



The Islamic State's High Stakes War in the Philippines

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What Happened: On December 2, an affiliate group of the Islamic State bombed a Catholic Mass in Marawi City, killing four. In the days since, other IS-linked groups have claimed a series of attacks across the Bangsamoro autonomous region – this despite heavy losses inflicted by counterterrorism operations in the southern Philippines. The timing is not coincidental: a pivotal election is looming in Bangsamoro, and extremist groups – including IS – see a chance to derail the 10-year-old peace process.

Our Focus: The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government reached a landmark peace deal in 2014. Under the deal, an interim government, headed by the MILF, has been overseeing the Bangsamoro autonomous region – but that transition period expires in 2025, when the region is set to vote in its first local government. With that in mind, the Islamic State East Asia (ISEA) “is engaged in a high stakes struggle to derail the Bangsamoro peace process,” writes Haroro J. Ingram, a senior fellow with the Program on Extremism at George Washington University. “The uptick in violent incidents linked to pro-Islamic State groups since the Marawi City bombing suggests that ISEA’s factions may be coordinating in a bid to distract and destabilize the security response.”

What Comes Next: The stakes are high for Manila. The historic peace deal freed up crucial resources to address external security issues – including maritime disputes with China in the South China Sea. “With the prospect of a lasting peace in the south, the Philippines has planned to pivot the attention and preparedness of its armed forces towards territorial defense,” Ingram notes. If terrorist groups succeed in derailing the final stage of the peace process, it could force the Philippine military to reorient back to internal security threats. Crucially, the Islamic State itself is well aware of this, with a mouthpiece publication noting that its operations in the Philippines will impact “the global conflict that is still drawing closer day after day between the tyrants of China and America.”