

# Philippine Islamic Extremism

The battle against "Islamic State" fighters turned Marawi, Philippines into a ghost town. But more than a year after the Philippine government regained control, Islamic extremism remains a threat. Germany's International Broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) reports on what one of the Islamic fighter's hopes are in establishing an Islamic state.

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"Our original plan was limited to attacking the military camp in Marawi and expelling the soldiers from the city," Islamic fighter Abdul told DW. The homegrown jihadi leaders [who laid siege to Marawi](#) under the banner of the "Islamic State" (IS) had convinced Abdul and his fellow fighters that the Philippine government would then withdraw. "They told us we would get what we had always wanted: an Islamic state here in Marawi."



Abdul, his young face hidden by a headscarf, stares into the camera as he contemplates his shattered dream. He has lost dozens of friends. His family has been displaced.

More than a year after the [heaviest urban fighting](#) in the Philippines since World War II, the historic center of Marawi, the country's largest Muslim city on the southern island of Mindanao, remains sealed off. Systematic air raids, heavy artillery fire and merciless house-to-house combat turned the area into a bombed-out ghost town with skeletal buildings that evoke the war-ravaged ruins of Aleppo, Raqqa and Mosul in the Middle East.

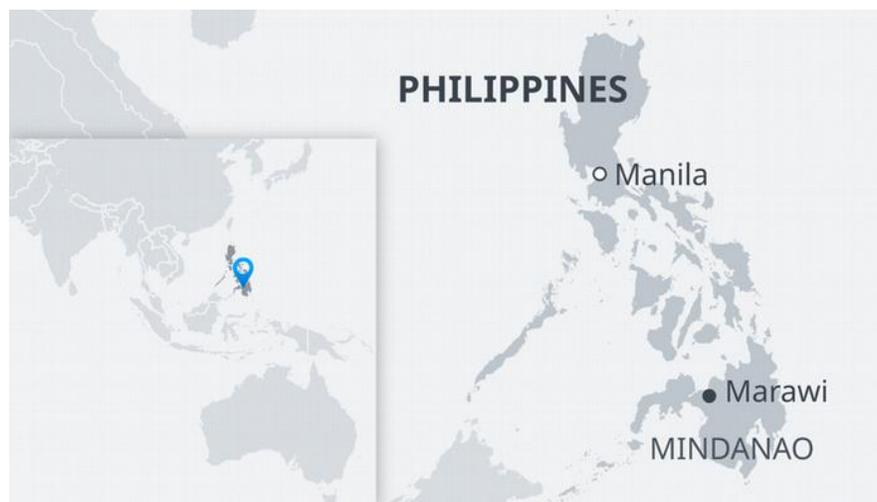


Former Marawi residents call the ruined area of the city 'ground zero'

## Centuries of oppression

Just over 5 percent of the Filipino population is Muslim; the vast majority are Roman Catholics. More than 90 percent of all Muslims — about 6 million people — live on Mindanao and the smaller neighboring islands of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi Tawi. But even here, they are in the minority. There's a prevailing sense of injustice here, dating back to the Spanish colonizers who introduced Christianity in the 16th century and subjected the local indigenous and Muslim population to their "pacification" campaign. Then came the United States, briefly followed by Japanese forces in the 20th century. And today there are the so-called "imperialists" in the capital, Manila, up north.

Abdul is convinced the vast majority of Filipino politicians are corrupt and dishonest. He also believes the government is sending "Christian settlers" to Mindanao to squeeze out Muslims like him. The dream of an Islamic state became his panacea against unemployment, poverty and anger. His family has traditionally supported the largest Muslim rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). But Abdul chose to secretly join the Maute extremists who had sworn loyalty to IS.



## IS offered 'feeling of brotherhood'

The group's leaders, Abdullah and Omar Maute, had spent many years in the Middle East adopting a radicalized outlook on life and religious interpretation. For several months after his recruitment in the spring of 2015, Abdul went to a Maute training camp in the jungle where he learned how to handle guns and knives, enjoying what he calls the "feeling of brotherhood." Via Telegram, WhatsApp and other social media channels, Abdul and his friends regularly received translated IS propaganda videos and sermons from Syria and Iraq. Abdul says there were also about 30 foreign fighters in his camp, mainly from neighboring Indonesia and Malaysia, but also from Arab countries. (DW was unable to independently verify his account).

At the end of his jungle training, Abdul received a Kalashnikov rifle and the equivalent of \$182. It was not a one-time sum, but the first payment of a regular monthly salary to prepare him for the future battle. Long years of violence in Mindanao have created a dangerous vacuum. As a result, clan rule, criminal networks, corruption and jihadi splinter groups have flourished. Abdul admits to having used his new weapon in clashes between two rival Marawi families, killing without remorse. "Even if you personally have no enemies, the enemies of your clan are your enemies. That's how it is here," he says.

## Siege of Marawi

The attack on the military base in central Marawi was planned for the summer of 2017, after the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. But after Abu Syyaf fighters, militant allies of the Maute, were uncovered in the area, the Maute spontaneously decided to move up their siege. According to government sources, around 1,000 fighters, mostly local, holed up in private homes, mosques and schools in late May 2017. [They took hostages](#) and beheaded an unknown number of Christians.



When asked about that time, Abdul was evasive: "We were told to only take action against Christians who belonged to the government." He then referred to his Quran study lessons at the jungle camp, where "they taught us that Islam allows us to take revenge for injustice." Abdul and his family were shopping in the neighboring city of Iligan when the battle for Marawi broke out. Unable to take part directly, he spied on the military, passing on details of troop movements to his friends entrenched in the city center.

