



**WINTER 2018 VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN
THE PHILIPPINES:**

**ENDEMIC CONFLICT, VOLATILE
POLITICS AND THE STRUGGLE
FOR IDENTITY**



**CENTER FOR
INSIGHTS IN
SURVEY
RESEARCH**

A PROJECT OF THE INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE

*Violent Extremism in the Philippines: Endemic Conflict, Volatile Politics
and the Struggle for Identity*

Copyright © 2019 International Republican Institute. All rights reserved.

Permission Statement: No part of this work may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the International Republican Institute.

Requests for permission should include the following information:

- The title of the document for which permission to copy material is desired.
- A description of the material for which permission to copy is desired.
- The purpose for which the copied material will be used and the manner in which it will be used.
- Your name, title, company or organization name, telephone number, fax number, e-mail address and mailing address.

Please send all requests for permission to:

Attn: Department of External Affairs
International Republican Institute
1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005
info@iri.org

Cover Image Description: Cotabato City seal.

Translation: Long live the Philippines. Muslims and Christians hand in hand for peace and development.

**VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN
THE PHILIPPINES:
ENDEMIC CONFLICT, VOLATILE
POLITICS AND THE STRUGGLE
FOR IDENTITY**

WINTER 2018

International Republican Institute

IRI.org

@IRI_Polls

© 2019 All Rights Reserved

ACRONYMS

AKP:	Ansar Khalifa Philippines
ARMM:	Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
ASG:	Abu Sayyaf Group
BARMM:	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
BIFF:	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters
BOL:	Bangsamoro Organic Law
CPP-NPA:	Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army
ISIS:	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
MILF:	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MNLF:	Moro National Liberation Front
NPA:	New People's Army
VE:	Violent extremism
VEO:	Violent extremist organization

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

BEHAVIORAL RADICALS

Individuals who either:

- Actively support or engage in violence in pursuit of an ideology that espouses wholesale change to the existing political, social and/or economic order; or
- Actively support or engage in nonviolent action in pursuit of an ideology that espouses wholesale change to the existing political, social and/or economic order

COGNITIVE RADICALS

Individuals who either:

- Passively support violence in pursuit of an ideology that espouses wholesale change to the existing political, social and/or economic order; or
- Passively support nonviolent action in pursuit of an ideology that espouses wholesale change to the existing political, social and/or economic order

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

- Policies, programs, interventions and/or activities that seek to alter the mentalities of current extremists and minimize the continuation of VE and VE-recruitment

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

- Policies, programs, interventions and/or activities that seek to alter the mentalities of current extremists and minimize the continuation of VE and VE-recruitment

DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

- Pull factors: Psychological and/or personal incentives that attract individuals to join terrorism and violent extremism
- Push factors: Structural factors such as social, cultural, political, religious and ethnic marginalization, corruption, poverty, lack of employment, poor governance
- Enabling factors: Mentors, online forums or local networks that may catalyze and exacerbate the process of radicalization and/or recruitment

FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS (FTFS)

- Individuals who leave their country to join a VEO in order to assist it in any capacity

PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

- Policies, programs, interventions and/or activities that address push factors/grievances before they metastasize into motivators for VE; preventing the movement of aggrieved individuals into VEOs

RADICALISM

- An ideology that espouses wholesale change to the existing political, social and/or economic order

RECRUITMENT

- The process of manipulating and/or providing incentives to an individual for the purpose of convincing him or her to join a VEO

RESILIENCY (TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM)

- Refers to individuals, communities or groups that are resistant to the push, pull and enabling factors that lead to violent extremism within a particular context

SUSCEPTIBILITY (TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM)

- Individuals, communities or groups that experience *pull* factors that lead to violent extremism within a particular context

VIOLENT EXTREMISM

- Active or passive support for or participation in violence undertaking to change the existing political, social and/or economic order
 - Active Support: Financial or logistical support for or engagement in VE
 - Passive Support: Intellectual support for the goals and tactics of VE

VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS

- Organizations that advocate for and/or uses violence to achieve the wholesale change to the existing political, social and/or economic order

VULNERABILITY (TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM)

- Individuals, communities or groups that experience *push* factors that lead to violent extremism within a particular context

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approach

- The International Republican Institute (IRI) contracted the Philippines-based Institute for Autonomy and Governance (IAG) to conduct a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) from August to September 2018. The purpose of this study was to better understand how governance deficiencies and other social dynamics create vulnerabilities to radicalization and violent extremism (VE) among young men in the Philippines' southern island of Mindanao. Given the constraints of this research project and the propensity of fighters and violent extremist organization (VEO) recruits to be male, the study focused its participant recruitment on men.
- The assessment also explored potential sources of resilience within the study's target communities in Mindanao: Cotabato City, Davao City, Palimbang and Zamboanga City. These cities represent a diverse sample of contexts throughout Mindanao related to their historical and structural grievances, traditional support for the peace negotiations, and proximity to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).
- This report is based on eight FGDs with a total of 76 Filipinos, targeting a diverse pool of at-risk male youth, ages 18 to 29. It also draws on IDIs with 20 individuals — five from each of the four locations. These interviewees included community leaders, members of nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and other key stakeholders.
- Using a pre-screening tool designed by IRI, IAG selected FGD participants who expressed various degrees of concern about the issue of VE in their communities and disaggregated them into two groups per city: a most concerned group and a less concerned group. The pre-screening process also took into account individuals' employment and salary, marital status, level of education, religious affiliation and level of awareness of VE in Mindanao.
- As is common in qualitative research, findings from these FGDs and IDIs are not necessarily representative of opinions of at-risk male youth and other groups in Mindanao.
- *Research Limitation:* Several participants and interviewees expressed reticence to talk about their experiences with VE due to fear of being associated with certain violent extremist organizations (VEOs).
- IRI's approach to preventing violent extremism (PVE) is anchored in three phases: **understand, inform, and equip**. This report represents the first phase in the Philippines.

FINDINGS

Potential Sources of Vulnerability to Violent Extremism

Finding #1: Pervasive violence and limited access to justice may drive individuals to consider violent extremism as a legitimate way to redress grievances.

Finding #2: Discrimination against individuals of Muslim faith intensifies feelings of marginalization and could aid violent extremist organization recruitment efforts.

Finding #3: Political alienation and disenfranchisement may increase the appeal of violent extremism to vulnerable individuals.

Finding #4: Low socioeconomic standing drives vulnerable Filipinos to consider joining violent extremism organizations, primarily because of the financial incentives.

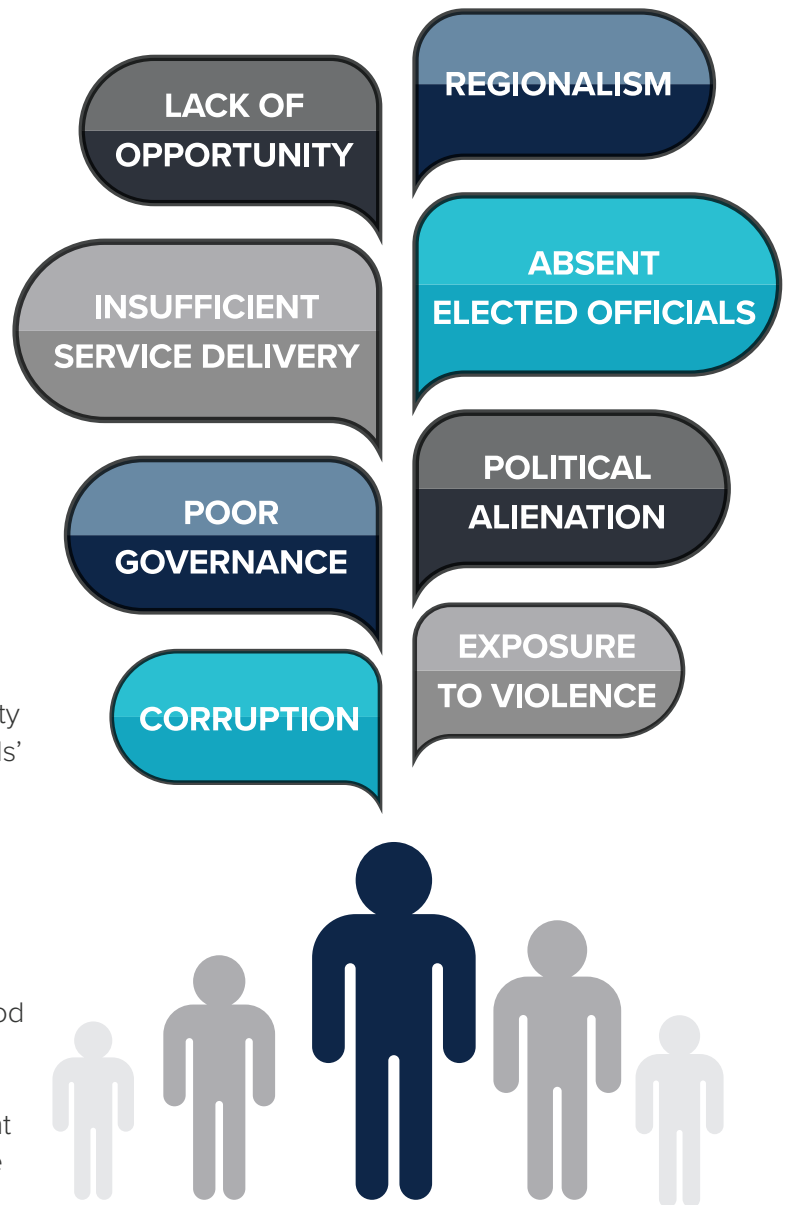
Finding #5: While widely seen as a positive security measure, martial law has restricted some individuals' movement and access to services, which could exacerbate existing grievances.

