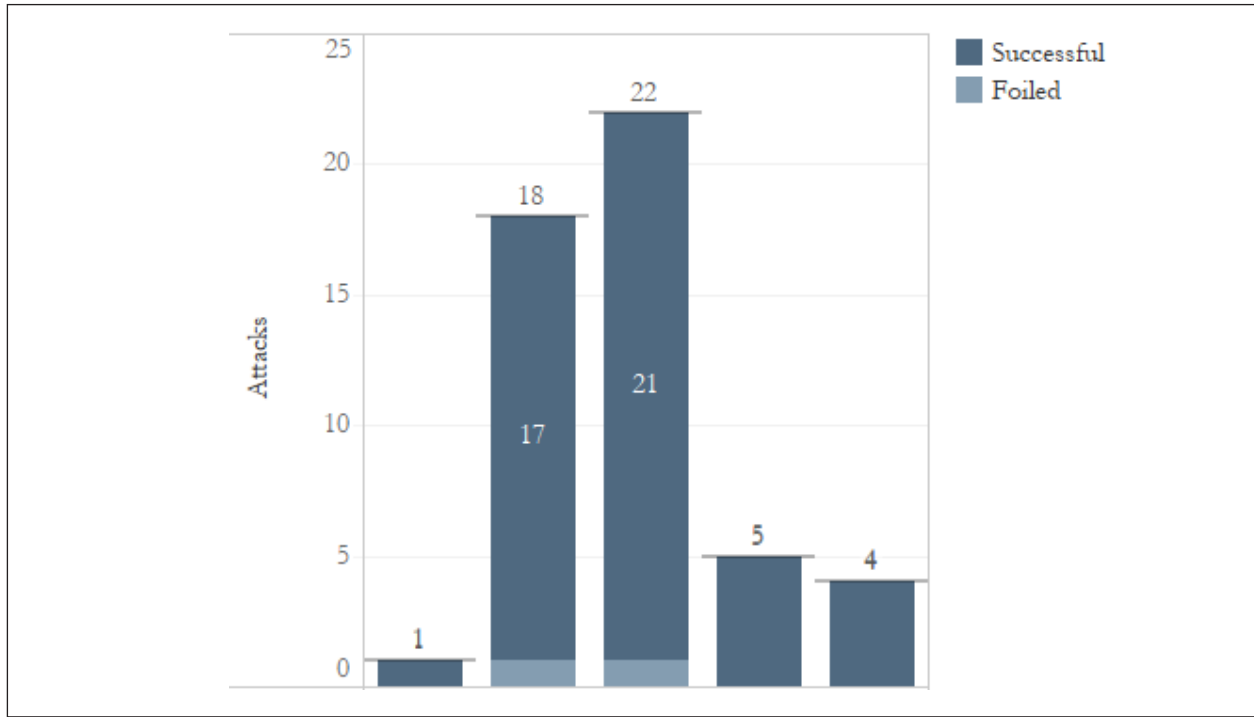
Figure 2.4 (a) depicts the number of Islamic State-related attacks per year in terms of successes (i.e., attacks completed as planned) and foiled attacks (i.e., interrupted by counterterrorism forces before or during the attack). Table 2.4 (a) further breaks down these trends by province.

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206 Van Ostaeyen.

207 Ibid.; Jones, "Don't 'crush' Abu Sayyaf perpetrators;" "Philippines Defense Chief: Latest Suicide Bombing in South 'Very Important' Development."

**Figure 2.4 (a): Outcome Trends of Islamic State-linked Attacks (Successes and Foiled Plots)**



The overall picture is that Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines have been mostly successful in carrying out attacks in the Philippines, with the data indicating 100% success rates in the years 2015, 2018, and 2019 and almost 100% in the other years of this study. However, these are also the years with the lowest numbers of attacks, with one recorded in 2015, five in 2018, and four in 2019. As mentioned, 2015 is the year of the first recorded Islamic State-related attack in the Philippines, while the low numbers in 2018 and 2019 are at least partially accounted for by the aftermath of the Battle of Marawi in 2017 and the need for affiliates to rebuild after the deaths of many of their members.<sup>208</sup> The years 2016 and 2017 are the only years in the data with recorded foiled or failed attacks, with one failure recorded in each year.

That said, the high success rates of Islamic State-related attacks do not necessarily imply that the Philippine security apparatus failed to deter attacks, although this may be a contributor. Given that the fight against Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines has frequently involved direct clashes between the military and militants, it is likely that many Islamic State attacks were preempted in operations. Such operations often resulted in the killing rather than arrests of militants, and thereby may not necessarily be reported as ‘foiled’ attacks.<sup>209</sup> This means that ‘foiled’ attacks may simply be underreported because the AFP was successful in preemptively launching counterterrorism raids before militants’ attack planning rose to the level that would draw media attention. For example, the AFP launched a counterterrorism strike against newly arrived ASG-Sulu fighters in Bohol province in April 2017.<sup>210</sup> Over the course of approximately two weeks, the AFP killed and arrested several militants.<sup>211</sup> The intentions and the timing of the militants’ eventual attack is unclear, but there is speculation that if all went as planned, it would have been a “major bomb attack against foreign tourists that would make

208 Van Ostaeyen.

209 For example, see Amy Chew, “Philippine army kills 28 pro-IS militants, preempts Eid Fitr bombings,” Channel News Asia, June 12, 2018; Jeoffrey Maitem, “Philippines: Soldier, 4 IS-Linked Militants Killed in Southern Clashes,” BenarNews, March 3, 2020.

210 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, pp. 10-12.

211 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

international headlines.”<sup>212</sup>

**Table 2.4 (a): Foil and Failure Trends of Islamic State-linked Attacks**

<i>Year/Province</i>	<i>Successful Attacks</i>	<i>Failed Attacks</i>	<i>Foiled Attacks</i>	<i>Total Attacks</i>
<b>2015</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
Sultan Kudarat	1	0	0	1
<b>2016</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>18</b>
Basilan	6	0	1	7
Davao del Sur	1	0	0	1
Lanao del Sur	9	0	0	9
Sultan Kudarat	1	0	0	1
<b>2017</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>22</b>
Lanao del Sur	14	0	0	14
Maguindanao	4	0	0	4
Metropolitan Manila	3	0	1	4
<b>2018</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>
Basilan	1	0	0	1
Maguindanao	3	0	0	3
Sultan Kudarat	1	0	0	1
<b>2019</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>
Basilan	1	0	0	1
Lanao del Sur	1	0	0	1
Sulu	2	0	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>50</b>

In addition to underreporting, low numbers of foiled attacks in the Philippines, especially in contrast to the higher foiled attack rates in Indonesia and Malaysia,<sup>213</sup> could be due to the fact that counterterrorism operations in the Philippines face notable challenges (as detailed in Chapter 1). Firstly, the AFP is accustomed to countering hierarchical secessionist groups such as the MILF, which requires a different strategy than the decentralized Islamic State affiliates.<sup>214</sup> Secondly, the lack of trust between the Moros in Mindanao and the Philippine central government poses a serious challenge to countering the spread of Islamic State influence in the country. Others have attributed this to problems of corruption, endemic poverty, and heavy-handed tactics on the part of the AFP.<sup>215</sup> Additionally, the operation to free Marawi from Islamic State militants, which involved airstrikes and heavy artillery, destroyed much of the city<sup>216</sup> and may have fueled Islamic State propaganda in Mindanao relative to

212 Ibid., p. 11.

213 See Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis.

214 “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia.”

215 Abuza, “Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines?”; Knight and Theodorakis.

216 Knight and Theodorakis.

other parts of the country.<sup>217</sup>

Lastly, it should be noted that the length of insurgency in the Philippines likely provides an advantage to groups in that the infrastructure for successfully waging insurgency (training camps and combat experience) existed prior to the emergence of the Islamic State. While many of the Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines (with the exception of ASG) were formed in the late 2000s and early 2010s, many group members were formerly part of the MILF and became disillusioned with the group when negotiations with the Philippine government stalled.<sup>218</sup> In fact, some groups, like the BIFF, are groups that have splintered off from the MILF.<sup>219</sup> The MILF itself, established in 1984, broke off from an older group, MNLF.<sup>220</sup> Therefore, there is likely some learning diffusion among groups in the Philippines, especially in terms of combat tactics and strategy. Additionally, some Islamic State affiliates had training camps established prior to declaring allegiance to the Islamic State, usually within their own operating areas within the country.<sup>221</sup> Finally, for many groups, a major appeal of Islamic State affiliation was the prospect of funding. However, some groups that were previously affiliated with and received funding from other transnational jihadi groups such as al-Qa`ida may have had remaining funding from the past partnership.<sup>222</sup>

## 2.5 Target Types

This section depicts target choices and lethality of attacks by target type. As shown in Figure 2.5 (a), Islamic State-affiliated militants tended to focus their attacks on state targets such as the military and other domestic security forces in 2015 and 2016. However, they shifted to civilian targets for the years 2017 and 2018, mostly driven by the Battle of Marawi, discussed further below. The first seven months of 2019 were split between state and civilian target types. Nevertheless, Figures 2.5 (b) and 2.5 (c) demonstrate that overall, military and domestic security forces were militants' target of choice, with many attacks directed toward the AFP.

