

PERIPHERAL VISION

Views from the Borderlands

SEMI-ANNUAL BULLETIN
FALL 2020



IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES, FEARS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM RISK NEGLECTING LOCAL CONFLICT DRIVERS

Joseph Franco

Conflict in the southern Philippine region of Mindanao continues in multiple areas, three years after the high-profile [Battle for Marawi City](#). The five-month long battle drew attention to the perceived influence of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and its attempts to establish a *wilayah* or province in Southeast Asia. More recently, the western Mindanao province of Sulu near the maritime border with Malaysia and Indonesia has seen an apparent uptick of suicide attacks from 2019 to 2020.

The most recent incident occurred on 24 August 2020 when Jolo, Sulu was struck by suicide bombers. The attackers were both [widows of violent extremists](#) belonging to the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and were responsible for killing fourteen people, and wounding over 75. The ASG first emerged as an offshoot of a local revolutionary group in the nineties with ties to al Qaeda (AQ), but several sub-factions pivoted to IS in 2014. The August incident was the second time in two years that bombers with suspected links with IS targeted Jolo. In January 2019, an Indonesian couple perpetrated a [similar suicide attack](#), targeting the Jolo Cathedral. On the outskirts of Jolo, an attack by another pair of bombers targeted the headquarters of the Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) 1st Brigade Combat Team (1BCT)—one of which was Norman Lasuca, the so-called first [Filipino suicide bomber](#).

The 1BCT incident led to speculation that it was a harbinger of increased foreign influence upon the decades-long internal conflict in Mindanao. While it is possible that foreign terrorist fighters numbers increased after the 2014 pivot to IS, there needs to be a critical examination of how foreign extremists fit into the Mindanao conflict. One recurring narrative is how foreign violent ideologies have supplanted indigenous sources of conflict. Some analysts have even gone as far as saying that suicide bombings have supplanted the so-called '[Filipino warrior culture](#)' that shuns tactics such as suicide bombings and instead prefers head-on confrontations, an Orientalist take on the complex history of Mindanao. The idea that Mindanao is a viable destination for foreign fighters inspired by the Islamic State is [contested](#), although it is clear that over recent years a significant number of non-Filipinos have joined ASG, the Maute Group, or others.

Spanning decades, the different conflicts in Mindanao have existed even before the emergence of technology-mediated, 'online' violent extremism. The seas around the Sulu archipelago—stretching from the Zamboanga peninsula in the east and the Bornean border territories in Indonesia and Malaysia in the west—have long been the theatre of piracy, kidnapping, and other forms of violence and illegality. One [longitudinal study from 1986-2004](#) suggests that measures of deprivation such as disparities in access to water, electricity supplies, and education predict the occurrence of conflict. Other issues, including [clan feuding](#), [local political conflicts](#), and [weak governance](#) often drive competition between local armed groups. Even accounting for the apparent IS idolatry that contributed to the five-month long Battle for Marawi in 2017, tensions attributed to illicit trade and the "[shadow economy](#)" remained a key factor generating conflict in Mindanao.

Estimates on the number of foreign fighters in the Philippines have hardly changed—around 40 to 60 from the beginning of the US-led Global War on Terror against al Qaeda to the current campaigns against IS. What is more plausible is that the greater ubiquity of social media has created the appearance of high-profile attacks. With the propagation of social media, messaging apps, and cryptocurrencies, it might have been expected that numbers in Mindanao would increase, especially following IS's [global call for fighters to join the conflict in the Philippines](#). However, controlling for outlier events like the Battle for Marawi, statistics from the University of Maryland's [Global Terrorism Database](#) reveal a downward trend in terrorism incidents from 2014. This suggests that the relationship between the number of foreign fighters and attacks in the Philippines remains inconclusive.

Local socioeconomic and governance concerns continue to [trump more abstract, transnational ideologies](#) in Mindanao's conflicts. In one example, several factions of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in central Mindanao deliberately distanced themselves from allies hosting foreign fighters. The foreigner-averse BIFF factions realised that [external actors would only draw more unwanted attention](#) from the Philippine military and could disrupt their profit generating extortion activities.