Potential Sources of Resilience to Violent Extremism

Finding #1: Peace talks are seen as a viable method of resolving conflict.

Finding #2: High levels of trust in local government efforts to counter violent extremism could enhance community resilience.

Finding #3: Existing public interest in improving awareness of violent extremism could be leveraged to strengthen community resilience to radicalization and violent extremist organization recruitment.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Local government units should conduct outreach campaigns, town halls and listening tours to ensure citizens' perspectives are being taken into account.

Recommendation 2: Civil society should amplify the voices and priorities of citizens and promote community needs.

Recommendation 3: Citizen access to decision-making and political inclusion should be prioritized over political ideology and the quest for political power.

Recommendation 4: Civil society organizations should work with citizens to conduct awareness campaigns on issues of violent extremism.

Recommendation 5: International nongovernmental organizations and local civil society actors should provide support to the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao government officials after the passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law.

Recommendation 6: Civil society organizations should train citizens to conduct community-level peace talks and dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines — Southeast Asia’s oldest democracy — has a long history of complex, unresolved violence among various clans and religious, political and criminal groups. Varied, protracted conflict has increased over the past several decades, resulting in a complex set of grievances and social cleavages among the population. Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are both partly responsible for and are beneficiaries of this increasing trend of violence.

Since the 16th century, the Moro (referring to the Filipino Muslim population) conflict has been deeply entrenched in the southern island of Mindanao, where 23 percent of the populace is Muslim. As tensions between the Christian-dominated government and the Muslim population grew, separatist movements — such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) — formed in response. The longstanding practice of clan feuding, or *rido*, characterized by enduring hostility and retaliatory violence between various ethnic groups, accelerate divisions and grievances that are readily exploited by separatism and extremism.¹

The Philippines has become a recruitment and operational hub for a number of violent extremist organizations (VEOs), including the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-Philippines. Ungoverned and insufficiently governed spaces have allowed VEOs to ravage large swaths of Mindanao. The 2017 Marawi siege — a conflict in which VEOs battled with Philippine government security forces — resulted in the dispersion of the Maute Group, the Ansar Khalifa Philippines (AKP), and other ISIS-affiliated fighters throughout the country. As VEOs scattered, their greater geographic reach has increased the terrorist and VEO recruitment threat to an unprecedented level in the Philippines.² VEOs have found success in exploiting existing divisions within Filipino society to identify pockets in which to operate. Terrorist groups manipulate community and individual grievances using targeted messaging campaigns and tailored incentives to increase recruitment.

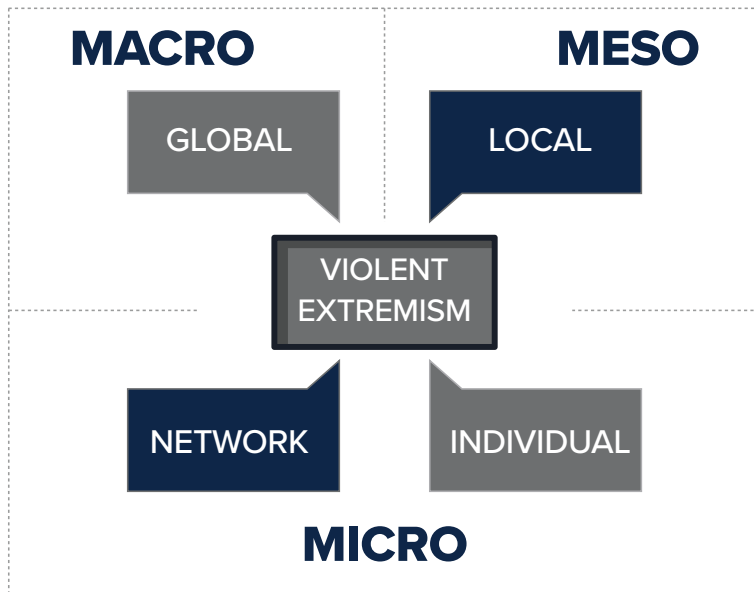
There is a generational divide among different VEOs in the Philippines. Older fighters, who belong to the MNLF and MILF are participating in the peace process with the government of Philippines, while younger recruits are opting for violent conflict by affiliating themselves with ASG, BIFF and ISIS-Philippines. Many aggrieved young Mindanaoans see participation by the MNLF and MILF in the peace process as selling out their communities to the so-called Imperial Manila, a perception that ASG, BIFF and ISIS-Philippines continue to exploit to increase youth recruitment.

Though recognized as a historic breakthrough in granting autonomy to the Bangsamoro people, the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) could be utilized by ISIS-affiliated VEOs to further exacerbate these tensions. The BOL is a product of a peace agreement between the government of the Philippines and MILF. It formally abolishes the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and creates the BARMM, likely led by MILF. In January 2019, the majority of voters in ARMM voted to ratify the BOL, and on February 6, 63 out of 67 *barangays* (the country’s smallest administrative units) in Cotabato voted to be included in the BARMM territory, while residents in Lanao del Norte voted against the inclusion of all six towns.³ As the peace process crystallizes and yields gains and losses for various nonstate actors, more radical and violent groups, including ISIS affiliates, could gain popularity and influence.

¹ Cabalza, Chester. “How Clan Feuds and Ethnic Tensions Breed Terrorism in the Philippines.” *The Diplomat*, 6 July 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/how-clan-feuds-and-ethnic-tensions-breed-terrorism-in-the-philippines/>.

² In 2017, the Philippines recorded the highest number of deaths from terrorism since 2002, ranking 10th out of 163 countries. See *Global Terrorism Index 2018*. Institute for Economics and Peace, Nov. 2018, <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/12/Global-Terrorism-Index-2018-1.pdf>.

³ Fonbuena, Carmela. “63 out of 67 barangays in Cotabato to join Bangsamoro region.” *Rappler*, 8 Feb. 2019, updated 9 Feb. 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/222984-plebiscite-results-number-of-barangays-cotabato-join-bangsamoro-region>.



*Figure 1:
IRI analyzes grievances at multiple levels*

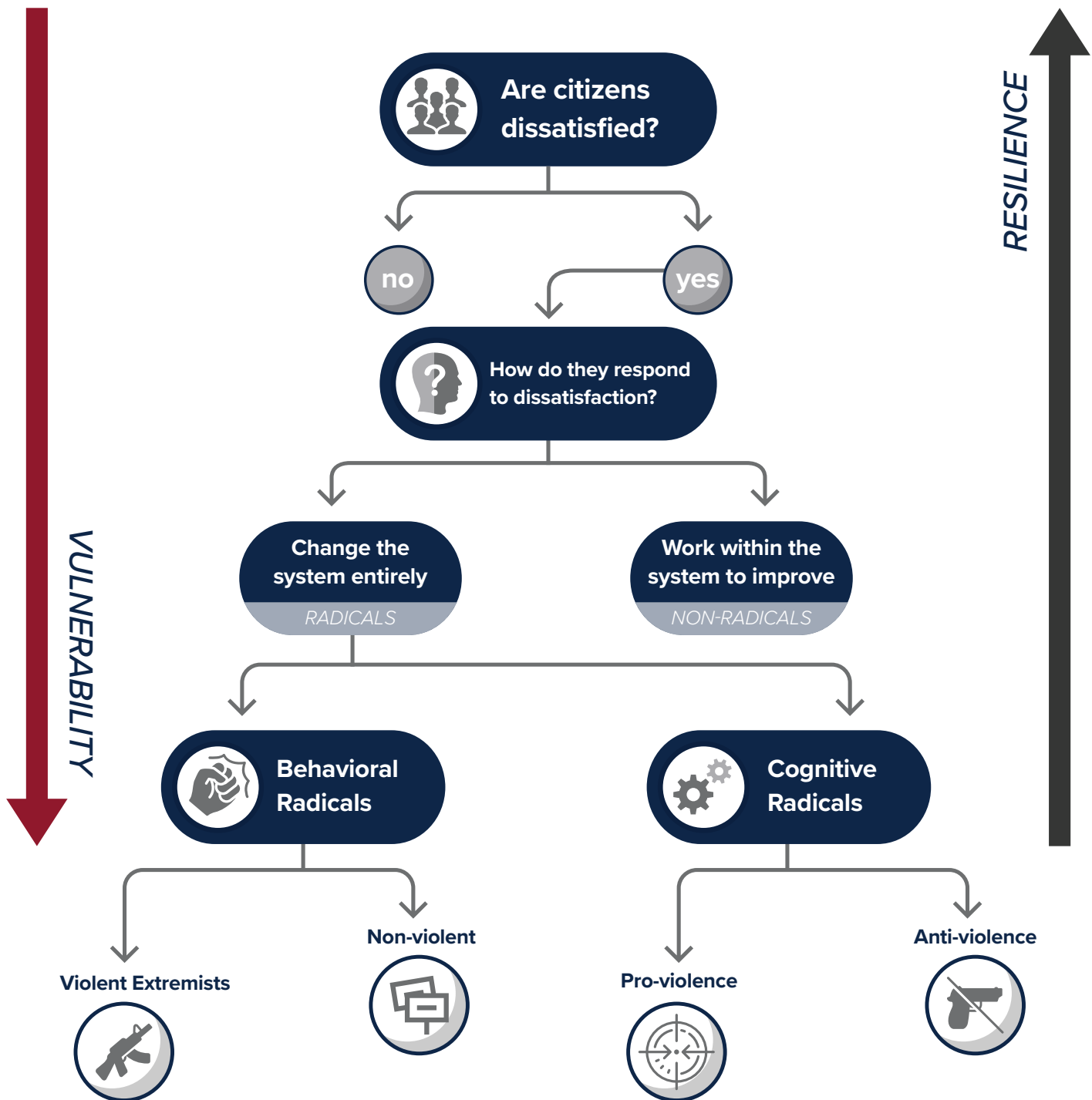
IRI takes a three-phased approach to preventing violent extremism (PVE): **understand, inform and equip**. Each phase is critical to forging a comprehensive, responsive, governance-focused strategy capable of preventing the conditions that allow violent extremism to take root. IRI’s approach is politically informed, locally driven and customized to the unique needs of specific communities.

