

# REPRESENT

## The Forgotten War on Terror: How the United States Overmilitarized Counterterrorism in the Philippines

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*Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. Razel Suansing describes the impact of U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the Philippines and steps the United States government can take to improve its efforts.*

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When President George W. Bush declared a war on terrorism, headlines about Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East populated the news cycle. The War on Terror evokes images of military troops operating in dry, hot deserts or mountainous terrain. Yet, across the Pacific Ocean, there was another front of the War on Terror: Southeast Asia.

Since 2002, the United States has invested \$3.9 billion into counterterrorism in the Philippines in an attempt to eliminate the terrorist threat in the area. In its early days, the effort succeeded. Only a small number of U.S. Special Forces were involved in a Philippine-driven military operation. The effort was conducted in close coordination with USAID to improve development efforts in terrorist-held areas. After the United States stripped the effort to skeletal forces of 200 special operators in early 2015, prominent terrorist groups like Abu Sayyaf—the Islamic State’s (IS) East Asia affiliate group—began to reemerge. Two years later, another IS-affiliate and Abu Sayyaf ally, the Maute Group, battled against the Philippine Army and government in what became known as the Siege of Marawi in 2017. These clashes would last five months and lead to a humanitarian crisis resulting in 353,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The re-emergence of terrorist groups begs the question of why the United States-backed counterterrorism operations in the Philippines have failed to stave off terrorist threats. Given the recent reckoning on the United States’ tactics during the War on Terror in the Middle East, the author found it appropriate to analyze the influence of the United States on the War on Terror in Southeast Asia. Though the investment has been well-intentioned on the whole, the measure failed to recognize the root causes that led to the conflict, including years of colonial and national government oppression. The multifacetedness of this conflict requires a multipronged solution. The operations have also failed to account for corruption in the Armed Forces of the Philippines and complications with transitional justice efforts in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. In order to understand its failure, the context of counterterrorism and transitional justice in the Philippines must be laid out.

### **BANGSAMORO HISTORY**

Similar to how they dealt with other minorities whose beliefs were incongruous to Western ideals, Spanish and American colonizers actively worked to erase the Bangsamoro identity. The Americans prominently used settler-colonialism to upend the Islamic hegemony on the island of Mindanao. Through the Homestead program, landless, non-Muslim Filipinos were encouraged to migrate into Muslim-majority areas such as Lanao and Cotabato, even through violent means. However, this attempt at forced assimilation failed. Muslims began to antagonize non-Muslim

Filipinos in response to threats against their social and economic well-being. Nonetheless, the roots of ethnic and religious divisions remained. Indeed, after the Spanish colonizers initially gave the Philippines its freedom in 1898, manifestations of ingrained colonial ideals began to surface amongst non-Muslim Filipinos. Muslim anguish began to mount as the Christian-majority government evidently favored non-Muslims, bestowing upon them the best lands in Mindanao and increasing investment in the development of Christian regions. Muslim-majority regions became among the poorest in the country. Additionally, the Philippine government refused to recognize the viability of Islamic laws, threatening the Bangsamoros' fundamental way of life.

With an already turbulent post-colonial history, the Jabidah Massacre in 1968 is commonly seen as the turning point of the Bangsamoro struggle, which pushed the people to act through violent means and demand for secession. According to Jibin Arula, the only surviving victim of the massacre, the government led by dictator Ferdinand Marcos formed a secret commando group, "Jabidah." The group was tasked with destabilizing and taking over Sabah, a Muslim-majority island near the Philippines, but belonging to Malaysia. After Arula's exposé was published, Rashid Lucman, a Bangsamoro congressman, called for Marcos to be impeached. When he failed to get support from his colleagues from Luzon and Visayas, the two other major islands in the Philippines, he started to call for Muslim Mindanao's autonomy, establishing the Bangsamoro Liberation Organization (BML) in the process.

Thereafter, more organizations called for autonomy, most prominently the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). After a series of violent clashes, several peace deals provided Bangsamoro autonomy over their own region. The most recent form of government established is the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), which establishes a devolved parliamentary government within Muslim-majority regions. However, even with Bangsamoro's increasing autonomy, acts of extremism in Mindanao are on the rise.

Experts claim that the relationship between poverty and the low quality of education in the Bangsamoro region leads to acts of extremism. The Bangsamoro region has some of the highest rates of poverty and illiteracy in the Philippines. The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (the ARMM) (now called the BARMM) had the lowest secondary-school completion rate at 64 percent in 2013. This is 10 percent below the national average enrollment rate. The disappointing statistics are due to the region's high level of poverty—which forces children to support their families economically—and displacement due to armed conflict. Extremist groups lure poor farmers with promises of a regular salary of between \$389 to \$974 far higher than \$194, the average monthly income in the region.