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Image: Police cordon off the site where twin bombs exploded in Jolo, Sulu on August 26, 2020. Two female suicide attackers who carried out a double bombing in the southern Philippines were the widows of militants who had worked for the Islamic State-linked Abu Sayyaf group. (Photo by Nickee BUTLANGAN / AFP) (Photo by NICKEE BUTLANGAN/AFP via Getty Images)

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READ OUR SPECIAL BULLETIN ON COVID-19'S IMPACT ON FRAGILE AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED BORDERLANDS - [AVAILABLE NOW](#)

PERIPHERAL VISION IS PUBLISHED TWICE A YEAR AS A TIMELY UPDATE OF DYNAMICS ON THE GROUND, WHILE ALSO HIGHLIGHTING THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE X-BORDER LOCAL RESEARCH NETWORK'S ACTIVITIES

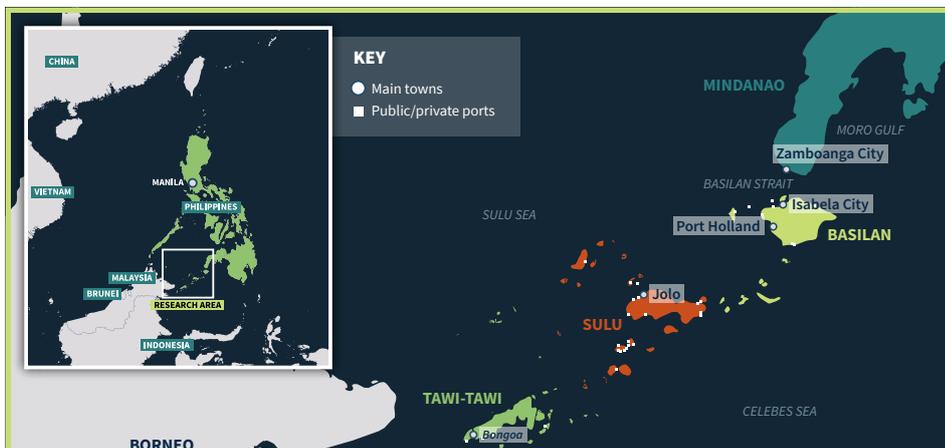
In June, the Philippine Congress passed the Anti-Terrorism Act or Republic Act 11479 (RA 11479), aimed at suppressing ongoing concerns of violent extremism in Mindanao and across the country. RA 11479 is now the [most legally contested](#) law in Philippine history, with more than three dozen petitions lodged against it with the Supreme Court. Criticisms of the law have fixated on issues such as the official proscription of terrorist organisations and/or personalities.

There are continued disagreements between activists contesting RA 11479 and its proponents in the government. Activists highlight that RA 11479 is symptomatic of the security-centric paradigm of preventing and countering violent extremism in the Philippines. In comparison, initiatives meant to address the ground level, quality-of-life issues that drive violent extremism, and conflict more broadly, in Mindanao have not received similar levels of legislative enthusiasm. Given the localised and non-ideological roots of conflict in Mindanao, bottom-up approaches should be prioritised. However, the expedited legislation of RA 11479 risks continuity of top-down, state-centric approaches by Manila towards its restive southwestern periphery.

Recognising the importance of local-level drivers of conflict is even more important given the current pandemic. The second front narrative has been overlaid with Covid-19, some analysts attributing attacks [around the globe](#) and the [Philippines](#) as a deliberate strategy to take advantage of Covid-19. In the latter case, such claims are premature and unfounded. The rate of violent incidents cited are consistent with the Philippine military's historical operational tempos.

Foreign fighters or not, individuals share the same travel restrictions imposed across the Philippines during the Coronavirus pandemic, whether domestic or international travel. Contrary to expectations, foreign fighters entering the Philippines predominately [travel by air](#) into legal points of entry rather than informally by sea. Previous research by the [X-Border Local Research Network](#) highlighted that there is no evidence of foreign fighters exploiting the informal transnational networks used by local maritime traders. Recently concluded research by the X-Border Local Research Network in Zamboanga City and the provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, suggest relative continuity of these travel patterns during the pandemic.