Drivers of violent extremism stem from several interconnected factors as detailed in *Figure 1*. Much of the existing research on violent extremism focuses exclusively on factors at the macro (global), meso (national and subnational), or micro (individual) levels. However, focusing on just one of these levels risks obscuring the ways in which the levels interact with and reinforce each other. In recognition of this fact, the research approach taken by IRI in our *understand* phase uses qualitative methods of information gathering, including focus groups to gather data across multiple levels of analysis. Our regional and thematic knowledge and political expertise allows us to glean unique insights from the research to develop a comprehensive yet nuanced understanding of local drivers of violent extremism.

IRI’s understand phase framework includes several levels of analysis to assess “vulnerability,” as well as sources of “resilience.” “Vulnerability” encompasses the full spectrum of drivers, including social, political and/or economic grievances that convince an individual to support violent extremism. “Resilience” connotes the ability of individuals to withstand recruitment efforts despite these grievances. Our unique framework — see *Figure 2* — allows us to identify not only differences between violent extremists and resilient individuals, but also between “cognitive radicals” — those who agree with violence but do not perpetrate attacks — and “behavioral radicals” — those who act on their radical ideology by committing violent acts.

Building on decades of survey research experience by IRI’s Center for Insights in Survey Research and Office of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, our *understand* phase is customizable and scalable to fit the myriad contexts susceptible to the threat of violent extremism.

Figure 2: IRI's Pathways to Violent Extremism



METHODOLOGY

IRI designed and commissioned a series of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews in order to understand vulnerable and resilient behaviors, perspectives and attitudes of individuals in Mindanao. IRI will use this data to determine the most pressing challenges and grievances in these communities that may manifest in VE and to identify entry points for governance programming.

IRI requested the Institute of Autonomy and Governance (IAG) to facilitate FGDs and IDIs from August to September 2018 with individuals from Cotabato City, Davao City, Palimbang and Zamboanga City in Mindanao. These cities capture a range VE dynamics in the region, related to their historical and structural grievances, traditional support for the peace negotiations and proximity to the current ARMM and future Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

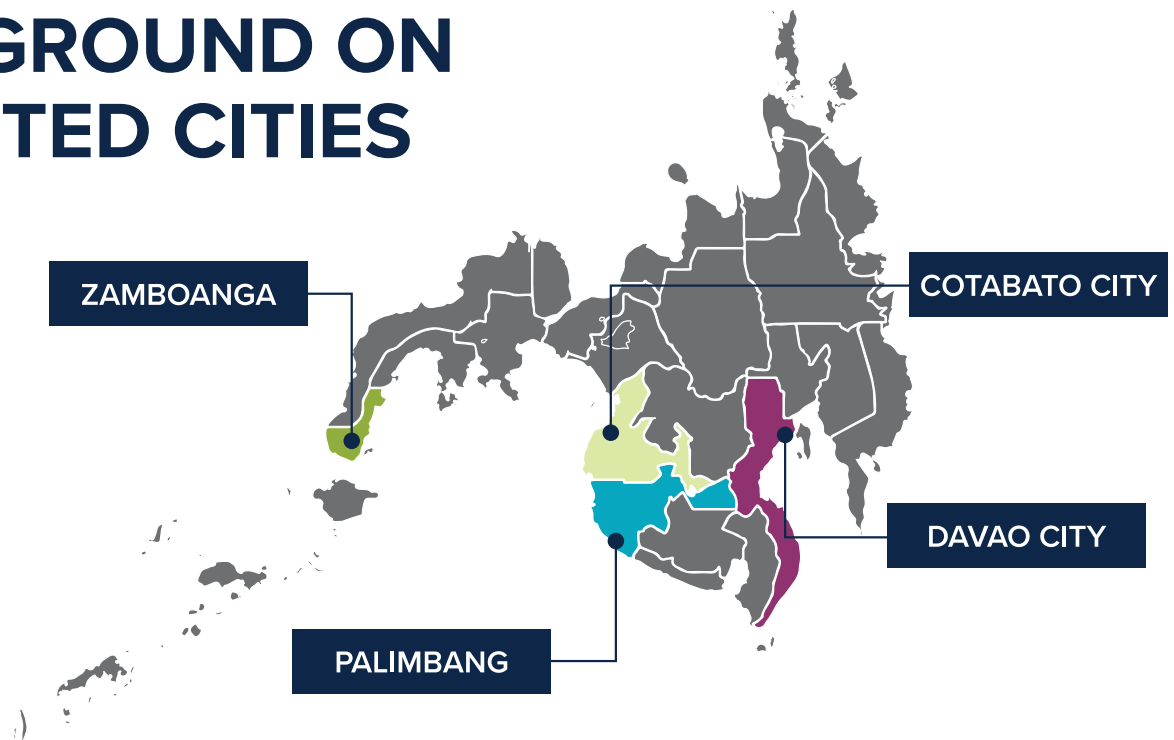
Data Collection Process

IAG conducted a total of eight FGDs, which reached 76 Filipinos. IAG selected FGD participants and interviewees using a pre-screening tool which took into account individuals' economic standing, education level and age, among other key factors. IAG selected discussants who expressed concern about the issue of VE in their communities, dividing FGD participants into two groups per city: a "most concerned" group and a "less concerned" group.

IAG also conducted IDIs with 20 individuals — five each from four the study sites. The interviewees were a diverse group of key stakeholders in their respective communities, including a chairman of a *barangay*, a member of a village youth council, representatives of various nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and a member of MILF.

As is common in qualitative research, findings from these FGDs and IDIs do not necessarily represent the opinions of at-risk male youth and other groups in Mindanao.

BACKGROUND ON SELECTED CITIES



1. **Cotabato City** was the seat of the previous ARMM government, with a 76 percent Muslim population. Of the four locations where IRI conducted research, Cotabato City is the only one which will be situated in the BARMM.
2. **Palimbang** is a diverse city inhabited by indigenous populations whose primary sources of income come from farming, fishing and the transport industries. The livelihoods of people working in these industries were deeply affected by the restrictions of movement imposed under martial law surrounding the Marawi siege.
3. **Davao City** is the largest and one of the most populous cities in the Philippines and the hometown of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Duterte served as the mayor of Davao prior to assuming the presidency in 2016 and still enjoys significant popular support in the city. The bombing of Roxas night market in 2016 killed 15 people⁴ and prompted local officials to tighten security in the city.
4. In 2013, **Zamboanga City** became a battleground when members of MNLF attempted to raise the flag of the self-proclaimed Bangsamoro Republik at Zamboanga City Hall, taking hostages. Clashes between the MNLF and the government's armed forces seeking to free the hostages and expel MNLF from the city went on for days, resulting in more than 200 dead and the displacement of more than 100,000⁵ people. Business establishments and houses were destroyed, and the city was placed under firm military control. The Marawi siege in 2017 has led the local authorities in Zamboanga City to enhance security even further following the declaration of martial law in Mindanao given the city's history of violence.

⁴ Tesiorna, Ben O. "Pregnant Davao Bombing Victim Dies in Hospital; Death Toll Rises to 15." CNN Philippines, 13 Sept. 2016, <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2016/09/13/pregnant-davao-bombing-victim-dies-in-hospital-death-toll-rises-15.html>.

⁵ Whaley, Floyd. "Philippine Standoff Ends, but Fighting Goes On." The New York Times, 29 Sept. 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/30/world/asia/fighting-continues-in-philippine-city-after-standoff-ends.html>.

OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUP AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Cotabato City:

1. FGD with 10 males in the most concerned group (ages 18-29)
2. FGD with eight males in the less concerned group (ages 18-29)
3. IDIs with five local experts and stakeholders

Participant profile:

- The average age of the groups was 21 years old
- More than half of participants were out of school
- Almost three quarters of participants were unemployed
- Almost three quarters of discussants identified as Muslim

Davao City:

1. FGD with 10 males in the most concerned group (ages 18-29)
2. FGD with 10 males in the less concerned group (ages 18-29)
3. IDIs with five local experts and stakeholders

Participant profile:

- The average age of the groups was 22 years old
- More than half of participants were out of school
- Almost half of participants were unemployed
- More than three quarters of discussants identified as Roman Catholic

Palimbang:

1. FGD with 10 males in the most concerned group (ages 18-29)
2. FGD with nine males in the less concerned group (ages 18-29)
3. IDIs with five local experts and stakeholders

Participant profile:

- The average age of the groups was 21 years old
- Almost half of participants were out of school
- More than a third of participants were unemployed
- More than three quarters of discussants identified as Muslim

Zamboanga:

1. FGD with 10 males in the most concerned group (ages 18-29)
2. FGD with nine males in the less concerned group (ages 18-29)
3. IDIs with five local experts and stakeholders

Participant profile:

- The average age of the groups was 22 years old
- More than half of participants were out of school
- More than three quarters of participants were unemployed
- Almost three quarters of discussants identified as Roman Catholic

CONTEXT

Prominent Violent Extremist Organizations

Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF): Initiated as a collection of Moro (Filipino Muslims) independence fighters who split from the Muslim Independence Movement in the early 1970s, MNLF established a new precedent for Islamist separatist groups in Mindanao. In the late 1970s, due to a disagreement among the MNLF leadership regarding the appropriate degree of adherence to Islamic principles within the independence fight, a swath of MNLF fighters splintered and formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). MNLF signed a peace treaty with the Philippine government in 1996 to establish the ARMM.⁶

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF): Chiefly located in central Mindanao, MILF is the largest and strongest Islamic separatist organization.⁷ In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, MILF carried out a number of bombings and acts of violence throughout Mindanao in its separatist struggle. Due to the Philippine government's weak control of and capacity in the region, MILF established a parallel government with popular support.