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217 Ibid.

218 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

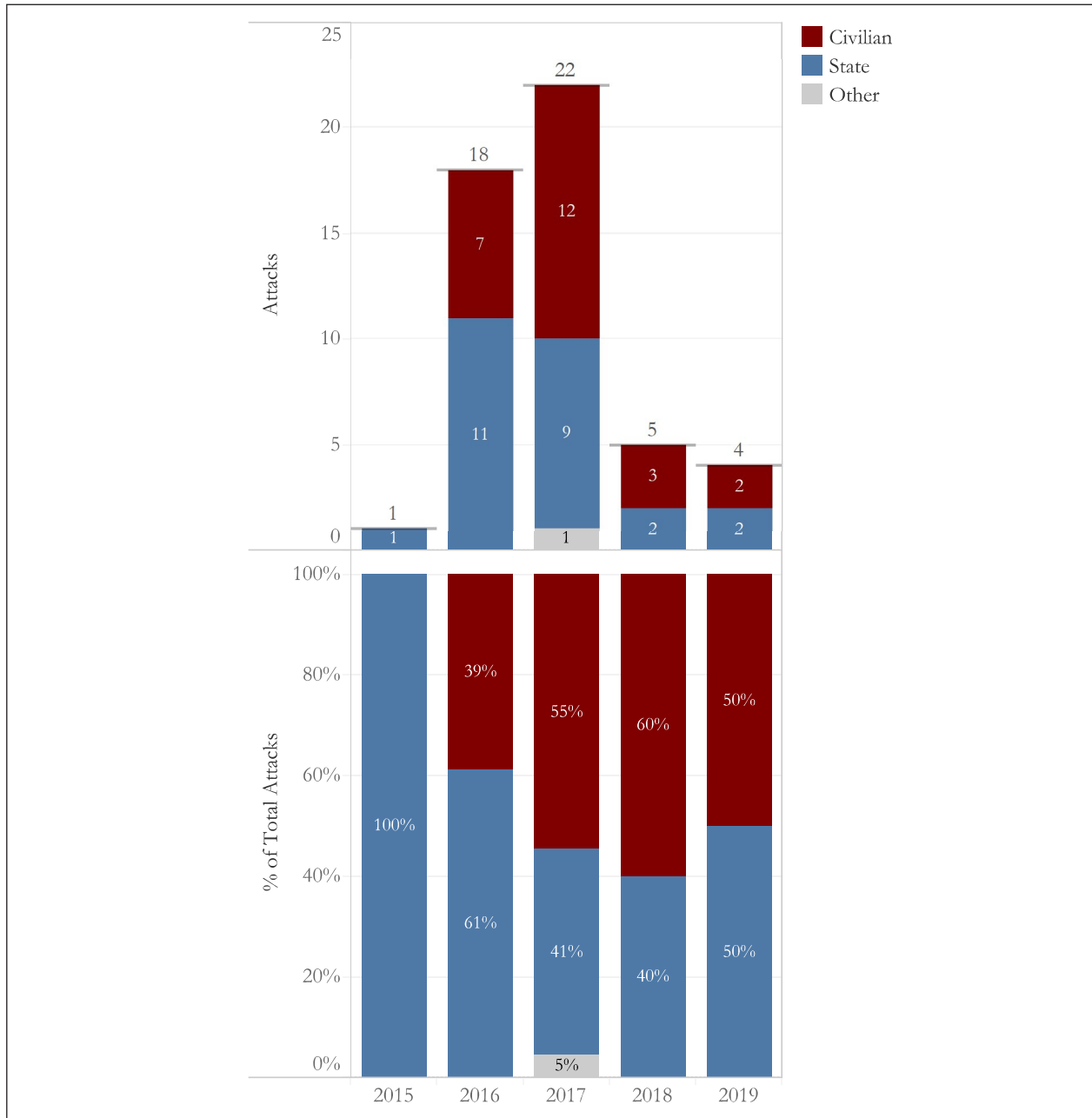
219 Chalk, "The Islamic State in the Philippines"; Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 3:1 (2016): pp. 64-89.

220 Chalk, "The Islamic State in the Philippines"; Quimpo.

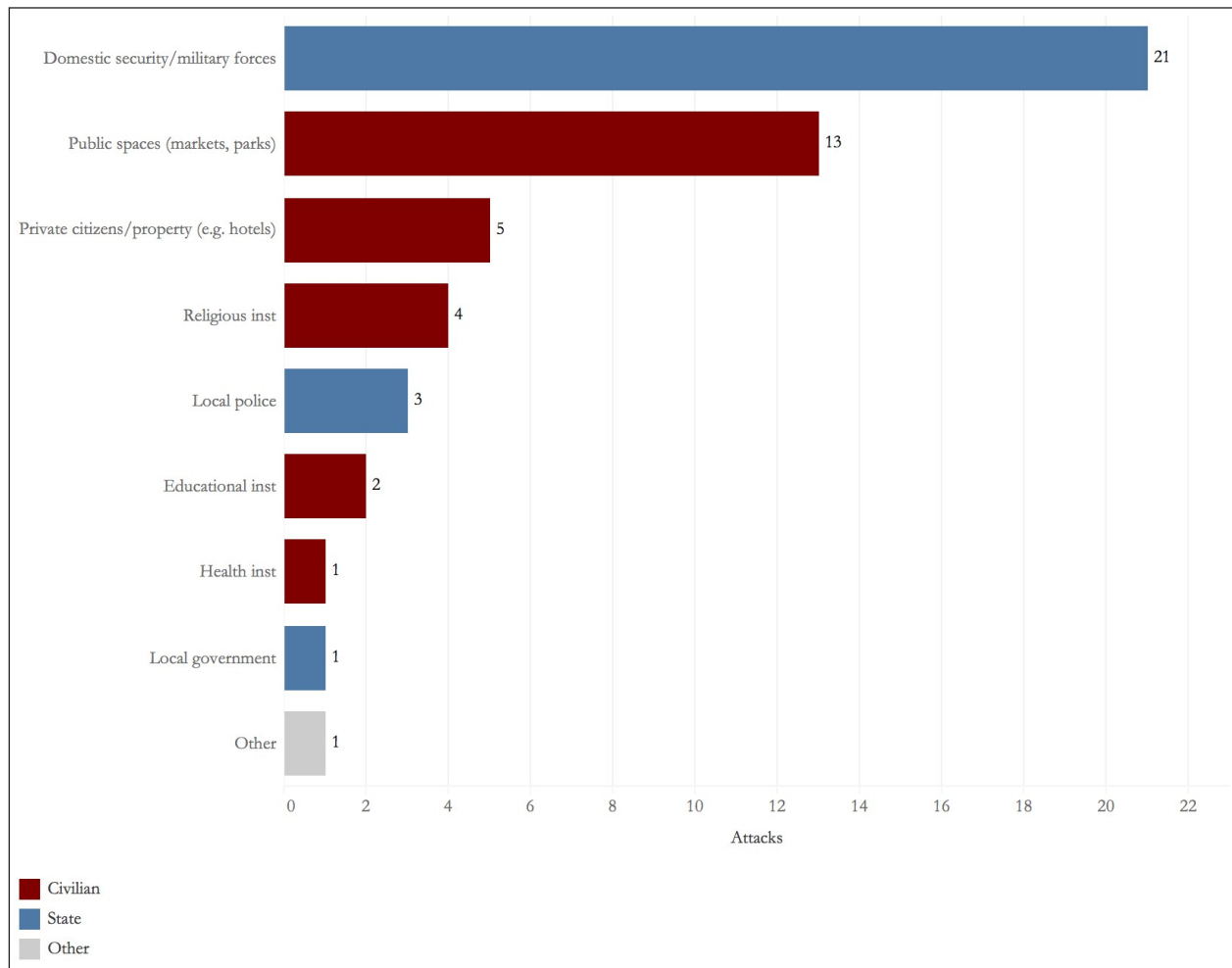
221 Quimpo; Banlaoi, "ISIS Followers in the Philippines."