In spite of transnational foreign fighters and a global pandemic, conflicts in Mindanao remain largely driven by local factors. Among an abundance of factors, relative deprivation, weak governance and the insecurity that is both emergent and exploited by illicit economies, drive conflict. Material conditions, especially quality-of-life issues are more likely to motivate violence rather than ideological narratives. There are serious risks that these conflict drivers might be exacerbated during the current pandemic, with the [Philippines currently in recession](#), owing to one of the longest lockdowns in the world and the sharp fall in remittances from overseas Filipino workers. Local governments in Mindanao have shown both initiative and effectiveness in mitigating the effects of the pandemic, while provincial authorities have had success in implementing [local solutions for tackling the incentives that sustain violent extremist groups](#) and improving security. Approaches infused with knowledge and participation from the grassroots are indispensable to address non-ideological of drivers of conflict.



Map: The Sulu archipelago in the Southern Philippines stretches from the island of Mindanao to the Borneo territories of Malaysia and Indonesia. (Source: [Trade in the Sulu Archipelago: Informal Economies Amidst Maritime Security Challenges](#), TAF 2019)

“ There are serious risks that the conflict drivers might be exacerbated during the current pandemic. ”

SUDAN'S CROSS-BORDER PEACE: SHAPING A NEW SECURITY STATUS QUO

In August 2020, after months of South Sudanese mediation, a collection of Sudan's opposition and rebel groups met in Juba, South Sudan, and signed an agreement with the Khartoum government seeking to end conflicts, which have mostly been fought in, or across, Sudan's borderland regions. Given the history of conflict between Juba and Khartoum, this may seem a surprising location for a peace agreement, but the improvement in relations between north and south in recent years, coupled with the influence South Sudan's leaders have with Sudan's rebels, shaped the process and its outcome.

Signatories to the Juba Agreement were broadly representative of Sudan's two most restless peripheries: the expansive western region of Darfur, which borders Libya, Chad, The Central African Republic and South Sudan; and the so-called Two Areas—South Kordofan and Blue Nile states—two historically contested, ethnically diverse regions that border South Sudan, and South Sudan / Ethiopia, respectively.

To some extent, all of Sudan's rebel groups are cross-border entities. Over the last three decades or more their fortunes have waxed and waned partly due to the patronage of Sudan's neighbours—previously Ethiopia, Uganda and Chad, more recently South Sudan—and the ability of the groups to operate within, or across, borderland regions. There, local political and commercial interests and the cross-border political economies involving the flow of goods and labour, are often as important to rebel groups as the formal relations between the region's capitals. This remains the case, as rebel groups seek to negotiate political control of previously military-held regions with an eye on the control of lucrative mining concessions and commercial agriculture.



Map: Sudan's states bordering South Sudan. South Sudan states are according to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005). Base map data source: OpenStreetMap. Copyright: MAP grafix 2020.

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While the new political dispensation in Khartoum since the fall of Omar al-Bashir in 2019 provided a window for an agreement with the rebel groups, it was the rebels' military weakness that originally drove them to the negotiating table—a process that had started before Bashir's downfall. But, due to a series of cross-border security deals that Bashir cut with neighbours, in particular Chad and South Sudan, which limited the rebels' scope of operations and access to military supplies, none of the groups have received significant direct support from neighbouring states for several years.

From a regional perspective, the central involvement of Juba in the peace process makes perfect sense. President Kiir, along with other key politicians, fixers and advisors in and around his government have long-standing relationships with Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) rebel group and, more recently, some of the Darfuri rebel factions. During Sudan's (Second) Civil war (1983-2005), the SPLM-N formed an important military component of the broader Sudan People's Liberation Movement, which fought the Khartoum government (and its local proxies) across Sudan's then southern areas.

More recently, after the SPLM-N re-started their rebellion in 2011 in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, and South Sudan's own civil war broke out in December 2013, the SPLM-N provided some assistance to Kiir against the rebels of Riek Machar's SPLA-In Opposition, particular in the border areas of Upper Nile and Unity states. Until the war broke out in Juba in 2013, Kiir had allowed the SPLM-N free reign to operate across the border in these areas, including recruitment in the camps along the border filled with refugees from Sudan's own conflicts. However, the rapprochement between Khartoum and Juba after the war started has meant that that the SPLM-N was kept on an increasingly short leash—a quid pro quo Kiir paid for Khartoum's agreement not to channel support to the SPLA-IO.