MILF's popularity increased after MNLF's 1996 peace agreement with the government which stipulated a ceasefire and formally established the ARMM. Although violent activity continued, the MILF leadership disavowed any use of terrorism or collaboration with local and regional terrorist organizations. Initially, these claims of nonviolence were largely seen as disingenuous, but in 2012, MILF leadership began earnest peace negotiations with the Philippine government which would ultimately

lead to the BOL. The BOL would officially instate MILF leaders as government officials in the newly established Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA): Founded in 1968, the CPP-NPA has committed a number of deadly terrorist attacks in the name of communism. From the mid-1980s to the present, the CPP-NPA has oscillated between violence and negotiations to end attacks against the Philippine government and armed forces.⁸ These negotiations stalled in 2002 after the U.S. listed the CPP-NPA as a terrorist organization, and clashes have continued.

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF): Based in the southern Philippines, BIFF shares MILF's goal of establishing an independent Islamic state for the Filipino Muslim minority. As a splinter group of MILF, BIFF carried out a violent string of attacks in 2012 in an attempt to discredit the peace talks between MILF and the government. In August 2014, BIFF declared allegiance to the ISIS, but the Philippine military perceived this as a mere attempt to leverage the "global reputation of ISIS."⁹

Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG): One of the first ISIS affiliates in the Philippines, ASG has earned a reputation for being one of the most radical and brutal Islamic separatist groups in the country, having carried out several high-profile killings, kidnappings and bombings.¹⁰ The group was run by Isnilon Hapilon, who was killed by the Philippine military during the Marawi siege in October 2017. Hapilon declared the group's allegiance to ISIS in 2014.¹¹ The group rose to prominence as a major

⁶ "Moro National Liberation Front." *Mapping Militant Organizations*. Stanford University, updated 14 Aug. 2015, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/379>.

⁷ "Moro Islamic Liberation Front." *Mapping Militant Organizations*. Stanford University, updated 24 Aug. 2015, <https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/309?highlight=Philippines#>.

⁸ "Communist Party of the Philippines – New People's Army." *Mapping Militant Organizations*. Stanford University, updated 24 Aug. 2015, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/149>.

⁹ "Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters." *Mapping Militant Organizations*. Stanford University, updated 27 Aug. 2015, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/601?highlight=philippines>.

¹⁰ "Abu Sayyaf Group." *Mapping Militant Organizations*. Stanford University, updated 20 July 2015, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/152>.

¹¹ "Philippines Military Kills Islamist Isnilon Hapilon." BBC News, 16 Oct. 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41632434>.

aggressor in the Marawi siege in May 2017. However, the Philippine government's military campaign significantly damaged the group, forcing it into a rebuilding phase. ASG has since resorted to its pre-Marawi tactics of suicide bombings and kidnappings and has retreated to its traditional strongholds in Mindanao's western island region of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. Like BIFF, ASG has pledged an oath to ISIS. ASG attacks have been announced on the ISIS news agency Amaq.¹²

Maute Group: One of the youngest terrorist groups in the Philippines, the Maute Group was founded in 2012 by the Maute brothers, Abdullah and Omar. The brothers were believed to have connections with ISIS supporters and have strong family ties to MILF leaders.¹³ The Maute Group quickly skyrocketed in notoriety after it aligned with ISIS and ASG to lay siege on Marawi. The U.S. government designated Maute as a terrorist organization in February 2018.¹⁴ Similar to ASG, the Marawi siege proved to be extremely destructive to the Maute's ranks, gutting the organization and forcing it into hiding. During the siege, both Maute brothers were killed along with the majority of the group's leadership. Although Maute has been significantly weakened, the Philippine government's intelligence reports have indicated the group is continuing to recruit new members to rebuild its ranks and reemerge as a serious VEO in Mindanao.¹⁵

ISIS-Philippines: Officially designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. government in February 2018, ISIS-Philippines is an affiliate of the ISIS terrorist network.¹⁶ Radical elements in Mindanao such as the Maute Group have pledged allegiance to ISIS and have coordinated numerous acts of terrorism — including the Marawi siege — with ISIS-Philippines.¹⁷

Ansar Khalifa Philippines (AKP): Although it is the smallest ISIS affiliate in the Philippines, AKP not only

participated in the Marawi siege but has since carried out several smaller bombing operations in the south-central region of Mindanao, primarily in Cotabato City.¹⁸

Discussant Perceptions of VEOs

Many discussants held positive or tolerant views of MILF, MNLF and, in some cases, CPP-NPA, associating them with diplomacy instead of violence due to their participation in the peace talks with the government:

“The [MILF] is not violent because they opt for diplomacy.”

– Palimbang focus group discussant

“MNLF and MILF are different because they are after peace where people are free in terms of livelihood.”

– Cotabato City interviewee

“

Maute, BIFF and Abu Sayyaf sow violence sometimes. And they even kill each another.”

–Palimbang interviewee

¹² Mogato, Manuel. “Islamic State Claims Basilan Blast that Killed 10.” Reuters, 1 Aug. 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/08/01/18/islamic-state-claims-basilan-blast-that-killed-10>.

¹³ Head, Jonathan. “Maute Rebel Group: A Rising Threat to Philippines.” BBC News, 31 May 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40103602>.

¹⁴ “State Department Terrorist Designations of ISIS Affiliates and Senior Leaders.” U.S. Department of State, 27 Feb. 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/02/278883.htm>.

¹⁵ Hart, Michael. “A Year after Marawi, What's Left of ISIS in the Philippines?” *The Diplomat*, 25 Oct. 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/a-year-after-marawi-whats-left-of-isis-in-the-philippines/>.

¹⁶ “State Department Terrorist Designations of ISIS Affiliates and Senior Leaders.” U.S. Department of State.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hart. “A Year After Marawi, What's Left of ISIS in the Philippines?”



NPA, MNLF and MILF [are not serious threats]. It just happens they have beliefs according to their tradition and culture. Some of this is good while some of this is not.”

– Palimbang interviewee



People are scared of [ISIS, Maute and ASG], especially when they are seen brandishing firearms.”

– Palimbang interviewee

“The MNLF and MILF helped drive away the ISIS-affiliated group in Butril.”

– Palimbang interviewee

“The MILF and MNLF want to have their own laws that are good and decent.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

Discussants’ tolerant views of these groups may have promising implications for the integration of ex-combatants into society as the peace talks and BOL are finalized.

Notably, two interviewees from Zamboanga spoke negatively about MNLF in particular. A few of these interviewees referred to the Zamboanga siege, which was perpetrated by MNLF, to justify their negative views of the MNLF.

“They wanted to get Zamboanga, but they had a hard time getting the city. Yes they are a threat. They only wanted power.”

– Zamboanga interviewee

“The MNLF are the ones bringing the war. They are the one who start the war. [They are the same as ISIS.]”

– Zamboanga interviewee

One interviewee also mentioned that the passage of the BOL may exacerbate tensions between MILF and MNLF: “Like for example now that the BOL is approved it might happen that the MNLF will also ask another program since the MILF was given their own state.”

FGD and IDI participants consistently indicated that Maute, ASG, BIFF and ISIS were a major security threat in their communities, connecting them with brutality and violence.

“[Maute, Abu Sayyaf, BIFF] are a threat because sometimes they can be considered bombers.”

– Cotabato City interviewee

FINDINGS

Potential Sources of Vulnerability to Violent Extremism

The following five findings represent potential vulnerabilities to VE in Mindanao. The qualitative research reflects key factors which drive citizen dissatisfaction and disillusionment, including political and economic exclusion; the effects of conflicts stretching across generations; the rise of ISIS on the island; and governance deficiencies.

Although the path to VE is nonlinear and highly individualized, factors that may increase an individual's propensity to become a behavioral or cognitive radical include: myriad forms of citizen dissatisfaction; a willingness to change the system; and pro-violence attitudes (see *Figure 2*). While none of these dynamics taken alone represents a necessary or sufficient condition for VE, IRI's research indicates that they may act as push factors that leave individuals increasingly vulnerable to radicalization and VEO recruitment.

Finding #1:

Pervasive violence and limited access to justice may drive individuals to consider violent extremism as a legitimate way to redress grievances.

For decades, armed conflict and violence have wreaked havoc on Mindanao. From clan-based conflict and acts of terror to operations related to the drug war, conflict has pervaded the island, desensitizing many while perpetuating a culture of fear. Many discussants have felt the effects of the conflict, having witnessed or directly experienced indiscriminate violence. Some discussants referenced the ongoing drug war, a campaign spearheaded by Duterte that has led to the extrajudicial killings of more than 12,000 Filipinos.¹⁹

“Someone was killed in front of me. We were playing billiards when the person was shot in the head. We were all afraid.”

– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

“I witnessed a riot, so I went to another street to avoid it. However, there was someone tailing me. He was allegedly the assistant of the previous *barangay* captain. Suddenly, he grabbed me, tied my hands and feet. He used his [car] to hurt me. But when we arrived in the *barangay* hall, they asked if anyone there knew me. Luckily, there



Justice here takes a long time. There was a killing incident in our area, and the killer is still at large.”