222 "Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia."

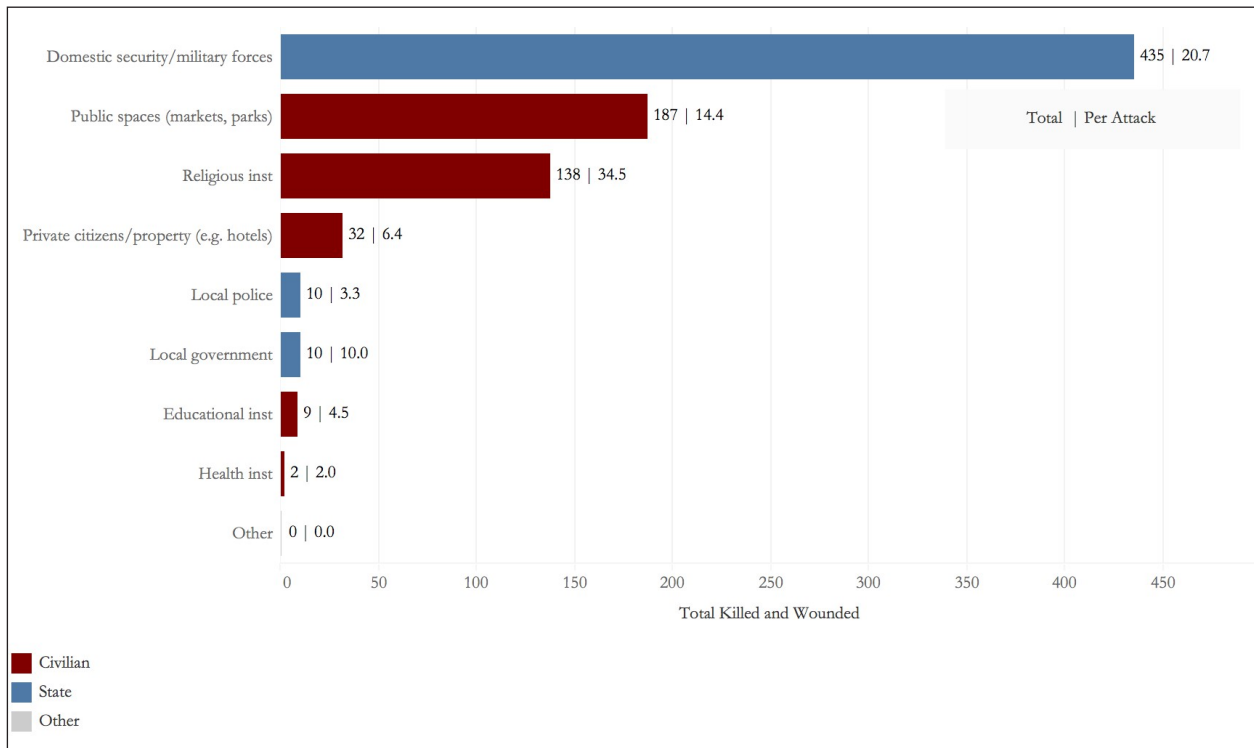
*Figure 2.5 (a): Target Selection of Islamic State-linked Attacks over Time*



**Figure 2.5 (b): Number of Islamic State-linked Attacks by Target Type**



**Figure 2.5 (c): Total Lethality, and Lethality per Attack by Target (Total | Per Attack)**



Figures 2.5 (a), 2.5 (b), and 2.5 (c) present information about Islamic State affiliates’ target choices in a variety of ways. The trends presented here suggest that the pattern for Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines mirrors the overall pattern in Southeast Asia.<sup>223</sup> Figure 2.5 (a) presents the percentage of target types per year. The data suggests that in the first two years of Islamic State influence in the Philippines, affiliates focused on state targets at a higher rate than civilian targets. However, in 2017 and 2018, affiliates attacked civilian targets more often than state targets. An examination of some of the major attacks in 2017 and 2018 confirms this trend: the May 2017 capture and murder of nine Christians in Marawi and the August 2018 attack in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, at a festival cathedral.<sup>224</sup> The data for the first seven months of 2019 shows that the target types were divided equally between state and civilian.

The preference for civilian targets in 2017 and 2018 is likely driven by the Battle of Marawi for both years. Most of the attacks in the data for 2017 occur in Marawi City when it was captured by Islamic State affiliates. The city of Marawi was, in several ways, “the proverbial perfect storm for an urban siege.”<sup>225</sup> First, Marawi City has a population of over 200,000 people, therefore the possibility of civilian casualties is high.<sup>226</sup> Militants knew that an urban battle with the AFP with a high probability of civilian casualties would be damaging for the Philippine military, “bringing international condemnation, reinforcing Islamic State’s narratives and inspiring popular resistance as, for example, occurred when US Marines attacked the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004.”<sup>227</sup> In many ways, Marawi’s sociocultural history

223 See Jadoon, Jahanbani, and Willis.

224 “One Killed, Dozens Wounded in Philippines Bombing,” Channel News Asia, August 29, 2018.

225 Franco, “Preventing Other ‘Marawis’ in the Southern Philippines,” p. 364.

226 Temby, p. 116.

227 Knight and Theodorakis, p. 6.



made it both a likely target for the Islamic State and a place in which the Philippine military would have trouble operating.

Second, the city has a high crime rate and is known as a center of illegal economic activity in Mindanao.<sup>228</sup> Relatedly, *rido* (clan feud) is prevalent in Marawi, as in Mindanao more broadly.<sup>229</sup> The objects of the feuds can vary from land disputes to personal affronts.<sup>230</sup> In addition, many in Marawi, as elsewhere in the region, distrust local law enforcement and “stress[ed] that Maranao problems could only be solved by Maranaos.”<sup>231</sup> As a result of this constellation of factors, people in Marawi have taken various measures to protect themselves including construction buildings with walls of reinforced concrete called *buhos* to protect inhabitants from violence.<sup>232</sup> These factors may have prolonged the capture of Marawi. Locals did not trust the AFP, and the militants with local knowledge, specifically the Maute Group from neighboring Butig, were able to exploit the fact that the *buhos* walls were more well-protected from AFP strikes.<sup>233</sup>

The preference for civilian targets in 2018 may be influenced by the fact that many Islamic State affiliates experienced heavy losses by fighting with the AFP during the Battle of Marawi, leading remaining militants to attack soft targets while avoiding direct clashes with military personnel.

Figure 2.5 (b) depicts the number of attacks each target type elicited from 2014 to July 2019. The category of attacks was evenly divided between civilian and state targets. Domestic security and military forces were the most likely target, with 21 attacks directed at them over the time period. This may be an attempt to provoke the AFP into combat; many such instances devolved into firefights between Islamic State-linked militants and the AFP. Such battles may at least displace local civilians and at worst result in civilian casualties, which the Islamic State and its affiliates may leverage against the mistrusted AFP to procure civilian support. This may also be because domestic security and military forces such as the AFP are at the forefront of counterterrorism efforts in the country.

The next three target types with the most attacks—public spaces, private citizens and property, and religious institutions—were civilian targets, with 13, five, and four attacks, respectively. The data suggests that in the Philippines, the targeted religion has been Christianity/Catholicism, as exemplified by the cathedral suicide bombings in Jolo in January 2019. The capture and murder of nine Christians in Marawi in May 2017 after militants seized the city is an example of such an attack. The targeting of minorities bears the trademark of the Islamic State’s sectarian attacks in other regions, where it has attempted to sow discord among civilian populations. For example, the Islamic State’s Khorasan province in Afghanistan and Pakistan frequently targets the Shiite community, Sunni Barelvi Muslims, Christians, and Hindus.<sup>234</sup>

Figure 2.5 (c) demonstrates the rate of people affected per target type. It suggests that significantly more people were affected by attacks on domestic security and military forces, a state target, with 435 people affected from 2014 to July 2019 and 20.7 people affected per attack. This trend is mostly attributable to attacks in affiliates’ home areas: Lanao del Sur province (Maute Group) and Basilan

228 Franco, “Preventing Other ‘Marawis’ in the Southern Philippines,” p. 364.

229 Ibid., p. 364.

230 Ibid., p. 364.

231 Franco, “Detecting Future ‘Marawis,’” p. 5. Maranao is the dominant ethnic group in Marawi City and surrounding areas.