The Darfuri groups, particularly the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), also became involved in the conflict in Unity state, often with very violent consequences. While the formal military alliance between the SPLM-N and the Darfuris—known as the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF)—largely fizzled out after some notable advances in 2011 / 12, Juba has remained a safe space for group members to retreat to after their own rebellion(s) in Darfur effectively ended at the hands of Mohamed Hamdan Daglo 'Himedti's' Rapid Support Force (RSF) militia in 2015.

Himedti, who has become a key player in Sudan's transitional administration, has also been involved in the negotiations in Juba, bringing with him the instincts of a borderland political entrepreneur and the clout of a militia leader with many thousands of men under his command. From the Juba side, Tut Kew Gatluak—a Bul-Nuer from Unity state, which borders South Kordofan in Sudan—has acted as Kiir's security advisor and trusted surrogate in the talks. Tut has a long history of involvement in north-south relations and is widely believed to be former Sudanese president Bashir's adopted son. He was involved in the Khartoum-backed Bul Nuer militias which fought the SPLA in the 1990s, latterly as part of Riek Machar's first rebellion, and has remained an influential intermediary in Khartoum's approach to its southern neighbour.

Seen from the perspective of Sudan's borderlands, the Juba Agreement is only the latest in a series of cross-border security pacts between Khartoum's leaders and their regional counterparts, like President Kiir in South Sudan. However, the agreements are only meaningful because they are mediated through powerful political-military entrepreneurs like Himedti and Tut Kew, who have genuine influence in these regions. These individuals are only the best known of many other actors on the Sudan-South Sudan borderland—for example, the Abdel Bagi family in Northern Bahr el Ghazal/South Darfur or Johnson Olony in Upper Nile/South Kordofan/Blue Nile—who have grown to national political prominence through their control over the borderlands.

The fact that the ousting of Bashir in 2019, and the transition process since, has largely been an urban and provincial affair, has underlined the continuing and unresolved divide between centre and periphery in the country. This necessitated a parallel track for the peripheries in the transition whose decades of war had remained remote from the civic political struggle in Khartoum and its environs. When viewed in this context, the fact that South Sudan's leaders have helped mediate a peace agreement between Sudan's soldiers and rebels should come as much less of a surprise.

SYRIA'S TREACHEROUS BOUNDARIES

Armenak Tokmajyan

Before the conflict in Syria, the red lines of the politically permissible were clear for most Syrians. Yet after the uprising in 2011, the regime lost control over much of Syria's territory and millions of people. Those remaining in regime-held areas continuously adapted to the new limitations placed on what could be said and done. In contrast, those displaced—whether outside Syria or in opposition-held areas—saw an end to the proscriptions on their behavior, thereby losing their once superb sense of how to navigate these invisible borders.

Today, as the regime has recaptured large swathes of land with Russian and Iranian help, the figurative frontiers of what is permissible have again been imposed in areas that have fallen under its control, so that little can be taken for granted. That is particularly true for returnees, or potential returnees, who must not only safely cross back into regime-held territory but also relearn how to navigate the treacherous red lines of behavior that are now vaguer, more localized, and subject to change.

For decades, Syrians, many of whom spent their lives living in a police state, skillfully grasped the invisible boundaries of what was acceptable. Complaining about corruption and nepotism was permissible; criticizing the president was not. Confronting a civil servant who wouldn't process papers without taking a bribe was permissible; confronting a security official who did so was far riskier.

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“ For decades, Syrians skillfully grasped the invisible boundaries of what was acceptable. ”

Today, these boundaries in regime areas are vaguer and constantly shifting. They are also influenced much more by local actors and dynamics. Before 2011, the boundaries were imposed by the political center and were applicable across Syria, despite the contrasting sociopolitical nature of the country's regions. After the uprising, Syria's fragmentation, the de facto decentralization of power, and the emergence of powerful local actors reshaped these invisible borders.

Presently, while protests are not permissible in regime-controlled Eastern Ghouta, they occasionally take place in some parts of Daraa Governorate, where the regime has a weaker presence. What is permissible in Damascus, the locus of the regime's power, differs from that in Deir Ezzor on Syria's eastern border. In the capital, the central authorities are still strong and decide what's permissible and what's not. In Deir Ezzor the rules are much more vague and often decided not by the formal authorities but by local and foreign pro-regime militias and warlords.

