The Battle for Marawi has surpassed the intensity of prior episodes of urban combat in the southern Philippines. More than three months since the fighting has erupted, dozens of militants remain entrenched within the main battle area. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Duterte administration underestimated the fighting capability and resolve of the militants. It is unclear whether the Maute Group (MG) and its allies would be able to break out of the encirclement. Conflicting reports have emerged over the fate of Isnilon Hapilon, the emir of IS-inspired forces in Philippines. The Battle for Marawi underscores the complexity of urban warfare compounded by the unfamiliarity of the AFP to fight in cities.

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Recent developments in the Battle for Marawi

In a nearly unanimous vote, the Philippine Supreme Court upheld the state of martial law declared in Mindanao on 4 July 2017. Proclamation No. 216 suspended the writ of habeas corpus and placed Mindanao under martial rule. Fighting broke out on 23 May 2017 after an in-extremis operation was launched by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to capture Isnilon Hapilon, the designated emir or leader of IS-pledged militants in Mindanao.

The raid immediately degenerated into a confused gun battle with hundreds of Maute Group (MG) members, Filipino militants and foreign fighters emerging from prepared positions across the city. As fighting dragged into the month of October, Marawi remains desolate with 90 percent of the civilian population displaced to nearby municipalities and towns. More than 700 militants had been killed along with 153 members of the security forces, with fighting expected to end in “10 to 15 more days.” Civilian deaths are expected to skyrocket once search and recovery operations are fully underway.

Underestimating the Maute

It has been belatedly admitted that the security forces that the Maute Group and its allies were “underestimated.” The Maute and its allies had time to plan a takeover of Marawi City, which included casing the headquarters of the Philippine Army’s 103rd Infantry Brigade and a safe house of a military intelligence group covering Marawi. Had the 23 May raid not occurred, the militants intended to take over the city on 26 May 2017, during the holy Muslim month of Ramadan. So while the Philippine military may have seized tactical surprise, it was offset by the strategic surprise attained by the MG.

For their foray into Marawi, the MG improved their ability to monitor the troop movements and communications of the AFP. In a congressional testimony, an infantry officer from the Philippine Army communications of the AFP. In a congressional testimony, an infantry officer from the Philippine Army declared: “Maute group aimed to kill many civilians, seized video shows,” ABS CBN News, 09 June 2017.

Not only was the MG able to conduct an intelligence preparation of the battlefield, it is apparent that it has been able to learn from prior encounters with Philippine security forces. Prior to the Marawi clashes, three separate military campaigns had been launched against the MG’s bulwark in the rural town of Butig, more than 30 miles from the city of Marawi. Butig was where the Maute Group first emerged and was known by residents in the area as “grupong ISIS” or the “ISIS group.” The group was initially a private army of the Maute clan’s matriarch, Farhana Maute, engaged largely in extortion rackets. Beyond any financial motivations, Farhana raised this private militia as a hedge against clan conflicts, commonly referred to as “rido” in Mindanao.

The lessons of Zamboanga

The Battle for Marawi has surpassed the damage of previous episodes of urban combat in the southern Philippines such as the 2013 Zamboanga Crisis. In Zamboanga City, an estimated 500 members of the Misuari Group occupied parts of Zamboanga City, under the pretext of a peace rally by former governor Nur Misuari. After three weeks, Zamboanga was retaken at the cost of 19 government forces and 208 rebels killed.

In Zamboanga, the fighting was centered in a shanty town where houses were made of light materials. Wooden walls and galvanized iron roofing offered little degree of hard cover for the rebels. In such an environment, the AFP’s limited close air support (CAS) and indirect fire assets were very effective.

Most of the fatalities suffered by the AFP occurred in the vicinity of Lustre Street, the site of several commercial establishments. The Philippine Army’s Light Reaction Battalion (LRB) was tasked to 8 Joseph Franco, “The Battle(s) for Butig: Contextualizing the Maute Group”, RSIS Commentary, 23 December 2016.
9 Author interview, former infantry company commander from the 49th Infantry Battalion, Philippine Army based in Butig from July 2015 to 2017.
10 Franco, “The Battle(s) for Butig”.
12 See Joseph Franco, “The Zamboanga Standoff: Role of the Nur Misuari Group”, RSIS Commentaries no. 168, 17 Septem-
14 Nur Misuari founded the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1972. The MNLF intended to establish an inde-
15 pendent Bangsamoro (Moro Country) state in Mindanao. Misuari signed a Final Peace Agreement with Manila in 1996 and subsequently became governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Misuari’s stint as ARMM governor was marred with corruption allegations and incompetence. Since losing the governorship in 2001, Misuari has figured in clashes with the government seeking to regain power and influence in the ARMM. The Misuari Group is his own private militia, headed by Misuari loyalist Habier Malik. Malik was reported killed in the 2013 Zamboanga Siege.
15 https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/68885-zamboanga-siege-light-reaction-battalion
16 The Philippine Air Force (PAF) dropped unguided HE-filled GP bombs (110-lbs and 250-lbs) from SF-260TP and OV-10 aircraft. PAF MD-520MG helicopters launched 2.75” rockets and strafed using 50-caliber gun pods. Philippine Army and Philippine Marine Corps infantry units used 60mm and 81mm mortars as company and battalion-level indirect fire, respectively.
retake the stronghold of the Misuari Group, the KGK building. Contrary to the shanties surrounding it, KGK was a four-story structure made of concrete. It took LRB operators three attempts to clear the structure and occupy it.