232 Franco, “Preventing Other ‘Marawis’ in the Southern Philippines,” p. 364.

233 Ibid., p. 365.

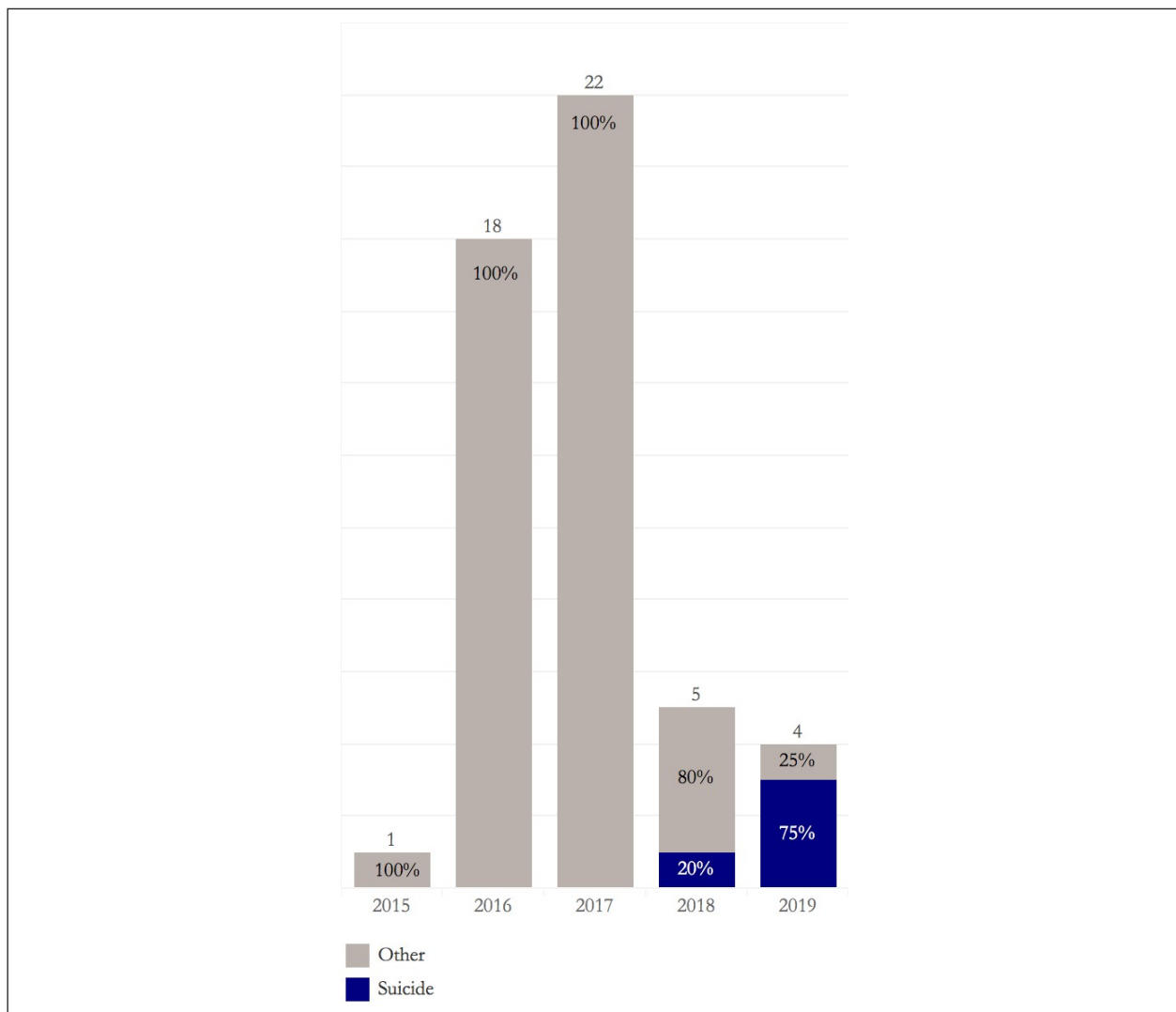
234 Amira Jadoon, *Allied and Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan’s Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).

(Hapilon’s ASG faction).<sup>235</sup> The next highest targets in terms of numbers of people affected were civilian targets: public spaces (187 affected), religious institutions (138), and private citizens and property (32), respectively. Interestingly, while fewer people in total were affected when religious institutions were targeted than when domestic security and military forces were, religious institution attacks affected a substantially greater number of people per attack (34.4) than attacks on domestic security and military forces (20.7).

**2.6 Tactics**

This section distinguishes attacks by type from 2014 to July 2019. As depicted in Figure 2.7 (a), there is a disturbing shift in Islamic State affiliates’ tactics in the Philippines: the introduction of suicide bombing.

*Figure 2.6 (a): Suicide Attacks in the Philippines*



235 As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Battle of Marawi was not coded as a single event in the data but rather as a series of individual attacks using open-source data. Thus, not every single clash between the AFP and Islamic State-linked militants during the siege is captured in the data. Out of 21 attack events where domestic security forces or military were the targets, only four occurred in Marawi during the battle in 2017.

Figure 2.6 (a) depicts the percentage of attack types used by Islamic State militants in the Philippines from 2014 to July 2019. Most notably, suicide attacks were not used until 2018, three years after the Islamic State emerged in the country. The first suicide attack occurred in Lamitan City, Basilan, when ASG-linked militants detonated a car bomb at a security checkpoint in July of that year.<sup>236</sup> This attack is notable not only because it was the first suicide attack attributed to the Islamic State in the Philippines, but because no Filipino Muslim has ever been reported to have conducted a suicide bombing in nearly five decades of insurgency in Mindanao.<sup>237</sup> Even though this attack was the first suicide attack via an improvised explosive device (IED) in the country, the sentiment that Filipino Muslims tend not to engage in suicide attacks appears to have remained true: the Islamic State claimed that the attack was carried out by one of its operatives from Morocco, Abu Kathir Al-Maghribi.<sup>238</sup> However, Al-Maghribi was provided logistical support from ASG.<sup>239</sup> Details about the attack remain unclear: the attack may not have been intended as a suicide attack, the IED may have detonated prematurely, and the intended targets may have been Christian schoolchildren at a parade that day in the city.<sup>240</sup>

Furthermore, as depicted in Figures 2.3 (a) and (b) (above), the use of suicide bombings coincided with a discernible increase in attack lethality. The use of suicide attacks, as has been noted in other regions, is directly attributable to Islamic State affiliation.<sup>241</sup>

The use of suicide attacks has some distant history in the Philippines. Namely, “a historical record of self-sacrificing attacks in Muslim Mindanao conducted by warriors who were called *juramentado* by the Spanish.”<sup>242</sup> These attackers engaged in self-sacrifice to fight Spanish colonization that lasted from the mid-16th Century to the late 19th Century. However, insurgent groups in the more recent past such as the MILF have not employed suicide attacks. Insurgent groups in the country may be adopting this tactic now not only because of the growing influence of the Islamic State and possibly of returning fighters, but also because of their weakened state after the Battle of Marawi, which left many militant leaders and fighters dead in late 2017. Such attacks “are an attractive strategy for weaker actors facing a conventional armed force.”<sup>243</sup> The post-Marawi militant landscape is one of a decentralized structure with several smaller groups.<sup>244</sup> This contrasts not only with older, well-resourced groups like the MILF but also the collaborations between Islamic State-linked groups from around 2015 to the Battle of Marawi.<sup>245</sup> Therefore, the increasing use of suicide bombings in the Philippines from 2018 onward may well be due to the increasing power differential between Islamic State affiliates and the AFP.

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236 Van Ostaeyen; Felipe Villamor, “Philippine Bombing Kills 10, Showing Insurgents Remain a Problem,” *New York Times*, July 30, 2018.

237 “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia.”

238 Temby.

239 *Ibid.*; *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*.

240 *Ibid.*

241 Temby.

242 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

243 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

244 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

245 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

## Chapter 3: Discussion and Conclusion

Although the influence of the Islamic State remains an important concern across Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines remains the epicenter of this phenomenon. In the past, as presented in this study, much of the Islamic State's attacks have been concentrated in the southern region of Mindanao, mostly attributable to the endemic instability in the region and the fact that the major Islamic State affiliates in the country are based there. But what are some of the factors that have contributed to the rise of the Islamic State in the Philippines? Broader instability and dissatisfaction with the central government in the region with regard to the prolonged peace negotiations with the MILF appears to be one of contributing factors. The creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in 2019 may impact the influence of the Islamic State in the region in important ways. From 2022 onward, the new Bangsamoro region will be run by an elected parliament with a transitional parliament and government appointed by Manila in the interim. While this seems promising in theory, the transition faces numerous difficult challenges. These include lifting residents out of poverty and providing critical public goods and social services, reintegrating 30,000 former MILF fighters to civilian life, and convincing other militant groups to give up arms.<sup>246</sup>

The creation of the autonomous region may ameliorate some of the long-term political grievances in Mindanao and undermine Islamic State's persuasive power. Conversely, if underlying grievances are left unaddressed, the Islamic State's narratives may gain even more legitimacy and become more persuasive. Much will depend on the ability of the Islamic State's local affiliates, such as ASG factions and the Maute Group, to regroup and revitalize their movements and manage shifting ethno-tribal allegiances.