Because those who remained in regime-held areas throughout the conflict repeatedly adapted their behavior to old, new, and changing boundaries, their sense of what is appropriate is much more acute than those who left regime-held territories. Most Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons are now out of touch with day-to-day realities in their native localities and Syria as a whole. Not being exposed to everyday interaction with the authorities, they have lost their feeling for the red lines, the crossing of which can be consequential.

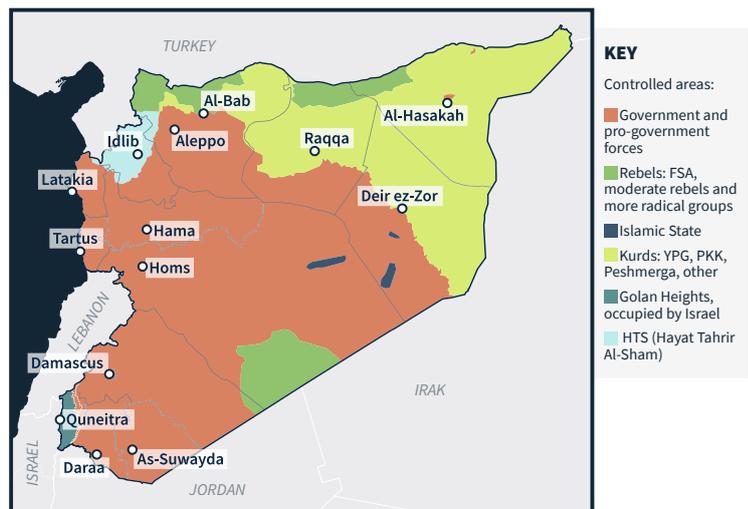


Image: Syrian refugees arrive at the Oncupinar crossing gate, close to the town of Kilis, south central Turkey, in order to cross to Syria for the Eid al-Adha Muslim holiday, on August 28, 2017. Turkish authorities allow Syrian refugees to visit their country for Eid-al-Adha celebrities. (BULENT KILIC/AFP via Getty Images)

The story of an unfortunate man who recently returned to regime-held Rural Aleppo Governorate from the territory where Turkey conducted its Euphrates Shield operation provides a case in point of how risky a miscalculation can be. A shepherd by profession and a singer by passion, this man in his fifties had never engaged in any political activity during his life. Confident of his "clean record," he decided to return home after being internally displaced. He successfully crossed into regime-held areas near the city of Al-Bab, suggesting he was not on the regime's wanted list. He returned to his hometown, but a few days later was called in by the local security forces and has not been seen since.

While the shepherd misjudged his chances, others have managed to return to live under regime rule without paying for this with their lives. In Eastern Ghouta, for instance, after the regime and Russia recaptured the area in March 2018, some [45,000 residents evacuated to opposition-held areas while 120,000 remained](#). The latter group did not want to become internally displaced persons or refugees and therefore resumed their lives under regime control. Some were detained, conscripted, or forcefully disappeared, but most survived regime reprisals.

The question is not so much what percentage of Syrians returned under regime rule and survived to tell the story, but what percentage paid a heavy price. In other words, where do the regime or the local authorities that have proliferated in recent years draw the line on behavior? When are someone's current or past actions considered permissible and when not? For those with a proven record of opposition activism or, alternatively, of regime support, this figurative boundary is more or less clear. For a majority of Syrians who fall between these two categories the answer is far more ambiguous.



Map: Syria's internal borders. December 2020. Base map source: Wikimedia commons (author: NordNordWest). Controlled areas data source: <https://syria.liveuamap.com/> (Dec 1, 2020)

The **X-Border Local Research Network** – a component of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Cross-Border Conflict: Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) program – is a partnership between The Asia Foundation, the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center and the Rift Valley Institute. With support from UK aid from the UK government, the three organizations work with local research partners to improve our understanding of political, economic and social dynamics in conflict-affected borderlands, and the flows of people, goods and ideas that connect them. The project supports more effective policymaking and development programming, leveraging research to advocate for peaceful change. The views in *Peripheral Vision* do not necessarily represent those of the partner organizations or the UK government.