## **TACTICAL FAULTS OF THE PHILIPPINE ARMY AND ITS COSTS**

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has been criticized by experts for its short-term solutions to terrorism. In his article for War on the Rocks, Zachary Abuza writes that the SSFP has been too reliant on decapitation and manhunt efforts. Though top officials are neutralized, the AFP does not take into account how quickly such organizations can regroup and recruit due to the high poverty and low literacy rates. Despite these tactical faults, the United States has freely supplied the Philippines with \$3.9 billion in counter-terrorism assistance and operations with insufficient monitoring mediums. In addition, reports have suggested that some AFP officials have also been getting kickbacks from Abu Sayyaf kidnapping ransoms. Not only does the United States fail to support programs that address the deep-rooted humanitarian causes for terrorism, but the United States has also supported Philippine counterterrorism operations with known flaws.

After the Marawi Siege, terrorist attacks have been on the rise, showing that the U.S. Army-AFP approach has failed to prevent terrorism in the long term. Suicide terrorism has become more prevalent despite the predispositions of Muslims and Catholics against suicide. Pro-I.S. groups in the Philippines have recruited over 100 pro-I.S. foreign fighters in the Philippines. Local groups have exploited the economic hardship and poverty that has come from the pandemic as a recruitment tool. The Philippine police and military are also currently fulfilling duties outside of their jurisdiction with the implementation of quarantine and public health measures, which has diverted their attention from the counterterrorism threat in the Philippines, which may allow terrorist groups to mobilize for the time being.

Since the eruption of the siege and the ushering of the Duterte administration, several programs have been initiated to address the deep-rooted causes of terrorism, specifically poverty. The Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program Payapa at Masaganang Pamayanan (PAMANA) or “Resilient Communities in Conflict-Affected Communities” administered by the Office of the Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process (OPAPP) hopes to address poverty and improve the delivery of social services. The United States Embassy also conducted the Youth Council Summit and has hosted two iftars (the meal eaten after sunset during Ramadan), which became a dialogue for religious and community leaders.

However, the government has yet to address the humanitarian issues relating to the conflict’s internally displaced peoples. The Philippine government has also been extremely focused on new infrastructure development instead of directly supporting internally displaced peoples. The Duterte Administration has touted the Japan-funded road network and the Grand Mosque as symbols of success, but most IDPs still live in shelters without running water and a full septic tank. The conditions of the IDPs worsened during the pandemic, particularly because of the Extended Community Quarantine, where IDPs were unable to find work. According to interviews with IDPs, the Department of Trade and Industry provided each household with either a sewing machine or a grocery package for a Sari-Sari (or convenience store). Yet, because DTI gave all the households the same product, they were unable to sell these to neighbors. The government only provided one-time cash assistance of between 194 and 389 USD.

Ramadan Muntor, the leader of an IDP coalition, said that because there is limited running water in the IDP shelters, it is difficult to execute the hygiene practices needed to prevent Covid-19 from spreading.

In addition, it was challenging to social distance since the 9 to 15 people living in a small house. Muntor also shared that it was difficult to become an IDP during the Marawi Siege because as one attempts to find refuge from the violence, they also experience discrimination and anxiety as they are suspected of being terrorists.

Muntor said that the government lacked transparency with their rehabilitation efforts and failed to address the IDPs. Every year, Muntor’s group leads a “State of the Marawi Bakwit” address prior to the Philippine president’s State of the Nation Address, where the IDPs express their grievances.

The apathy on the part of the government is reminiscent of historical tensions that radicalized the Bangsamoro people. The United States and Philippine governments must be quick to address this mismanagement in order to prevent radicalization. Experts have stated that the U.S. military’s biggest fault is its narrow, tactical approach supporting the Philippine counterterrorism operation without sufficient monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of their tactics.

## **IMAGINING A DIFFERENT COUNTERTERRORISM IN THE PHILIPPINES**

In backing the Philippine government’s existing counterterrorism efforts, the United States, as in its other counterterrorism campaigns around the globe, has largely focused on tactical operations instead of addressing the root causes of why recruits turn to terrorism. In order for the United States and the Philippines to be successful in their joint-counterterrorism operations, they must first strengthen monitoring and evaluation efforts. The U.S. military must keep closer track of AFP operations, ensuring they are tactically sound and funds are used in an optimal manner. The U.S. government can also work on training forces to have stronger tactical instinct and more accurate intelligence.

In addition, a significant portion of the fund must be used to strengthen more sustainable counterterrorism programs like the PAMANA program and help OPAPP ideate other P/CVE programs. USAID can increase funding for civil society organizations that work on deradicalization. These organizations often understand root causes of terrorism in a Mindanao-specific context and will be more effective at this work than either Washington, D.C. or Manila. USAID can also fund organizations such as Doctors Without Borders, Save the Children, and UNICEF, who are filling the humanitarian void that the government has left and ensure that deradicalization efforts are not brewing in such camps. As the Islamic State weakens in the Middle East, groups now view Southeast Asia as an alternative home base and possible site to establish the caliphate.

By focusing on the root causes of radicalization with an emphasis on local engagement, the United States can ensure that counterterrorism efforts have sustained effectiveness, preventing future acts of terrorism instead of engendering hatred through overmilitarization. The United States can lead a new era of more humanitarian counterterrorism and prevent the destabilization of Southeast Asia.

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