### Elimination or Dispersion?

As is often observed in domestic military operations, aggressive counterterrorism efforts can result in a dispersion of militants across a country or region, and can lead to intermittent militant retaliation, especially against civilians.<sup>247</sup> As the data in this report indicates, around 2017, Islamic State-linked militants shifted their target preferences from state targets (such as military and other domestic security forces) to civilian targets, some of which involved Christians. Although the Philippine armed forces severely undermined Islamic State-affiliated militants in late 2017, some of these militants seemed to be holding out in mainland Mindanao, conducting attacks and engaging security forces.<sup>248</sup> While Hapilon's Basilan-based ASG faction is regrouping following his death in 2017, Sawadjaan's ASG faction in Sulu is actively conducting attacks; the August 2020 twin suicide attack in Jolo, for example, was believed to involve Mundi Swajadjaan, the nephew of Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan.<sup>249</sup>

The report's data demonstrates several patterns in Islamic State-linked operations in the Philippines, which could be instructive for envisioning its future trajectory. Firstly, most attacks occurred in the southern region of Mindanao, due in part because the major groups (Abu Sayyaf Group, Maute Group, BIFF, and AKP) are based there and, relatedly, because of the weak governance of the region. Furthermore, many of these attacks occurred during the Battle of Marawi, which lasted from May 2017 to October 2017. Post operations in Marawi, given the weakened yet dispersed nature of the Islamic State's affiliates within the country, future Islamic State-associated activities may change locations,

246 "The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro," International Crisis Group, June 27, 2019.

247 Amira Jadoon, "Playing Dirty to Survive: The Vulnerability of Civilian Targets within US Military Aid Recipient States," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 30:3 (2019): pp. 587-614.

248 "The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro."

249 "Mundi Sawadjaan behind Jolo twin bombings, military says," Dappler, August 27, 2020; Jason Gutierrez, "At Least 14 Killed After Suicide Bombers Hit Philippines," *New York Times*, August 24, 2020.

depending on where militants are able to seek refuge and regroup.

Per the data used in this report, Islamic State-linked militants appeared to be usually successful in carrying out their attacks (although part of this may be due to underreporting of deterred attacks, as mentioned in the previous section). This may be due to a combination of counterterrorism challenges and insurgents' expertise in conducting attacks due to the long history of insurgency in the country. Given that Islamic State-affiliated militants have no significant territorial control, attacks on soft targets may see an increase in the future relative to attacks on hard targets.

A major finding worth highlighting is the increased lethality of attacks in 2018 and 2019. This correlates with the advent of suicide attacks in the Philippines, which have increased in number since they began in 2018. Although many attackers were foreign fighters, the tactic may proliferate if the Islamic State's influence remains in the country. A worrying trend is the execution of more sophisticated attacks such as the "twin" bombings at the cathedral in Jolo in January 2019.<sup>250</sup> The twin suicide attacks in August 2020 in Jolo served as another reminder and a warning that the trend of suicide attacks may continue. While the attacks were not claimed by any group, as noted above, ASG's faction led by Sawadjaan was suspected of being behind the attack.<sup>251</sup> According to some reports, the Philippine Army suspected the two perpetrators involved widows of militants who were affiliated with the Islamic State-linked ASG faction.<sup>252</sup> Subsequently, the Philippine authorities arrested an Indonesian woman in October 2020, who was suspected of planning a suicide attack and also believed to be affiliated with the Islamic State-linked ASG faction.<sup>253</sup> Some studies argue that unlike large groups that are able to control territory, Islamic State affiliates, increasingly smaller and increasingly decentralized, may be compelled to employ suicide bombings to fight the AFP.<sup>254</sup> Militants may be adopting suicide attacks as a tactic not only because of their recent losses after the Battle of Marawi, and their relative weakness vis-à-vis the AFP, but also due to the influence of foreign fighters or possibly fighters returning from Iraq and Syria. Although suicide bombers in the Philippines have largely involved foreign fighters,<sup>255</sup> more recent attacks have begun to involve Filipino militants, suggesting a dangerous cultural shift that may be hard to reverse if and when the Islamic State disappears from the country.

### The Socioeconomic and Political Context

As mentioned above, one of the major drivers of Islamic State-linked attacks in terms of timing is the prolonged negotiations between the Philippine central government and the MILF. For example, an uptick in the number of Islamic State-affiliated attacks in 2016, centered in Mindanao, accompanied the failure of the Philippine legislature to pass the Bangsamoro Basic Law in the same year. Such events enabled "the [Islamic State] idea of a pure Islamic state with Islamic law applied in full and deaths of Muslims everywhere avenged [to take] root, reinforced by [Islamic State] videos."<sup>256</sup> In other words, failures in the negotiation process increased Moros's distrust in the central government and made the Islamic State's narratives more appealing to potential new recruits. Furthermore, frustra-

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250 Ibid.

251 Gutierrez, "At Least 14 Killed After Suicide Bombers Hit Philippines."

252 Raul Dancel, "Militants' widows carried out twin suicide bombings in Jolo: Philippine military," *Straits Times*, August 25, 2020; "Suicide Bombers in Philippines Attack Were Widows of Abu Sayyaf Militants: Army," *BenarNews*, August 26, 2020.

253 "Philippines Captures Indonesian Woman Suspected of Planning a Suicide Bomb Attack," *BenarNews*, October 10, 2020.

254 "The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro."

255 "Is the Islamic State Gaining Ground in Southeast Asia?" *World Politics Review*, September 25, 2019; Pawel Wojcik, "Suicide Bombs and Foreign Fighters are Burgeoning Jihadi Threats for the Philippines," *Defense Post*, October 29, 2019; Zachary Abuza and Colin P. Clarke, "The Islamic State Meets Southeast Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, September 16, 2019.

256 Jones, "Radicalisation in the Philippines," p. 937.

tions with the MILF's role in the peace process led to the emergence of factions such as the BIFF.<sup>257</sup> It is critical to understand how such past political developments underpin the ecosystem of militancy within the Philippines. Although counterterrorism efforts focused on leadership decapitation and undermining the human capital of militant groups may curtail groups' operational capacity, it may only be a short-term success if underlying factors are not addressed adequately.

In light of the above, a key development that may lessen the Islamic State's influence in Mindanao is alleviation of some of the underlying conditions that facilitate sympathy for the organization and its local affiliates via the passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law in 2019. This agreement, convened by both the MILF and the Philippine government, creates the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region (BARMM), which supersedes the Autonomous Region on Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).<sup>258</sup> The new BARMM includes more than 60 additional towns than the ARMM including Cotabato City, its "de facto" capital.<sup>259</sup> This agreement provides more autonomy to the region and gives power to the Bangsamoro government, led by the MILF, over provisions such as budgeting, the administration of justice, agriculture, social services, and trade and industry.<sup>260</sup> Additionally, the BARMM will receive funds to "address long-standing issues."<sup>261</sup> In exchange, the MILF pledges to "decommission its combatants."<sup>262</sup>

However, much rides on the success (or failure) of the BARMM and the Bangsamoro Transition Authority's (BTA) ability to provide better governance and living conditions for Moros. As stated by a MILF leader: "If this fails, you liquidate hope."<sup>263</sup> The BARMM agreement is the culmination of a prolonged negotiation process between the AFP and the MILF, at times frustrating members of the latter to the point of defecting and creating their own militant groups, such as the BIFF.<sup>264</sup> The consequences of the BARMM's failure are dire: "There are no other options on the table."<sup>265</sup> Failure would undermine any remaining influence the MILF holds over other militant groups in the region. Furthermore, it may make Islamic State affiliates' recruitment appeals more tempting.<sup>266</sup>

The prospects for the success of the BARMM are currently unclear. Firstly, the members of the BTA are predominately Maguindanao, one of 13 Muslim ethnic groups in the Philippines, and thus not very representative of the population of Mindanao.<sup>267</sup> Secondly, the ability of the BTA to deliver services is unclear given that many policy instruments have not yet been formulated.<sup>268</sup> Without the proper infrastructure to carry out policies, it will be difficult for the government to address long-standing issues such as political corruption and illegal economic activities.<sup>269</sup> Furthermore, another major is-

257 Chalk, "The Islamic State in the Philippines;" Anthony Measures, "Stalling Peace in the Philippines," Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, July 7, 2015; "The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro."

258 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 12.

259 Franco, "Detecting Future 'Marawis,'" p. 9; "63 barangays of NorthCot now officially part of BARMM," Republic of the Philippines Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, November 21, 2019.

260 Beatrice Julie Gutierrez, "Fast Facts on the Bangsamoro Organic Law," Philippine Information Agency, accessed February 19, 2020.

261 Franco, "Detecting Future 'Marawis,'" p. 4.

262 *The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines*, p. 12.

263 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

264 Chalk, "The Islamic State in the Philippines;" Kirsten E. Schulze and Julie Chernov Hwang, "Militant Islam in Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41:1 (2019).

265 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

266 Temby, p. 129.

267 Franco, "Detecting Future 'Marawis,'" p. 9; Susan D. Russell, Lina Davide-Ong, April Rica Gonzalez, Rey Ty, Nagasura T. Madale, and Noemi A. Medina, "The Mindanao Conflict and Prospects for Peace in the Southern Philippines," in *Mindanao: A Perspective on Youth, Inter-Ethnic Dialogue and Conflict Resolution In the Southern Philippines* (Northern Illinois University: 2004), p. 6; Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder, "Grassroots and Rebellion: A Study on the Future of the Moro Struggle in Mindanao, Philippines," *Civil Wars* 14:4 (2013): p. 523.

268 Franco, "Detecting Future 'Marawis,'" p. 9.

269 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

sue facing the BARMM as mentioned at the beginning of this report is the large number of Marawi residents that remain displaced from their homes following the capture of the city in 2017.<sup>270</sup> In short, whether or not the BTA is successfully able to stabilize the region will have significant repercussions for Islamic State support in the country.

One development that could further complicate the situation in the Philippines is President Duterte's proposed abrogation of the U.S.-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA).<sup>271</sup> The VFA is an agreement along with the two countries' Mutual Defense Treaty and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) that grants the U.S. military the ability to temporarily station forces inside the country.<sup>272</sup> One of the main contributions that the United States makes to Philippine security is to its counterterrorism operations, including logistics, equipment, and funding. If the Philippines ends the VFA with the United States, it may have significant counterterrorism repercussions. Although the Philippine government suspended its decision of withdrawal from the defense treaty, the future between the two countries, and the degree of cooperation, remains uncertain.<sup>273</sup>

### The Evolution of Islamic State in the Philippines

Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines, especially ASG-Basilan and the Maute Group, were dealt a significant blow after the Battle of Marawi, when many key leaders and militants died in the fighting. This development deeply changed the structure of Islamic State-linked militancy in the Philippines, moving from the united front of the Maute Group-ASG-Basilan-led coalition during the Battle of Marawi to an increasingly decentralized structure. A major cause for the decentralization of the network is the loss of the "unifying influence of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq" as the group loses territory and corresponding paucity of available funds and recognition from the group, leading to competition among Philippine militants.<sup>274</sup> The change in the nature of the Islamic State's presence in the country indicates fewer Marawi-style sieges and more targeted attacks such as the Jolo bombings, especially against minorities to sow discord.

Overall, the counterterrorism apparatus of the Philippines must change the nature of its own operations to curtail the Islamic State threat accordingly, which may require a greater reliance on effective intelligence and law enforcement operations. In addition to sustaining counterterrorism operations against Islamic State affiliates in the Philippines, the government needs to participate in regional security measures to stem the flow of militants from other countries—from within and outside the region. Finally, it is critical that the risk posed by the Islamic State, especially in its dispersed form, is not overlooked or underestimated by the Philippine security apparatus in the face of other important priorities such as the sustained threat from the communist insurgency in the country,<sup>275</sup> as well as newer socioeconomic pressures created by COVID-19.

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270 Temby.

271 Ankit Panda, "In Sudden Step, Philippines Reverses Course on Ending US Visiting Forces Agreement – For Now," *Diplomat*, June 4, 2020; Jim Gomez, "Philippines notifies US of intent to end major security pact," *Military Times*, February 11, 2020.

272 Andrew I. Yeo, "President Duterte Wants to Scrap a Philippines-U.S. Military Agreement. This Could Mean Trouble," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2020.

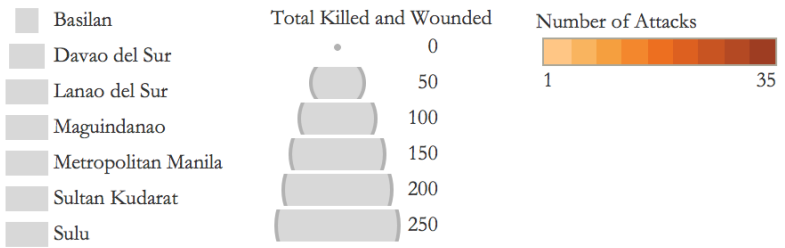
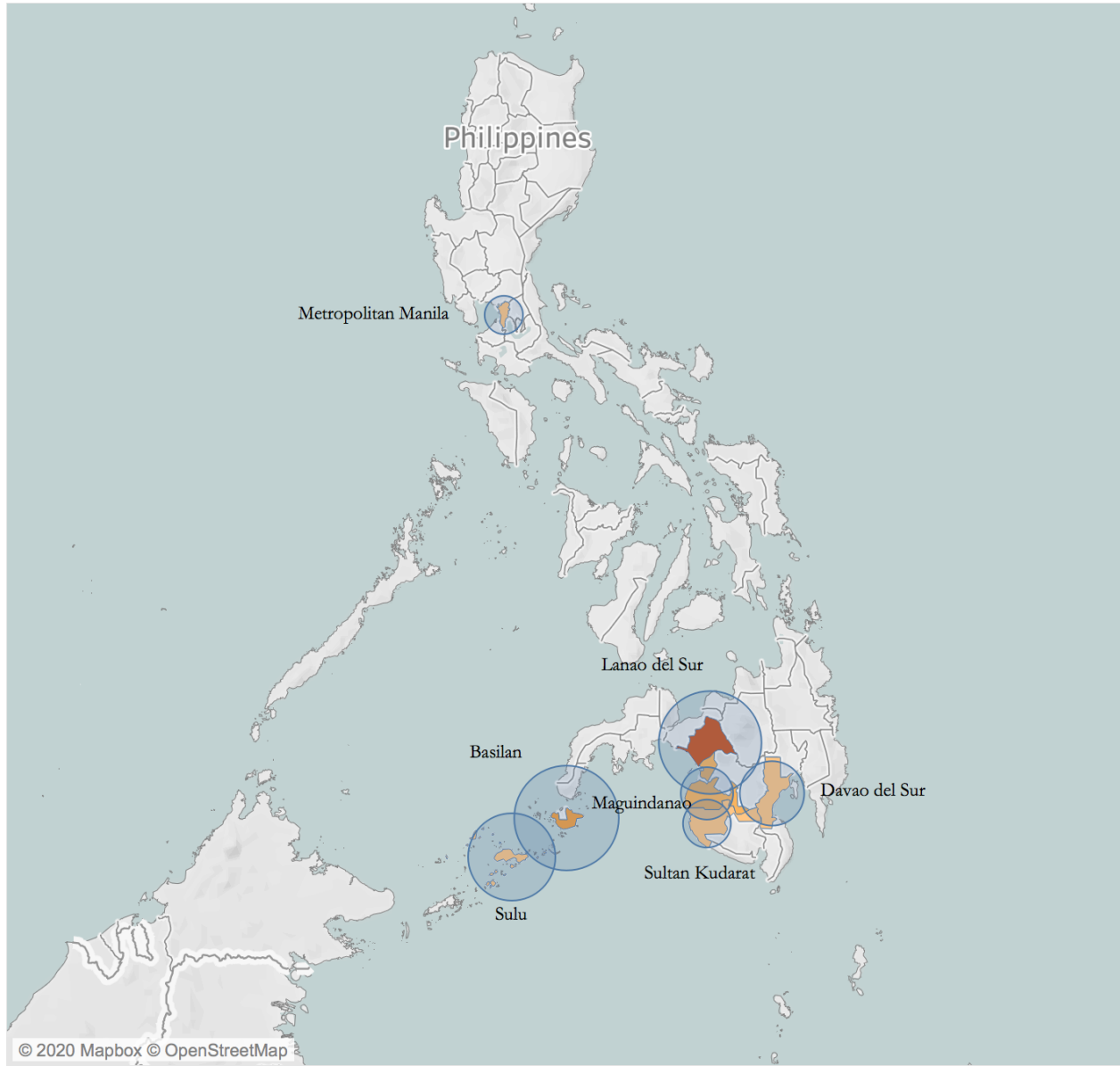
273 Jason Gutierrez, "Philippines Backs Off Threat to Terminate Military Pact with U.S.," *New York Times*, June 2, 2020; Ben Werner, "Philippines Freezes Pull-Out From Visiting U.S. Forces Agreement," *USNI News*, June 8, 2020.

274 Temby, p. 116.

275 Nepmuceno. Although the communist New People's Army's attacks declined in 2019 compared to previous years, due to the counterinsurgency operation, Operation Sauron, undertaken by the AFP and the Philippine National Police, the threat persists and the group's attacks against civilians have increased. See the "Global Terrorism Index 2020" for more details. Moreover, while attacks by communist extremist groups have generally been greater than those by Islamist extremist groups, the latter's attacks tend to be more deadly. See Rhoades and Helmus.

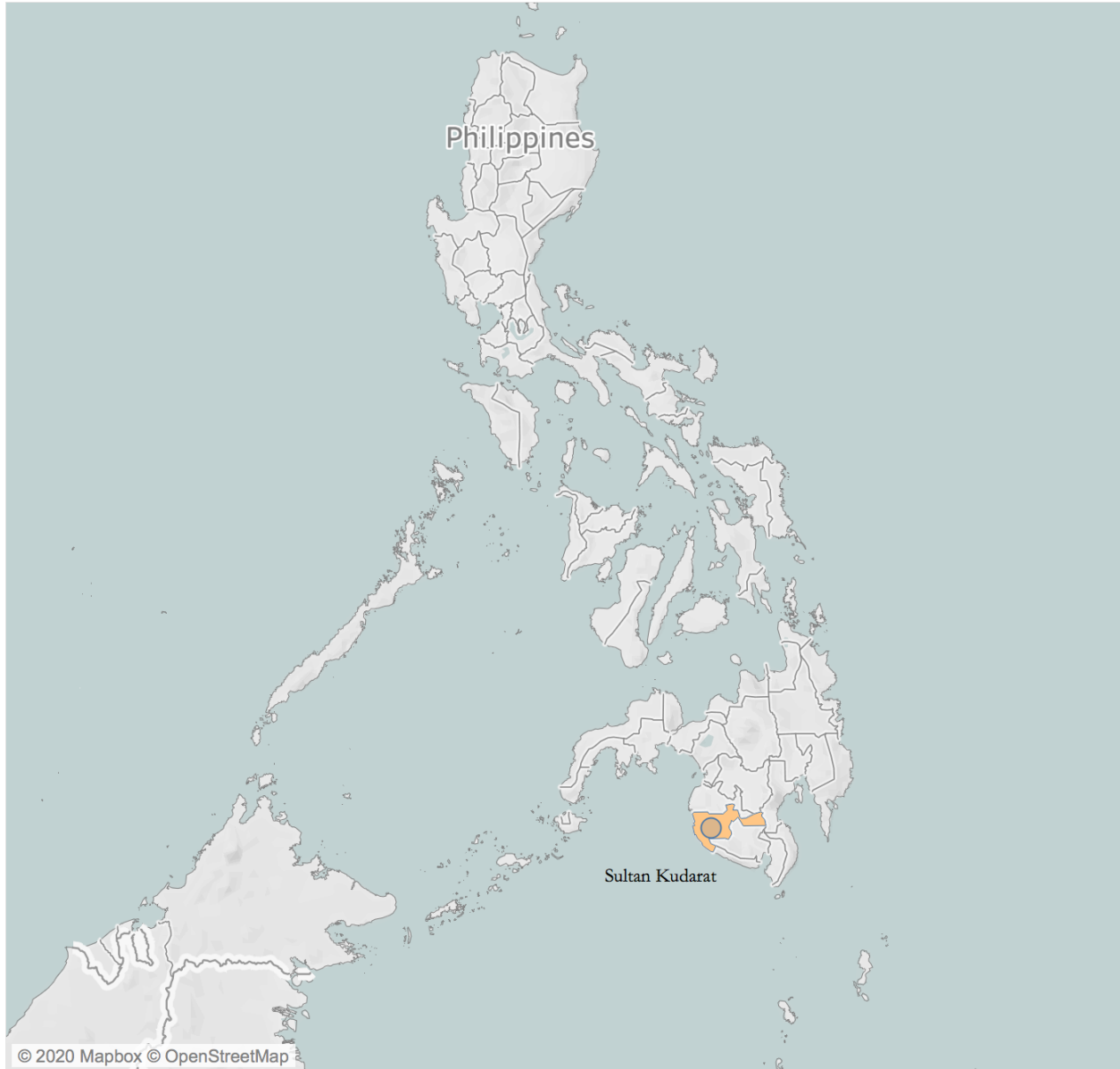
# Appendix

**Figure 2.1 (a): Islamic State-Linked Attacks and Numbers Killed and Wounded in the Philippines, 2014-2019**

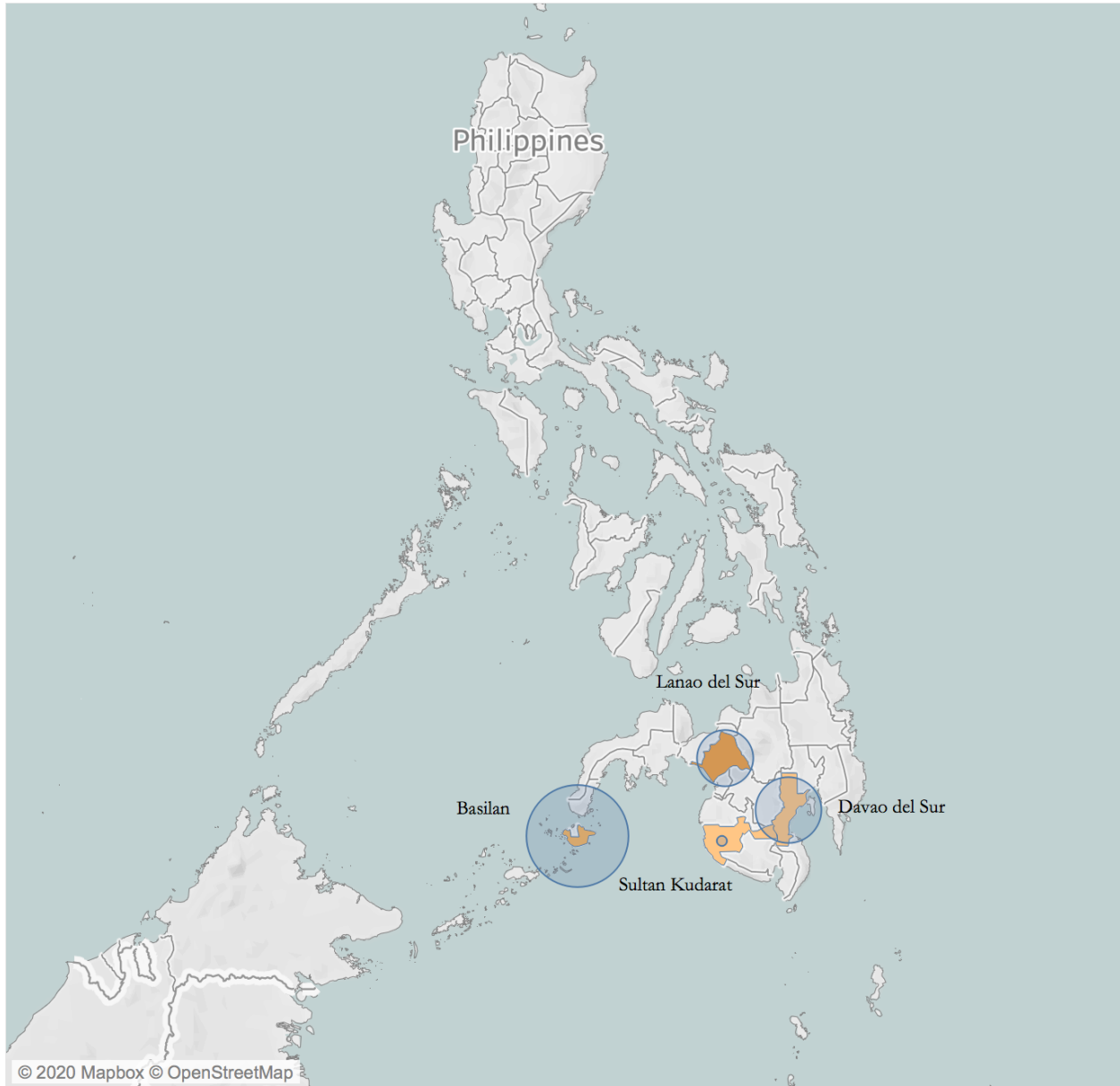




*Figure 2.1 (b): Islamic State-Linked Attacks and Numbers Killed and Wounded in the Philippines, 2015*