- Palimbang focus group discussant

¹⁹ “Philippines’ ‘War on Drugs.’” Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/tag/philippines-war-drugs>.

was some I knew who recognized me. But when I was transported to the police station, the police officers didn't seem to care. They said they would no longer arrest [the perpetrator] because my face was already swelling. It is really unforgettable to me. He thought that I belonged to one of the gangs that staged the riot.”

– Davao City focus group discussant

“My cousin, who used to be an addict, was forced by the police to [say that he used drugs]. They heated a piece of iron and stuck it to my cousin's body.”

– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

This community-level violence has critical implications for VE vulnerability. Research has shown that, in violent communities, “deviant behaviors are normalized and compromise withers,”²⁰ thereby increasing an individual's susceptibility to VE. This report mirrors these findings; for example, a discussant from Zamboanga City said, “In a video, I saw how the ASG cut the heads of the Marines. What they did is justified because the soldiers do the same.”

Several focus group discussants and interviewees referenced state-sponsored violence — specifically those related to the drug war — which could exacerbate vulnerability to VE even further given that our theoretical framework and past research highlights anti-government sentiments as a critical prerequisite to radicalization to VE. In other contexts, government action, including the killing or arrest of a family member or friend, has been identified as a primary factor pushing individuals to join a VEO.²¹ As such, targeted acts of violence perpetrated by the police or government may breed or aggravate a sense of injustice among vulnerable individuals.

Discussants also indicated that cases of violence and killings are often left unresolved, justice is not served,

DAVAOEÑO PERSPECTIVES ON THE WAR ON DRUGS

Prior to his election in 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte served as mayor of Davao City and conducted a similar anti-drug campaign during his term.²² Notably, discussants from Davao more readily defended or justified the war on drugs.

“Let's say that killing a person is against the law. In order to stop that case, prevent it, there is a need to kill to curb the situation from getting worse. The president's decision to implement *Oplan Tokhang*²³ is right to stop or lessen the cases. Though there is no assurance that the drug war would be stopped during his administration, the cases would at least be reduced.”

– Davao City focus group discussant

“[Drug use] would not be stopped if the Oplan would not be implemented.”

– Davao City focus group discussant

“Those who are targeted in the Oplan Tokhang, if they would not be stopped, they would be the ones who would kill or victimize.”

– Davao City focus group discussant

These responses not only indicate approval of violent measures to correct wrongdoing, but also illuminate a degree of comfort with undemocratic measures in the name of “justice”.

²⁰ McCauley, John F. et al. *Contextual Violence and Support for Violent Extremism: Evidence from the Sahel*. University of Maryland, September 2016, https://cidcm.umd.edu/sites/cidcm.umd.edu/files/mccauley_cidcm_paper.pdf.

²¹ *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*. United Nations Development Program, 2017, <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>.

²² Davao participants were unique in their positive assessment of the drug war and support for its continuation. In the other target geographic areas, focus group discussants conveyed a much more negative view of the drug war.

²³ *Oplan Tokhang* refers to Duterte's drug war.

and a culture of impunity pervades. One interviewee from Zamboanga City said that human rights violations were one of the most pressing issues in his community: “I can see that there is no more sense in the rights of an individual because anytime you can be arrested without a warrant. If you are powerful, you can violate.”

“The drug users are killed without enough evidence. There is a lack of evidence to issue the person a warrant of arrest. If they will fight back, that’s all, that is where you can arrest or shoot them if they fight back.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“Justice here takes a long time. There was a killing incident in our area, and the killer is still at large.”

– Palimbang focus group discussant

“For example, something [like violence or criminal activity] happens and then [when] you report it, they will just ignore you.”

– Cotabato City, focus group discussant

“The extra-judicial killings ... they are killing any person, right? Without [legal] cases that this person is like this, maybe they only heard it from someone else that this person is a criminal so they are killed without proof. There is no justice to the incidents.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

As violence continues to permeate Mindanao, individuals may increasingly feel hopeless and develop grievances against the state when they are unable to access justice.

Across a range of regions and contexts, violent extremism thrives as one among many manifestations of conflict dynamics. In the Philippines, the violence that plagues Mindanao may fuel desensitization to violence and vulnerability to VE. And with limited recourse to justice, individuals may resort to violence as a means to redress grievances.

Finding #2:

Discrimination against individuals of Muslim faith intensifies feelings of marginalization and could aid violent extremist organization recruitment efforts.

Religious discrimination significantly affects the day-to-day decisions of Muslims in Mindanao. Muslims in Mindanao report hesitating to openly practice their religion and avoiding certain public areas where they may feel unsafe or unwelcome.²⁴ This represents a source of grievance that VEOs can easily exploit. Discussants expressed concerns that they could be banned from entering public spaces or even reported to local security services if their outward appearance identified them as Muslims. These fears were exacerbated in the wake of the Marawi siege.

“For example, before I didn’t have fear praying in *masjid*²⁵ because it is a normal thing to do. But when the incident in Marawi happened, I doubled my carefulness. All of those who are praying can be suspected as a member of ISIS because [people associate] Islam [with] ISIS.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“Since Marawi, the *niqabi*²⁶ students were not allowed to enter here in the Notre Dame University and Polytechnic University. So this was unfair, because not all *niqabi* belong to ISIS and Maute.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“If you’re going to travel, other people could report you to the police or soldiers because they think you are a member of ISIS. That is common with the *niqabis*. If you wear a niqab, people think, ‘Hey, that’s a member of ISIS or they are possibly members of ISIS because they are *niqabi*.’”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

²⁴ The role of geographical differences in perceived discrimination emerged among the four sites where IRI conducted research. Discrimination against Muslims was experienced by discussants in Cotabato City and Davao City, but this issue was not raised by discussants in either Palimbang or Zamboanga City.

²⁵ Arabic word for mosque.

²⁶ A niqab is a veil for the face that leaves a slit for eyes and is worn by some Muslim women.

²⁷ The Maguindanaons are a Muslim tribe who reside primarily in Cotabato province.

“For me, it is scary because the government or the police are targeting us Maguindanaons.²⁷ They’re saying that our *barangay* is affiliated with ISIS because it is where an ISIS member came from, even though it is not true.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“The bias is against [youth leaders in Bangsamoro]. It’s common for them to be checked and asked where they came from, and where will they go when stopping at checkpoints. It’s unlike the Christians who would not be probed in checkpoints.”

– Davao City focus group discussant

Discussants from Cotabato in particular said that they have faced prejudice from residents of Manila because of negative perceptions linked to their hometown.

“If a person from Cotabato would go to Manila they will call him ‘killer’ because ISIS was from here in Mindanao. If you are a Muslim and you go to Manila, they will suspect you.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“If they would go there [Manila] if they apply for work sometimes they will not accept you if you put Islam [as] your religion. And if they know that you’re from Cotabato they will not accept you.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

Some participants mentioned discrimination in the workplace as well, which served as a deterrent to pursuing employment opportunities. For example, a discussant from Cotabato City noted, “The wife of my friend applied [for a job] in Manila and she got accepted. But when she was started the job she encountered a Christian who told her, ‘You’re a Muslim, maybe you’re a member of ISIS.’ Since then she didn’t apply again to any branches of [the company].”

Feelings of isolation and injustice combined with diminished economic opportunities may influence some to turn to VEOs — not only to gain alternative sources of income but also to fight for the common cause of correcting injustices faced by fellow Muslims in Mindanao.

Finding #3:

Political alienation and disenfranchisement may increase the appeal of violent extremism to vulnerable individuals.

Discussants across the focus groups expressed resentment over political exclusion and a perceived lack of representation in the policy and direction of their country. A discussant from Cotabato City noted that a “lack of attention from the government” can lead to grievances. Similarly, another FGD participant from Cotabato City described the government’s lack of consultation when making decisions: “[Only] those



Before I didn’t have fear praying in mosque because it is a normal thing to do. But when the incident in Marawi happened, I doubled my carefulness. All of those who are praying can be suspected as a member of ISIS because [people associate] Islam [with] ISIS.”

- Cotabato City focus group discussant

²⁷ The Maguindanaons are a Muslim tribe who reside primarily in Cotabato province.

who are in high positions participate in the decision, they don't inform those who are [affected by] the decision." These sentiments may be exploited by VEOs or other nefarious actors that offer a sense of inclusion and self-worth.

Corruption emerged as a consistent source of dissatisfaction among discussants, with many believing that it was a major problem in the country and an impediment to effective and responsive governance. Discussants' perceptions of corrupt or ineffective leadership sometimes manifested in preferences for undemocratic avenues of redress. An FGD participant from Zamboanga City said, "I don't think [democracy can address VE]. Because the senators are corrupt. If they are not, then the issue is resolved. It's better to have dictatorship." Another discussant from Cotabato City perceived corruption as enabling and driving VE, pointing that corruption results in "poverty which leads to criminality and violent extremism."

In some instances, perceptions of unresponsive governance also morphed into a lack of confidence in the government's capacity to resolve the issue of VE in the country. Discussants attributed a variety of reasons — from corruption to ineffective strategy and a lack of political will — to the government's inability to overcome the threat.

"The solution that the national government gives is purely band aid. It is only for the present. For example, in Marawi, because of the siege, they will deploy [the security forces], but would return back in their stations afterwards. It's not sustainable."

– Davao City focus group discussant

"No, [Duterte cannot prevent violent extremism] because he does not control the country. Others, like the congressmen, are corrupt."