In the end, it took five months of airstrikes, as well as the deployment of 12,000 soldiers and [U.S. army intelligence units](#), to bring the city [back under government control](#). Some fighters managed to escape, and Abdul went underground. He has since returned to live with his parents, and so far remains undetected.

About 1,200 people are said to have lost their lives; the government claims almost all were jihadi fighters. But many families are still missing relatives, and most victims were buried anonymously in mass graves. Due to the scale of destruction, 65,000 people are still living in emergency shelters. [Martial law remains in force](#).

When asked whether it was worth all the death and destruction, Abdul sounds as if he's trying to purge himself of guilt. "They brainwashed us. They promised us time and again that life in Marawi would improve as soon as we had an Islamic state," he says almost defiantly. "I really didn't see any of this coming. They promised us that we wouldn't be attacked in the city." Abdul is angry — with the government "for bombing Marawi" and with the dead Maute brothers "for breaking their promises." Now 21, he has slipped back into unemployment. (*Read more: [2018 will be 'dangerous' for the Philippines](#)*).



The historic center of Marawi remains off limits, displacing some 65,000 people

## Muslim self-rule — or a renewed threat?

[Iron-fist ruler Rodrigo Duterte](#), the first Philippine president to hail from Mindanao, has promised Muslims more autonomy. If everything goes according to plan, the minority community will be granted more self-determination on the basis of a constitutional framework known as Bangsamoro Organic Law, approved earlier this year. The government's most important negotiating partner in the peace process is the largest rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, which signed a peace deal with the government in 2014. As soon as Muslims have self-rule — expected in 2022 — MILF says it plans to disarm around 30,000 fighters.



Covered graffiti in Marawi, by the entrance of a school, expresses support for IS

But if the road to autonomy turns into a dead end, "many people here will seriously question our credibility," warns Sammy Al-Mansoor, commander-in-chief of the MILF fighters, in an interview with DW at his modest jungle headquarters. "Then ISIS could again try to take advantage of the situation and poach our fighters, and that would indeed be very dangerous," using another term for the militant group.

Still reeling from defeat, the promise of Muslim autonomy is Abdul's new hope for a better life, a substitute for the shattered dream of an Islamic state. But for how long? Angry young men like Abdul, quick to inspire and easy to disappoint, remain susceptible to global jihadi propaganda as it attempts to gain a foothold in Southeast Asia. "I would fight again," Abdul says. "But I would not fight in our Muslim territory. Then it would again be our own people who suffer most. But if the fight takes place elsewhere, I would join in."

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**For additional information on the Battle of Marawi and the Islamic goal in PI refer to the following articles:**

### [Is Philippines' Marawi free from 'Islamic State' influence?](#)

The Philippine government has "liberated" the southern city of Marawi from Islamist extremists. But does it also signal the end of "Islamic State"-inspired militant groups in the country? Ana P. Santos reports. (26.10.2017)

### [2018 will be 'dangerous' for the Philippines](#)

2017 was a challenging year for the Philippines, with the country facing increased political and security problems. Observers say 2018 will be even more difficult. Ana P. Santos reports from Manila. (28.12.2017)

### **Marawi residents caught between a difficult terrain and Islamists**

Security risks and poor road conditions are making it difficult for humanitarian and medical aid to reach an estimated 77,000 people, who were displaced when IS-inspired jihadis took over Marawi. Ana P. Santos reports. (15.08.2017)

### **Philippine troops rescue priest 'Father Chito' from IS jihadis**

A priest held hostage by jihadis in Marawi has been freed by Philippine troops. His rescue comes as the Philippine military makes fresh advances against Islamist militants. Ana P. Santos reports from Manila. (19.09.2017)

### **Marawi residents report military abuses during jihadist siege**

Residents of war-torn Marawi are preparing to take legal action against the Philippine government for the alleged mass destruction of property and human rights violations. Ana P. Santos reports from Marawi. (30.10.2017)

### **Philippine President Duterte declares Marawi 'liberation' from jihadis**

Philippine President Duterte has declared that Marawi city is now liberated from IS-linked jihadis. Rebuilding and rehabilitating the war-torn city will be a test case for Duterte, say analysts. Ana P. Santos reports. (17.10.2017)

### **Philippine President Duterte mulls martial law extension in Mindanao**

Locals and rights activists are opposing a possible extension of martial law in Mindanao island. They say that emergency measures are no longer required after security forces freed the region from "IS"-linked insurgents. (04.12.2018)

### **US forces 'assisting' Philippines in battle to end city siege**

US special forces are "assisting" Philippine troops against Islamist militants on Mindanao, the US embassy says. The two-week siege has left the city of Marawi devastated. Militants are still reportedly holding hostages. (10.06.2017)

### **Will President Duterte live up to his campaign promises?**

President Rodrigo Duterte's pledge to relentlessly fight crime and corruption helped him win the Philippine presidency. But was it just tough talk? The GIGA Institute of Asian Studies' Jasmine Lorch speaks with DW. (30.06.2016)

### **Philippines declares end to battle with Islamist militants in Marawi**

The Philippine defense secretary has said the last of the pro-'Islamic State' militants in the southern city of Marawi are "finished." The five-month battle against the group claimed more than 1,000 lives. (23.10.2017)

[Source: DW | Sandra Petersmann | December 18, 2018 ++]