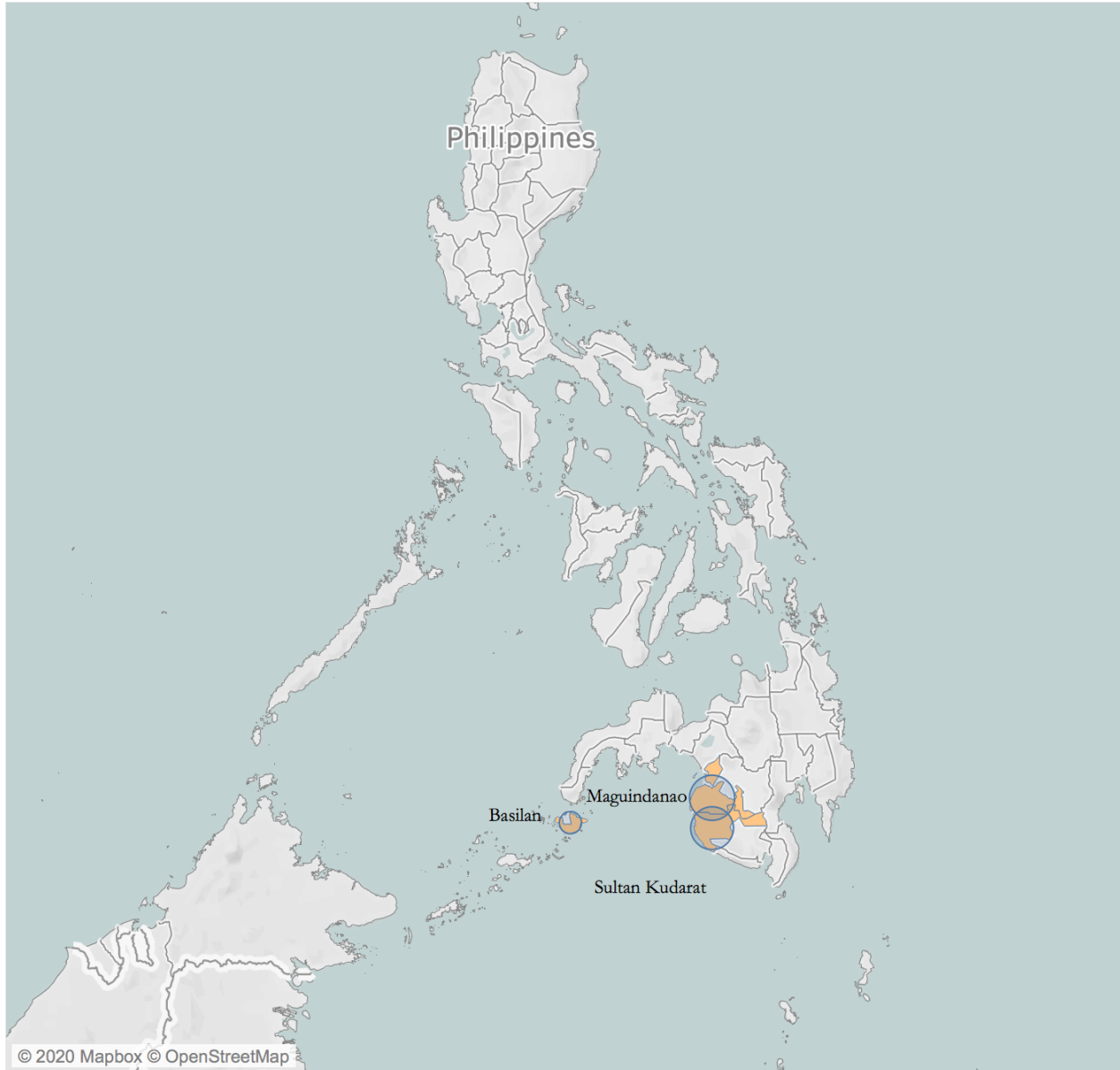
*Figure 2.1 (c): Islamic State-Linked Attacks and Numbers Killed and Wounded in the Philippines, 2016*



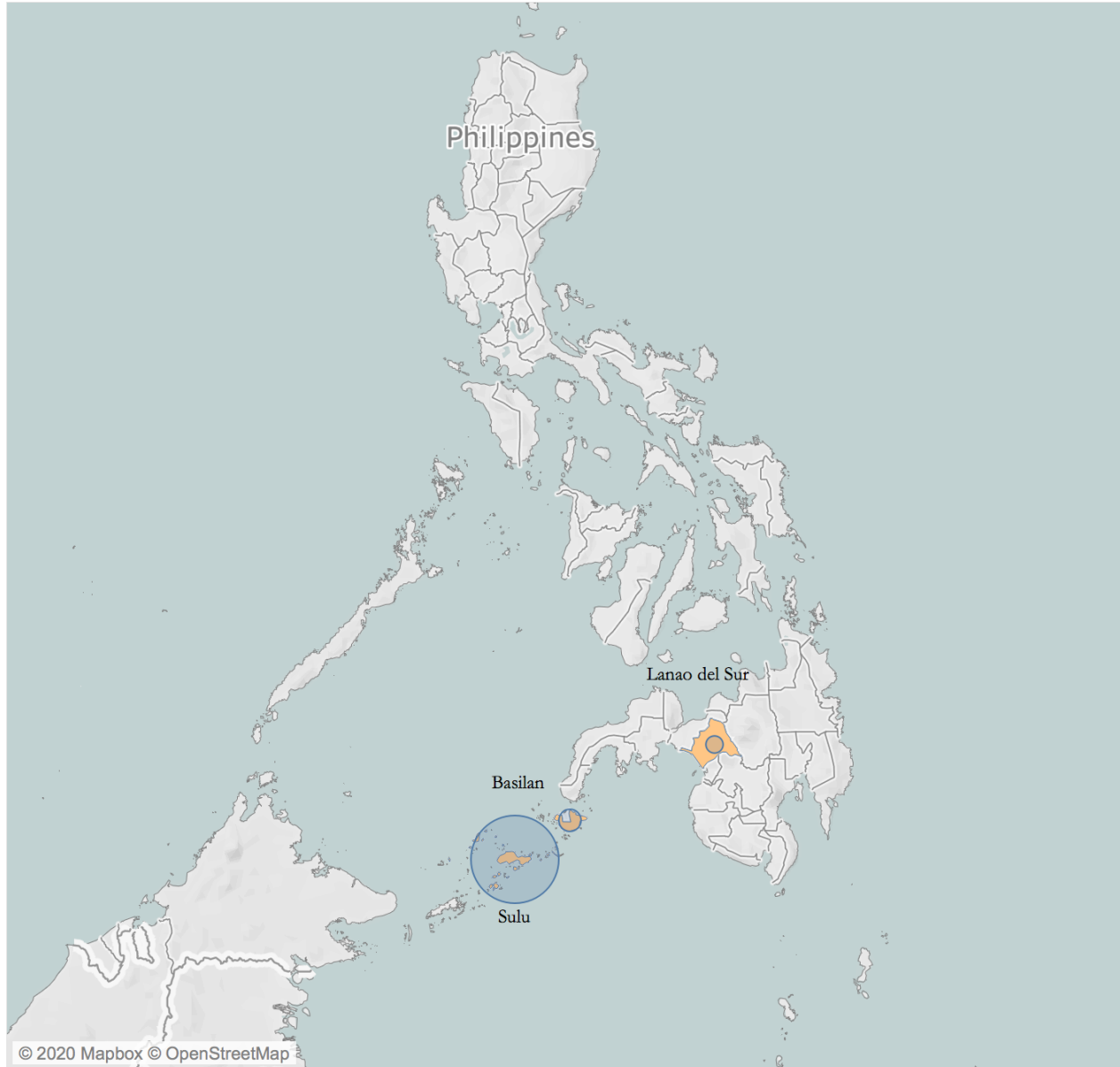
**Figure 2.1 (d): Islamic State-Linked Attacks and Numbers Killed and Wounded in the Philippines, 2017**



**Figure 2.1 (e): Islamic State-Linked Attacks and Numbers Killed and Wounded in the Philippines, 2018**



**Figure 2.1 (f): Islamic State-Linked Attacks and Numbers Killed and Wounded in the Philippines, 2019**





Combating Terrorism Center

AT WEST POINT