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

ZOOM-IN PERSPECTIVE: The Effects of VEOs and Prolific Violence on Families

Underpinning conflict dynamics in Mindanao are strong family or clan networks that can soften the ground for radicalization, as some individuals may be subjected to considerable pressure from family members to join a VEO.

"I had a student last year who was a niece of Tokboy [Mohammad Jaafar Sabiwang Maguid, known as 'Tokboy,' the leader of AKP up until his death in 2017].²⁸ I just overheard from their conversation during lunch that she was being endorsed to the group at grade five. There were two factors then. First, Tokboy was living in the area. Secondly, there is that Moro attitude [of] 'Even he is wrong, but since he is my cousin, I will side with him.'"

– Palimbang interviewee

"About my cousin, it's not that his father supports his son just because he knew that his child was [part of] ISIS. His father gave him a warning, he said, 'You should stop what you are doing,' but his son cannot stop because he was just recruited by his wife. That is why he cannot leave — he cannot refuse because it was his wife who recruited him."

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

"If a family member is a member of ASG the rest of the family will also join."

– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

Thus, VEOs may exploit existing clan divisions and tensions to fuel recruitment efforts.

²⁸ Fonbuena, Carmela. "Counterterrorism: Why the Death of AKP's Tokboy Matters." *Rappler*, 9 Jan. 2017, updated 16 Jan. 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/157731-akp-ansar-khalifa-philippines-tokboy-death>.



[An ISIS recruiter had] suitcases, all of which contained money. Then he went to our houses [like a salesman, saying] that he is looking for people who will help him...to send them to Marawi.”

- Cotabato City focus group discussant

“The government does not have enough resources to stop violent extremism, because even among themselves they are fighting. Look at Duterte and [Philippine Senator Antonio] Trillanes.”

– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

“[The government] does not have the political will [to prevent VE] because they just focus in one place, not the entire country.”

– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

These responses imply that some individuals may not trust the national government’s willingness or capability to counter VE effectively. In contrast, FGD participants held high levels of trust in the local government. See Finding #2 in “Potential Sources of Resilience to Violent Extremism” section.

As feelings of political alienation and disenfranchisement simmer beneath the surface, violent extremism may increasingly be perceived as an appealing and practical method for vulnerable individuals to express their grievances. A few respondents cited marginalization and exclusion from governing institutions and actors as a reason why some grievances could only be addressed using violence. As one FGD participant from Zamboanga City said, “Even if we tell them [government officials] they will not listen to us. That’s why the ASG is there. Without violence, they will not listen.”

IN-FOCUS

The Effects of the Marawi Siege: Trauma and Fear of Recurrence

In May 2017, ISIS-allied VEOs laid siege on the Mindanaoan city of Marawi in an attempt to establish a stronghold for the more radical elements of the Moro independence movement. The results of the takeover were devastating: Parts of the city were destroyed, and an estimated 1,200 people, including civilians and security forces, were massacred.²⁹ More than 300,000 people were displaced.³⁰

As violence roiled Marawi, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte placed the entire island of Mindanao under martial law, enhancing military authority, allowing for warrantless arrests and heightening surveillance.³¹ In December 2018, the congress granted an extension of martial law until the end of 2019,³² and its effects are widely felt physically and psychologically by citizens.

These sentiments were most pronounced in Cotabato City, which is geographically closest to Marawi and home to a significant number of people displaced during the armed conflict.

“We are anxious that for instance, it will also happen here what happened to Marawi. There are news circling around that there are people from other places that are now here [such as] ISIS.”³³

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“It’s alarming even if we are far from Marawi. It might happen also to other places, even here in Zamboanga. I feel uncomfortable and insecure. You don’t know when or where it will happen.”

– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

“The change is trauma; we’re scared of our surroundings because we don’t know where and when [an attack may happen].”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

In Davao City and Zamboanga City, participants recalled experiences with violence, stating that Marawi re-traumatized them by bringing back memories of past conflicts such as the 2016 market bombing in Davao City and the 2013 Zamboanga siege.

“The people are traumatized because they remember the Zamboanga siege.”

– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

“The incident in Marawi caused psychological effects. For a student with a virgin mind and then you saw [an incident like that] it for the first time, it would haunt you, reaching to the point similar to having a trauma and sleepless nights. And I have a classmate who suffered like that, thinking that it [the Marawi siege] may also happen in the city.”

– Davao City focus group discussant

²⁹ Barron, Laignee. “One Year after the Deadly Siege, Thousands of Filipinos Remain Displaced from Marawi.” *Time*, 23 May 2018, <http://time.com/5288210/one-year-marawi-siege-displacement/>.

³⁰ Hashempour, Ramin. “Life in Ruins: Marawi Conflict, One Year On.” International Committee of the Red Cross, 23 May 2018, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/life-ruins-marawi-one-year-on>.

³¹ Westerman, Ashley. “Martial Law Extended for Another Year in Southern Philippines.” *The Two-Way*, NPR, 13 Dec. 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/12/13/570470625/martial-law-extended-for-another-year-in-southern-philippines>.

³² Petty, Martin. “Philippine Congress Extends Mindanao Martial Law until End-2019.” Reuters, 12 Dec. 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-security/philippine-congress-extends-mindanao-martial-law-until-end-2019-idUSKBN1OB01R>.

³³ Quotes in this report may have been minimally treated to increase clarity. The original voices have been preserved to the maximum extent possible, and may retain errors in syntax, grammar, or word choice.

IN-FOCUS

The Effects of the Marawi Siege: Trauma and Fear of Recurrence cont'd

“Personally, I am afraid. I still have trauma with the siege here in Zamboanga.”

– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

Citing heightened concerns for basic safety, Mindanaoans appeared to be more receptive to constraints imposed under martial law, as they felt these measures were necessary to address an urgent threat in their community. Increased police and military visibility were often perceived as a sign that the government had the will to counter violence.

“I feel comfortable because the police are just around.”

– Davao City focus group discussant

“Though we are safe here, people nowadays prefer to be at home due to panic. It is creating panic as the incident in Marawi was chaotic. Some Davaoeños are thinking that it may also happen here. But at least the president implemented martial law.”

– Davao City interviewee

“I take the actions and the implementation of martial law by the government in a positive manner. Though there are some who complained that it is tiresome to have their bags checked at checkpoints, they did not realize the bigger picture that it will help

curb threats. That is why it is being done by our local government. I do not need, personally, justice. Something bad already happened in other area, so to prevent it from happening here, martial law is implemented.”

– Davao City focus group discussant

“They became alert then they strengthen their security in every

municipality or city here in Mindanao. Their surveillance every night, the curfew, every day they are patrolling. It gets even safer.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

Across the island of Mindanao, the reverberations of Marawi had not yet ceased more than a year after the incident. As discussants recover from the psychological effects, securitized efforts appeared to gain more support, with participants more amenable to restrictions of fundamental freedoms.

“

Policemen are everywhere, the marines and armies [are there] to secure us.”

– Palimbang focus group discussant

Finding #4:

Low socioeconomic standing drives vulnerable Filipinos to consider joining violent extremism organizations, primarily because of the financial incentives.

When asked why individuals would join VEOs, participants across all focus groups cited financial incentives as a key pull factor. This problem is likely to be especially acute in Mindanao, which is one of the poorest regions in the country.³⁴ Many discussants noted poverty was one of the most pressing issues facing their communities.

An interviewee from Palimbang noted, “As long as they have money to lure potential recruits, many will still join.” An interviewee from Davao City echoed these sentiments, saying, “They don’t really know, they do it in exchange of money they can be recruited by VE groups, especially without prior knowledge.” Some discussants mentioned that some recruiters went door-to-door with offers of wealth in exchange for joining a VEO.

“[An ISIS recruiter had] suitcases, all of it contained money. Then he went to our houses [like a salesman, saying] that he is looking for people who will help him...to send them to Marawi.”
– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“If a family member is a member of ASG, the rest of the family will also join. If not, a family member will go house-by-house to give money [to join the group.]”
– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

Discussants cited substantial sums of money offered by VEO recruiters as an effective recruitment tactic.

“You are given 10,000 pesos (\$190).³⁵ Some are lured by the money given [to] them [by VEOs] so they will join even if they know it’s bad.”
– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

“The ISIS has [a] lot of money. They offer a bigger amount [than other VEOs].”
– Palimbang focus group discussant

FGD participants reported that living conditions and financial situations in Mindanao were increasingly dire, noting rising prices and difficulties in getting jobs. Several FGD participants said that joining a VEO was, in some cases, a way for the poor to support their families:

“He may be encouraged to join because he is in poverty, he needs to give sustenance to his family. If he is guaranteed sustenance by the group, he will join.”
– Palimbang focus group discussant

“[VEOs can recruit individuals by saying,] ‘We will take care of your family’s expenses.’”
– Cotabato focus group discussant

“One of the ways of violent extremist groups attract the youth is money. They will give you money, and they will assure you of the livelihood of your family.”
– Cotabato City focus group discussant

Discussants also speculated that individuals may be drawn to VEOs to increase their sense of self-worth — this pull is amplified when linked with offers of money. As one interviewee from Palimbang said, “In our town, people who have money are more powerful and more respected.”

Out of all points of vulnerability mentioned in the focus groups and interviews, money was most frequently mentioned. When combined with key structural factors, money has an increased appeal for individuals vulnerable to VE.

³⁴ *Philippines Economic Update: Staying the Course Amid Global Uncertainty*, World Bank, Oct. 2018, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/209201538533339474/pdf/130421-PEU-October-2018-WEB3.pdf>.