On hindsight, Zamboanga provided a forecast of the challenges of urban warfare in Mindanao. Within the city alone, the differences in construction standards meant that the training and tactics that the AFP brought to the city was in constant flux. Domination worked well for KGK, but was considered sub-optimal for the residential sprawl that the AFP found itself in. The former commander of the AFP Joint Special Operations Group remarked how:

“For instance, the technique of points of domination for room clearing turned out to not be effective in combat during the 2013 Zamboanga siege. Because flimsy wood is used to construct many homes in the Philippines, they also had to come up with new approaches that would not be needed in the shoot house. The enemy tactics, techniques, and procedures were also taught to the trainees.”

What perhaps worked in the AFP’s favor is how the Misuari faction had little will to fight. Duped into joining a peace rally, the former MNLF cadres were as confused as the security forces that confronted them. At some points of the battle there were incidents of fratricide among the Misuari Group fighters, between the loyalists to Habier Malik, the top MNLF official leading the attack, and those promised cash to travel to Zamboanga.

Marawi: A city of KGKs?

The infrastructure for sustained urban combat fighting existed in Marawi even before the MG was organized as a force. The city provided the conditions for the emergence of a living laboratory for urban warfare innovation. Marawi was a labyrinth of concrete structures, a city of KGK Buildings waiting to be turned into Maute fighting positions. It meant that clearing operations were painstaking affairs as AFP Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) teams struggled to clear hundreds of Maute-emplaced improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and other unexploded ordnance.

Asrido or clan conflicts are prevalent in Central Mindanao, families hedge against other clans by fortifying their homes. Rural Mindanano homes are often seen with simple earthen work fortifications or dugouts. In Marawi, these family shelters take the form of concrete reinforced basements/shelters, colloquially referred to as “tunnels.” Arms caches are also found throughout most of the city, which may contain automatic rifles and ammunition. Additionally, structures in Marawi are far more robust than the structures in Zamboanga. Commercial buildings and houses are made from “buhos” (Tagalog for “poured”) concrete rather than cinder blocks as seen in other cities in the Philippines. Reinforced concrete is able to withstand CAS and indirect fire utilized by the AFP, as well as squad-level weapons such as M203 grenade launchers.

The prevalence of multi-story buildings in Marawi, mostly three to four stories high, meant that infantry units needed to think vertical. Snipers were a perennial source of danger for government troops. Other improvised weaponry were also much used in Marawi. In Zamboanga, the MNLF used firebombs to obscure their positions from government troops’ observation. In Marawi, firebombs were used as part of complex, multi-level ambushes. In June 9, this firebombing tactic led to the near loss of an entire Marine company.

The militants demonstrated as well their ability to blunt the advance of mechanized infantry troops. On the first evening of fighting, the Maute Group sprung an ambush on members of the 5th Mechanized Infantry Battalion. Two armored vehicles were destroyed and the survivors were rescued only 5 days later by reinforcing light infantry troops. The incident led to a theater-wide initiative by the AFP to outfit its armored personnel carriers and fire support vehicles with improvised wooden armor.

After the Battle for Marawi

The combination of defensive terrain, enhanced intelligence and surveillance, and increased fighting capability explains why the Battle for Marawi has lasted for more than a hundred days. Beyond the kinetic realm, what sets apart the Maute Group from the Misuari Group was their resolve to fight. Compared to the more secular motives of the MNLF rebels, the MG intended to fight the AFP to a stalemate, taking cues from how IS fighters plugged it out with coalition forces in Mosul and Raqqa.

20 Author interview via Facebook Messenger with Philippine Army officer assigned to the Light Reaction Regiment in early June 2017.
22 On 09 June 2017, 13 Marines were killed and 40 wounded after an early morning ambush by the Maute Group. See Allan Nawal, et. al. “13 Marines killed in action, 40 wounded in 14-hour battle in Marawi”, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 10 June 2017.
24 Ibid.
The barrier for the adoption of techniques used by the MG in Marawi is quite low. Any criminal gang can mimic the firebombing tactics the Mautes used with great effect against elite units. Other illicit networks would likely acquire cheap off-the-shelf drones to provide early warning against law enforcement raids. So while Marawi may be more than the sum of its parts, its components have been exposed, waiting to be exploited.

Marawi was the proverbial perfect storm for the AFP. But it is unlikely that a battle of similar scale will occur in Mindanao soon. While other cities in the Philippines may have *buhos* houses, arms caches or a history of armed clashes, they do not synergize as readily as seen in Marawi. What needs to be monitored is the dispersion of tactics and techniques as anecdotes and vignettes emerge from the ruins of the city.

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*The views and conclusions expressed in this working paper do not necessarily reflect the views of the Security Reform Initiative.*