³⁵ On average, families in Mindanao earn 122,500 pesos (\$2,331) and spend nearly 100,000 pesos (\$1,902) annually. 10,000 pesos (\$192) is thus a substantial amount of money for the average resident, representing around 10 percent of annual household expenditures. See “Income and Expenditure.” Mindanao Development Authority, 2012. <http://minda.gov.ph/products-and-services/statistical-reference/income-and-expenditure>.



At the time of martial law, we were told by our elders that if we go out the soldiers will kill us for no reason.”

- Cotabato City focus group discussant

Finding #5:

While widely seen as a positive security measure, martial law has restricted some individuals’ movement and access to services, which could exacerbate existing grievances.

Martial law imposes a number of limitations that affect individuals’ livelihoods, education and social lives. Discussants reported avoiding leaving home and exercising increased caution due to fear of both terrorist threats and of armed forces’ impunity to carry out arrests and arbitrarily detain civilians based on mere suspicion.

“At the time of martial law, we were told by our elders that if we go out the soldiers will kill us for no reason.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“We are afraid to go out. The soldiers might get us.”

– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

“Every wrong move we make could lead us to jail because it is martial law. The soldiers won’t follow the laws anymore; the soldiers are the only ones who have authority over their actions.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“[We lost] our praying rituals. [I pray] at home because I’m scared [to go to the mosque] because explosives may be left outside.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

Beyond anxiety about treatment from soldiers, discussants reported major restrictions associated with the martial law curfew. In one case, a FGD participant from Cotabato City was unable to buy critical medicine for his father due to the curfew. As he explained, “When in case of emergency, for example at midnight, you need to buy medicine so you need to go to a distant hospital, and the regional hospital here does not have complete medicines. So you have to buy it in a drug store, so the time is limited because of the curfew, and they might close the store.”

Restrictions on freedom of movement also threaten the livelihoods of the poorest segments of society, populations whose primary sources of income come from farming, fishing and the transport industry. An FGD participant from Davao City noted: “In Iligan, there’s a curfew where no one should be outside the premises of their houses from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. But the problem is that the livelihood of the fisherman was affected. They needed to fish at dawn, but they could not pursue it due to curfew. Since there’s martial law, they could be arrested because of curfew, thus, no income.”

Martial law’s curfew and fear sparked by the Marawi siege also affected the ability of youth to travel freely or meet up with friends.

“My life was affected since the terrorists invaded Marawi, especially my freedom to go to other places because my parents became too strict and also because of the implementation of martial law. Now policemen implement curfew strictly.”

– Palimbang focus group discussant

“I often used to do bonding with my friends from afar, but now, it is seldom because of the martial law.”

– Palimbang focus group discussant

“Because of Marawi siege, my parents are now stricter. They don’t allow me to go out with my friends. Our economic activities, which is the source of our living, were also affected.”

– Palimbang focus group discussant

Given the restrictions on outlets for citizens to socialize, pray, access basic services and, in some cases, earn a living, some individuals may increasingly feel isolated and become susceptible to radical views.

Conclusion: Reflections on Potential Sources of Vulnerability to Violent Extremism

The above findings represent potential sources of vulnerability to VE that can help explain the increased rate of VE attacks in Mindanao. They reveal grievances, attitudes and structural drivers that correspond with a search for alternative forms of grievance redress and a sense of injustice — sentiments that often increase susceptibility to radicalization in other contexts. Together, these findings do not constitute definitive drivers of VE in Mindanao, but rather reveal key conditions, grievances and attitudes that could contribute to the problem and undermine peace and security in the region.

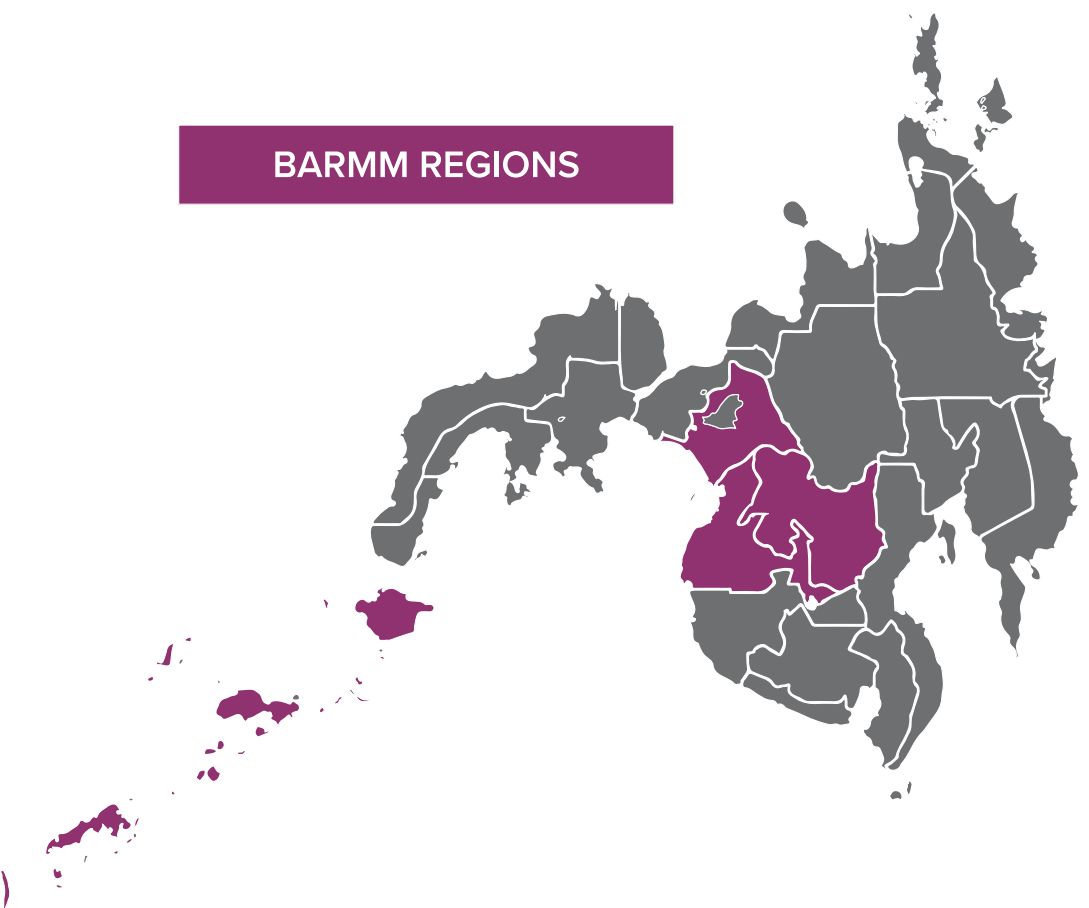
Potential Sources of Resilience to Violent Extremism

The five findings explored in the section above point to the grievances, conditions and attitudes likely driving vulnerabilities to recruitment by VEOs. However, FGD and

IDI participants also pointed to constructive attitudes, societal structures and influential stakeholders that could be drawn upon to counter these vulnerabilities.

Most participants expressed positive perceptions of government-led efforts to prevent and counter VE in Mindanao. Moreover, the relative success of the BOL prompted many FGD participants and IDI interviewees to express a baseline trust in peace processes as an avenue for reconciliation. While most participants had been exposed to various forms of conflict and violence, they expressed widespread support for efforts aimed at providing the general population with more data that shows *why* people are joining VEOs and to help develop initiatives that would mitigate the growing threat of VE in Mindanao.

None of these factors by themselves represent a necessary or sufficient condition for resilience, but could be a foundation upon which the government, civil society and other key actors can build.



Finding #1:

Peace talks are seen as a viable method of resolving conflict.

A number of political developments in the Philippines featured prominently in the research, all of which could have significant implications on security in Mindanao. Federalism, for example, was a cornerstone of Duterte's 2016 presidential campaign — an initiative that Duterte promotes as a way to preserve peace in Mindanao and to provide regional leaders with more autonomy. This initiative is not without critics — there are some concerns that it would only exacerbate inequality and widen socio-economic divides.³⁶

Several FGD participants stated that Duterte's federalism reforms would strengthen the government in its fight against VE.³⁷ For example, a discussant from Zamboanga noted that a concerted effort including the leaders of the new federal states must be undertaken to prevent VE: "Duterte doesn't want to lead the country alone. If we have independent leaders VE will be prevented." Another discussant from Zamboanga City indicated that the government's push for federalism was a sign that it had the will to



There should be a common ground to agree on peace. For me, it's really important to listen to both sides. The leaders of both sides should talk."

– Davao City interviewee

combat VE: "Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao will now have independent leaders." Echoing this sentiment, an interviewee from Zamboanga City said, "That's why Duterte is pushing for federalism. In this way, the support will reach [the local government so it can address VE]."

Another key initiative spearheaded by the Duterte administration is the BOL, which has been recognized as a historic breakthrough in addressing the underlying grievances in the Bangsamoro region. Some focus group discussants mentioned the BOL as a positive step in uniting the relevant actors in the fight against VE:

"We Muslims should unite in our actions. The reason there is a BOL today is to protect all the Bangsamoro here in Mindanao. The main point of the BOL is our security in Mindanao. So *inshallah*,³⁸ let's vote yes for the Cotabato be included in BARMM, so we can also be protected by the Bangsamoro government, *inshallah*."
– Cotabato City focus group discussant

"Yes [the government] can stop VE if they will unite as one. The MILF, MNLF and the government can prevent VE."
– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

"Maybe for me, they can [prevent VE] but it still depends [on whether] they would help each other. Because there is news that Muslim soldiers [referring to MILF and MNLF] and Christian [referring to the government] will work together to drive away the ISIS, but I just don't know if it is true. If it will happen *inshallah* then good but ... because they could start being a strong group right there to drive away the ISIS, if they would work together."
– Cotabato City focus group discussant

"There are other ways to see change aside from violence like in a peaceful way, example the BBL.³⁹ It should be done through negotiation or talking."
– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

³⁶ Heydarian, Richard. "Does Federalism Make Sense for the Philippines?" *Forbes*, 19 July 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardheydarian/2018/07/19/does-federalism-make-sense-for-the-philippines/#4a7c870077cf>.

³⁷ Notably, Duterte has consistently promoted federalism as a way to preserve peace in Mindanao. See Bacani, Benedicto. "Prospects of Federalism as a Solution to the Mindanao Conflict." Institute for Autonomy and Governance, 5 Oct. 2017, <http://iag.org.ph/index.php/editor-s-picks/877-prospects-of-federalism-as-a-solution-to-the-mindanao-conflict>.

³⁸ Arabic for "God willing."

³⁹ The BOL was formerly called the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL).

“If the Bangsamoro [BOL] pushes through, it’s really good that there is a common ground or the law is really passed.”

– Davao City interviewee

As the BOL emerged as a tangible outcome from the peace talks, participants emphasized this dialogue as a legitimate and democratic way to resolve the endemic violence. Peace negotiations between the government and violent nonstate actors have been conducted intermittently for decades, and the periods in which they have stalled have been punctuated by violence. Despite these setbacks, many discussants felt confident that peace negotiations were viable and the proper way forward.

“If I know someone [who was going to join a VEO], I would tell him that there’s other way to prevent that to achieve your intentions like peace talks. There are other ways to achieve goals in a peaceful way. No armed forces are needed. Let’s depend on rule of law.”

– Davao City focus group discussant

“I think the government should talk to ISIS, NPA or al-Qaeda. Just like the NPA, they also have an ideology they are fighting for.”

– Palimbang focus group discussant

“[The government] has the capacity to [counter violent extremism] through the peace talks.”

– Palimbang focus group discussant

“The government won’t really negotiate with the terrorists, but if you really want peace talks, you should listen and understand what they’re fighting for. If you don’t listen, it would be an endless cycle of conflict and misunderstanding.”

– Davao City interviewee

These sentiments indicate that discussants may be willing to peacefully redress their grievances through negotiations and other conflict resolution mechanisms. Discussants’ faith in the capacity of negotiation and peace talks to resolve key issues could present an opportunity for peaceful and democratic resolution of conflict at the local level.

Finding #2:

High levels of trust in local government efforts to counter violent extremism could enhance community resilience.

Given their concerns about a Marawi-like scenario unfolding in their communities, it is perhaps unsurprising that residents of Mindanao place a high priority on security. Discussants expressed contentment with the local government’s increasingly visible security measures, which has made residents of Mindanao less likely to turn to local armed groups for alternative means of protection.

“Compared to previous days when you cannot even walk because you are afraid something will happen, today you can see every corner has a soldier [or police] assigned. This cannot be called a safe city without security. So the local government has taken steps for assurance.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“As a student, you will be discouraged to go to school because it may be your last day because of the bomb scare at the campus. But with the help of the local government, there are none. They are able to prevent the infiltration of any terrorist acts.”

– Davao City focus group discussant

“Yes, there is support [from the local government] because of the heightened security. The local government imposes strong security.”

– Davao City interviewee

Although the national government was occasionally recognized for its efforts to counter VE, respondents expressed greater trust in their local governments on this issue. The complex security environment in Mindanao demands a more contextualized understanding of local violent groups, and thus respondents consider local government better positioned to answer these specific threats.

“There’s a great difference between local and national [government] in terms of scope. The local [government] knows ... who are the friends and

foes, unlike the national government ... Perhaps what's on the ground may be difficult to be understood by the national [government]. That's why there is struggle between us here in Mindanao than those in national [government]. I feel confident in the local government unit because they respond well. It's their house.”

– Davao City focus group discussant

Some discussants proposed that civilians should assume a more active role in countering VE by cooperating with local government and reporting suspicious activities.

“Our government has the capacity to prevent violent extremism. But, of course, the cooperation of ordinary people is also needed. For example, in our *barangay*, they were saying that they saw a suspicious person, they reported it in our *barangay*, then the *barangay* directed it to our mayor.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“The cooperation of the citizens is really needed because [otherwise] there would be no one who will inform the [police] of what is happening, that there is a mess there.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

In contrast with fears of unjustified violence by the national police and armed forces under martial law, local government is still predominantly perceived as a trusted source of safety. A resilient community must include active participation and direct access to local officials to share security concerns.

Finding #3:

Existing public interest in improving awareness of violent extremism could be leveraged to strengthen community resilience to radicalization and violent extremist organization recruitment

Across the focus groups, discussants were eager to raise awareness about violent extremism and related issues. When asked what could be done to address violent extremism, FGD participants shared a number of creative ideas — including utilizing social media and other outlets — to gain knowledge and understanding of VE.

“The media can help [raise awareness about VE] through staging a talk show.”

– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

“Record a video of yourself explaining violent extremism so others could watch it too.”

– Cotabato City focus group discussant

“By doing some interviews or a documentary so we can know what is VE.”

– Zamboanga City focus group discussant

“We can also address the conflict through seminars because most of [those] involved [in VE] are youth, the uneducated, so through formal education, through seminars we can instill in their minds the ways to achieve peace building. We can prevent this conflict without violence, we can prevent this through talks, seminars or forums so they can be educated.”

– Davao City interviewee

“Aside from seminars and forums, we also make campaigns to raise or intensify awareness. We disseminate it to the university through video or posters. Not just within the mass communications but also in social media. We have a page or through our telebroadcast in the University of Mindanao, we show it to raise awareness and spread information.”

– Davao City interviewee

Other FGD participants suggested that it may be beneficial to create a Facebook page and use other social media tools to raise awareness about VE. A discussant from Davao indicated that he would like to know more about the policies and programs that address VE: “I want to know the rules and policies on violent extremism ... to create awareness.”

These sentiments indicate that some individuals in Mindanao have the will to not only learn about VE, but also recognize the importance of preventing it. To that end, efforts to address the upstream, structural factors may have broad appeal among citizens of Mindanao.

CONCLUSION

Reflections on Potential Sources of Resilience to Violent Extremism

The above findings constitute potential sources of resilience to VE in Mindanao, indicating trust in the government-led countering violent extremism efforts and a belief in the efficacy of peace processes. FGD participants spoke about their desire to better understand the drivers and effects of violent extremism and to share this information with others in Mindanao.

This receptivity to VE alternatives is a critical entry point for government officials, local civil society leaders and international implementers seeking to educate the public about the dangers of VE and highlight peaceful alternatives. Additionally, the sincere belief that Mindanaoans hold in the merits of peace process reflects their positive experiences with peace talks that will soon culminate in the BOL plebiscite in early 2019. This sentiment must be built upon when government and civil society leaders are searching for peaceful conclusions to the endemic fighting throughout Mindanao. If the recently completed peace talks provide any lessons for future peace processes, then future reconciliation efforts must ensure equitable representation, a sincere recognition of grievances and an actionable path forward. These resilience points illuminate critical entry points for government, civil society and international actors to design and implement successful programs to prevent violent extremism.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations listed below are designed to address the vulnerabilities to VE and to leverage the resilience points identified in the FGDs and IDIs. These recommendations are intended for local government officials, as well as domestic and international nongovernmental organizations.

- 1** | ***Recommendation 1:***
Local government units should conduct outreach campaigns, town halls and listening tours to ensure citizens' perspectives are being taken into account.

Local governments must redouble their efforts to listen to citizens concerns and incorporate ensure that their priorities are reflected in policy. In order to do this, local governments need support, technical advice and tools to understand and analyze public opinion and create responsive policy. International NGOs could provide support for officials in this endeavor.

- 2** | ***Recommendation 2:***
Civil society should amplify the voices and priorities of citizens and promote community needs.

Civil society should implement consultations with citizens and distill key grievances into advocacy and awareness campaigns. These include public events and initiatives highlighting the dangers of political alienation, the need for local economic investment in and government support for small businesses, and calling for more reliable channels to regularly access government officials and elected representatives.

- 3** | ***Recommendation 3:***
Citizen access to decision-making and political inclusion should be prioritized over political ideology and the quest for political power.

- a. Political parties and government officials should be encouraged to seek citizen input when designing their party platforms and political agendas.
- b. NGOs should share data with political actors showing that political alienation increases the threat of VE and VEO recruitment throughout Mindanao.

- 4** | **Recommendation 4:**
Civil society organizations should work with citizens to conduct awareness campaigns on issues of violent extremism.

Awareness campaigns could engage citizens to enhance their knowledge of violent extremism and sources of vulnerability and resilience through videos, documentaries and educational events.

- 5** | **Recommendation 5:**
International nongovernmental organizations and local civil society actors should provide support to the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao government officials after the passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law.

The new government officials of the BARMM will need significant support and technical advice on how to govern effectively and responsively, as many of these officials may not have any prior experience and considering the volatility of the region. International NGO and civil society should implement training programs and coaching to support these officials.

- 6** | **Recommendation 6:**
Civil society organizations should train citizens to conduct community-level peace talks and dialogue.

While discussants believed in the viability of dialogue and mediation to resolve conflict, some may lack the skills and resources to conduct them. Civil society organizations should work to provide these skills for citizen leaders in order to peacefully and democratically address local conflict. For example, dialogue ambassadors could be trained in conflict resolution and convene dialogue sessions in community forums to discuss key grievances and provide options for democratic redress.

International Republican Institute

IRI.org

@IRI_Polls

P: (202) 408-9450

E: info@iri.org



A PROJECT OF THE INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE