

# Moro Islamic Liberation Front

## AT A GLANCE

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## HOW TO CITE

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## SUMMARY

**Formed:** 1977

**Disbanded:** Group is active, but reportedly in the process of disarmament

**First Attack:** September 7, 1986: MILF operatives threw a grenade into a wedding at a Catholic church in Salvador, Philippines. (10 killed, 90 wounded)<sup>1</sup>

**Last Attack:** April 17, 2017: The MILF claimed responsibility for two attacks coordinated in Tacurong, Sultan Kudarat, Philippines. One explosive device detonated near a gas station and a second device targeted police personnel responding to an earlier blast. There were no casualties, but 5 civilians and 9 police officers were wounded. (0 killed, 14 injured)<sup>2</sup>

## OVERVIEW

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is the largest militant organization in the Philippines and seeks autonomy for Filipino Muslims. The MILF split from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1977, although it was generally inactive and did not call itself the MILF until 1984. The MILF controls territory in the southern Philippines, governing by Shariah law. It has generally focused on political negotiation, but it has a significant history of terrorism and militancy. In 2014, the MILF concluded peace negotiations with the Philippine government for an autonomous region in the southern Philippines, to be called the Bangsamoro. The MILF is in the process of gradual disarmament.

## NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), formerly known as the New Moro National Liberation Front, is an Islamic separatist organization based in the southern Philippines. It seeks an independent Islamic state or autonomous region for the Filipino Muslim minority, known as the Moro people, who live primarily in the Philippines' Mindanao region. The MILF is chiefly located in central Mindanao and is the Philippines' largest separatist group; it is also considered the strongest group in Mindanao.<sup>3</sup> The MILF originated as a splinter group of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the 1970s. Hashim Salamat, an MNLF co-founder, began to have ideological and political disagreements with Nur Misuari, his fellow co-founder and MNLF's key leader. Salamat charged that

Misuari was not pursuing truly Islamic goals in conjunction with his quest for Moro independence, and in December 1977, Salamat led a group of MNLF members in an attempt to take control from Misuari. When the attempt failed, Salamat established a splinter group called the New MNLF, which broke completely from the MNLF.<sup>4</sup>

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Salamat and the New MNLF's leadership traveled to various Muslim countries, including Egypt and Pakistan, in order to gain support. They portrayed their new organization as a moderate alternative to the MNLF, which at the time was demanding complete independence from the Philippines. The New MNLF expressed its readiness to accept significant regional autonomy, believing that this position would be more likely to garner support from foreign states and non-state actors that shied away from the MNLF. This attitude may have been a ploy at the time, since the group would later also state that its goal was full independence. Generally, the New MNLF was unsuccessful in securing material foreign support. Most foreign states and non-state actors involved in the Moro separatist movement were already backing the MNLF.<sup>5</sup>

There is almost no reporting of the New MNLF's activities during its first few years. In the early 1980s, several groups of New MNLF commanders attended military training camps in Afghanistan. Three hundred sixty or more commanders trained there for one year, and nearly 200 fought as members of the mujahedeen against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Their experiences abroad introduced the New MNLF fighters to more extreme Islamist ideologies, and the fighters brought these ideas back to the Philippines. In 1984, the New MNLF officially changed its name to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in order to distinguish itself completely from the MNLF and indicate its Islamic focus. Most reports designate 1984 as the founding date of the MILF although it existed in 1977 under the New MNLF name following its split from the MNLF. The MILF began to be more active at around this time; its first recorded attack—bombing a Catholic wedding—occurred in 1986. However, its next recorded attack did not take place until the following year. Conducting attacks was not the MILF's initial priority. Instead, it focused on strengthening its organization through economic self-reliance, increasing Islamization, and military buildup of its armed wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF).<sup>6</sup> Drawing on its Islamic orientation to gain support among Moros, the MILF continued to present itself to the Philippine government as a more reasonable negotiating partner than the MNLF concerning the status of Moros. Salamat and the MILF leadership met with Philippine government officials several times in an attempt to negotiate an autonomy arrangement but were unsuccessful.<sup>7</sup>

However, in the late 1980s, the Philippine government was simultaneously meeting with both the MILF and the MNLF as a strategy to exacerbate tensions between the two organizations and split the Moro separatist movement. In January 1987, the MILF conducted attacks throughout Mindanao – mostly bombings to damage property – to demonstrate its strength and to force the government to negotiate seriously with the MILF. After an unofficial truce, MILF talks with the Philippine government restarted.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the late 1980s and the 1990s, the MILF's political tactics gained strong support in the Philippines' southernmost regions. The MILF established a parallel government throughout Mindanao, claiming to liberate various zones from the Philippine government by instituting a Moro-run system. Because of the Philippines' weak state capacity in those regions, the MILF was able to take control of territory with minimal violence by coopting the local population. While the MILF likely used some level of force to gain territory and certainly employed armed members to police and defend this territory, accounts of the MILF's territorial expansion do not mention violence. Instead, the MILF seemingly enjoyed popular support and cultivated further favor by assuming many government functions. The group offered services such as issuing marriage and birth certificates to Moros, which the Philippine government sometimes failed to do.<sup>9</sup> The MILF engaged Moro communities through a consultative committee system, in contrast to the MNLF's more centralized system. Its leadership actively

sought supporters' input by convening assemblies to discuss policy ideas, especially at local levels.<sup>10</sup> MILF-controlled zones included military bases as well as communities that encompassed various villages. The MILF's Camp Abubakar, for example, covered approximately forty miles and included a mosque, a religious school, commercial and residential areas, a weapons factory, a solar energy system, and segments of seven different villages.<sup>11</sup>

The MILF used its Islamic focus and popular support to substantiate its claim to lead the Moros. Within the areas under its control, the MILF sought to create an independent Islamic state, and it enforced its rigid interpretation of Islamic law.<sup>12</sup> For example, the MILF based its judiciary system on Islamic tenets and created an Internal Security Force (ISF) to maintain order and enforce Koranic teachings within MILF-controlled zones. While the MILF-controlled zones had already been dominated by Moros, some Moros opposed the imposition of the MILF's fundamentalist interpretation of Islam which clashed with the less strict, more popular interpretations practiced in the Philippines. Generally, however, the MILF's effective community engagement, allocation of government services, and dedication to Islam seemed to have won them broad support.<sup>13</sup>

The Philippines' 1996 peace agreement with the MNLF – which extended and adjusted the existing, unpopular Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) – ultimately brought the MILF an increase in regional popularity and dominance. Almost immediately after the agreement, the MNLF's Misuari was elected the new governor of the ARMM with government support. However, many MNLF members viewed the agreement and the election as driven by Misuari's thirst for personal gain at the expense of meaningful change for the Moros. This disillusionment with the MNLF boosted the MILF's recruitment and eventually led the MILF to overtake the MNLF in size and capacity. With the integration of many MNLF members into the Philippine political and social system after the agreement and the defection to MILF of others, the MILF became the dominant Moro militant force. MILF members, angry with the 1996 agreement's concessions to the Philippine government, demanded full independence and increased their attacks against government targets.<sup>14</sup>

Following the spike in violent clashes after the 1996 agreement, the MILF and the Philippine government signed a ceasefire agreement in 1997. The ceasefire stipulated that Philippine forces be repositioned away from MILF areas and required that Philippine law enforcement coordinate with MILF operatives before conducting operations in MILF-controlled areas.<sup>15</sup> After 1997, the MILF began to emphasize the role of government negotiations in its strategy, although it simultaneously continued to develop its armed force.<sup>16</sup> Some MILF units still conducted attacks, and, in 1999, the organization founded its Special Operations Group (SOG), which has carried out bombings and other terrorist activities. The SOG has been called the MILF's terrorist division.<sup>17</sup>

In 2000, violent MILF activity interrupted the ceasefire and led to a shift in government strategy. Then-President Joseph Estrada declared all-out war against the MILF and against the separatist movement more generally. This offensive had enormous consequences for the MILF. During this fighting, the MILF lost Camp Abubakar and several other camps in battles with Philippine forces. In response to Estrada's offensive, the MILF declared *jihad* against the Philippine government. The war in 2000 caused major suffering and displacement of civilian populations. When Gloria Macapagal Arroyo assumed the presidency in 2001, she ended the war and changed government policy to one of "all-out peace." This shift illustrated the disjointedness of Philippine policy toward the MILF, since new presidents tended to establish very different policies. By this time, the MILF was considered the major organization in the Moro separatist movement. As the Philippines' largest, strongest militant group, the MILF had eclipsed the MNLF in importance and viability as a negotiating partner for the government.<sup>18</sup>

With Arroyo's election, the Philippine government and the MILF resumed peace talks. To encourage progress in the negotiations, the Arroyo administration convinced the United States not to designate the

MILF as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in the early 2000s, as then-President George W. Bush had wanted to do.<sup>19</sup> While MILF operatives allegedly have still been involved in scattered attacks and kidnappings and have cooperated with other militant groups in the region such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the organization's leadership claims that these incidents are due to rogue units rather than general policy. In 2003, Salamat reiterated the MILF's commitment to the 1997 ceasefire and officially rejected the use of terrorism by the MILF. He also disavowed the group's relationships with terrorist organizations like JI or the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). However, the continuation of reported links between MILF members and those other groups undermines Salamat's statement.<sup>20</sup>

After Salamat died in 2003 of natural causes, Al Haj Murad Ebrahim became the MILF's leader. Ebrahim is seen as a more moderate figure than Salamat, and under his leadership, the peace process has made significant progress.<sup>21</sup> In 2008, the Philippine government and the MILF signed the Memorandum of Agreement for Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), which would have extended the 1996 ARMM boundaries and eventually replaced the ARMM completely. The MOA-AD would have allowed for greater independence for the Moro regions and a power-sharing arrangement among the various parties. Public outcry and opposition by the MNLF – which believed that its own 1996 agreement with the government was final and that the Philippine Supreme Court's ruling of the MOA-AD was unconstitutional – nullified the arrangement.<sup>22</sup>

Under President Benigno Aquino III, who assumed office in 2010, peace negotiations to replace the unpopular ARMM accelerated. Talks occurred between the Philippine government and the MILF, marginalizing the MNLF. The MILF officially dropped its demand for full independence in 2010, seeking regional autonomy instead.<sup>23</sup> The Philippine government and the MILF signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) in 2012 and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in 2014. Under these agreements, a new autonomous region called the Bangsamoro will replace the ARMM with new wealth- and power-sharing arrangements between the Bangsamoro government and the Philippine government. The agreements allow for Shariah courts to oversee judicial processes for Muslims, while the judicial needs of non-Muslims are processed in civil courts. Additionally, the agreements detail the Bangsamoro's sources of revenue and nautical jurisdiction, as well as outline the transition of MILF fighters to civilian life.<sup>24</sup> The MILF has already begun decommissioning some of its armed members and surrendering weapons in accordance with the negotiations.<sup>25</sup>

The MNLF has continued to oppose the MILF-Philippine government agreements on the grounds that its own 1996 agreement had already settled the question of the status of Muslims in the Philippines.<sup>26</sup> While one MNLF faction did express support for the proposed Bangsamoro region, several other MNLF representatives have appeared before the Philippine Senate and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to argue against the MILF-Philippine government proposal.<sup>27</sup>

On July 27, 2015, the Philippine House of Representatives began deliberations on the Basic Law on the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region (BLBAR), also known as the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL).<sup>28</sup> If ratified, this law would officially abolish the ARMM and provide for transition to a Bangsamoro government, which would likely be led by MILF members.<sup>29</sup> However, the failure since 2015 to pass the law has created opportunities for conflict. The feeling of disenfranchisement among some members of the MILF has led to a split, resulting in the formation of a breakaway group called the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). In March 2018, government forces conducted a raid on BIFF fighters, killing at least 44 and wounding 26 others. One week after the offensive, MILF vice-chairman Ghazali Jaafar argued that the Philippine government's inability to pass the law has instigated more conflict in Mindanao as some groups, like the BIFF, once again favor violent means of ending the conflict.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, there remains some spirit of cooperation with the government. In 2017, the MILF cooperated with government forces in their campaign against the IS presence in the Philippines.<sup>31</sup> In April 2017, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte called for the law to be passed and signed into force before the end of 2018, vowing to fulfill the long-standing agreement.<sup>32</sup> A setback occurred in May 2018, when, as part of President Duterte's violent campaign to end drug use and trafficking in the country, government forces on a counter-drug mission killed nine members of the MILF. A MILF spokesman denied that the MILF took part in the drug trade and claimed that the fighters had surrendered before being executed.<sup>33</sup>

In June 2018, both the Senate and House approved versions of a BBL, though the versions required reconciliation before they could be signed into effect.<sup>34</sup> On July 10, the two legislative chambers began a bicameral conference to reconcile conflicts in the two versions, aiming to have a law signed into effect before the opening of the legislature's regular session on July 23.<sup>35</sup> However, several pieces of the deal remained contentious, including the area boundaries it outlined, its policies of taxation and resource-sharing, and the manner for localities within the proposed boundaries to opt in or out of the deal. Wary of these disagreements, lawmakers expected a challenge in the nation's Supreme Court., Nonetheless, on July 24, 2018, the Philippine House of Representatives passed the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), the final name of the former BBL.<sup>36</sup> President Rodrigo Duterte signed the bill into law, creating a Muslim regional entity in Mindanao. With the bill's passing, the MILF, representatives of which were present during the signing of the bill in Manila, declared its support. MILF leader Ebrahim declared that 30,000-40,000 fighters would be decommissioned.<sup>37</sup> The BIFF expressed distaste for the agreement, stating that it would only benefit the MILF and promised future attacks in retaliation.<sup>38</sup> As of July 2018, no response from the BIFF has yet been reported.

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

### A. LEADERSHIP

Although it does have prominent individual leaders, the MILF primarily operates with a collective leadership structure, unlike the Philippines' other militant organizations. This structure is rooted in Salamat's dedication to the Islamic concept of "shura," or consultation. The MILF includes a Central Committee, comprised of various religious and secular elites.<sup>39</sup> The Central Committee includes vice-chairmen for different sections, such as Islamic Affairs and Military Affairs. Additionally, the MILF includes a Supreme Islamic Revolutionary Tribunal and a Consultative Council, the latter of which is also called Majlis al-Shura. These three major bodies—the Central Committee, Supreme Islamic Revolutionary Tribunal, and Consultative Council—are the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of the MILF, respectively.<sup>40</sup>

**Hashim Salamat** (1984 to July 13, 2003): Salamat broke from the MNLF in 1977 to form what would become the MILF. He believed that Misuari's MNLF was focusing too much on politics and not enough on Islam. Salamat died of natural causes in 2003.<sup>41</sup>

**Al Haj Murad Ebrahim** (2003 to Present): Ebrahim, also a former MNLF member, joined what would become the MILF in 1981. He eventually led the MILF's armed wing, called the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), and served as Vice Chair of Military Affairs for the MILF.<sup>42</sup> He became Chairman of the MILF after Salamat's 2003 death.<sup>43</sup>

**Mohagher Iqbal** (Unknown to Present): Iqbal is the MILF Peace Panel Chairman and chief negotiator in the peace talks with the Philippine government. He is a major MILF spokesman and has also served as the MILF Chair of the Committee on Information.<sup>44</sup>

**Abdullah Macapaar** (Unknown to Present): Macapaar, best known as Commander Bravo, is a prominent MILF commander who is generally considered rogue. His forces have carried out deadly attacks, sometimes against MILF official policy. He has claimed that his forces only follow MILF orders when they are in compliance with the Koran.<sup>45</sup>

## B. NAME CHANGES

- New Moro National Liberation Front (New MNLF) (1977): The New MNLF was a splinter group of the MNLF, established when Hashim Salamat failed to take power from MNLF leader Nur Misuari. The group was initially composed of MNLF members dissatisfied with Misuari's tactics.<sup>46</sup>
- Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (1984): The group renamed itself to reflect its separation from the MNLF and its distinctly Islamic orientation.<sup>47</sup>

## C. SIZE ESTIMATES

Estimates of the MILF's strength usually consider only armed fighters. The MILF itself asserts that its support base numbers approximately two or three million out of Mindanao's four million Moros.<sup>48</sup>

- 2007: 11,769 (Armed Forces of the Philippines)<sup>49</sup>
- 2011: 11,000 (Reuters)<sup>50</sup>
- 2015: 10,000 (BBC)<sup>51</sup>
- 2018: 30,000-40,000 (New York Times)<sup>52</sup>

## D. RESOURCES

Around the 1990s, the MILF received funding from Al Qaeda (AQ) and from Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law, who founded various charities that funneled money to the MILF and similar groups. However, the MILF primarily funds itself through extortion and also reportedly profits from marijuana trafficking, although the organization denies engaging in illegal financing activities.<sup>53</sup>

Further, the MILF collects alms – called “zakat” – from Muslims, sometimes in the form of taxes within the zones that it controls.<sup>54</sup> The MILF also reportedly receives money from various Islamic states, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, and individuals in those states. Other funding sources include money diverted from foreign Islamic nongovernmental organizations and remittances from Moro members of the United Overseas Bangsamoro.<sup>55</sup>

The MILF is reportedly the most well-armed of the Philippine militant groups. The MILF allegedly stockpiled explosives and landmines during its 2000 war against the government. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) estimated in 2006 that the MILF controlled 8,170 firearms, most of which were rifles and grenade launchers. Some analysts give higher estimates of the MILF's weapons cache.<sup>56</sup> The MILF's weapons sources include domestic and foreign black markets, captured stockpiles, and their own weapons production.<sup>57</sup>

The MILF has a website, called [luwaren.com](http://luwaren.com), that is maintained by the Committee on Information, part of the MILF Central Committee. The website is dedicated to the “continuing struggle for the right to self-determination and freedom of the Bangsamoro People.”<sup>58</sup>

## E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

**Disclaimer:** This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

The MILF is concentrated almost entirely in Mindanao, the Philippines' southernmost region, which includes various islands. Besides its bases on the island of Mindanao itself, the MILF also operates in parts of the Palawan and Sulu archipelagos.<sup>59</sup>

## STRATEGY

### A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

The MILF is an Islamist organization with the goal of creating an independent, Islamic state for Muslims in the country's southern regions. As suggested by its name, the MILF had a clear Islamic orientation from the beginning, in contrast to the MNLF's more secular orientation. Many of the MILF's early leaders had studied at conservative universities in Muslim countries, and Salamat himself studied at Egypt's Al-Azhar University. Later, MILF members trained at military camps in the Middle East. In the 1980s, the MILF formulated a policy of gradually creating an Islamic society in the Moro regions. To accomplish this, the MILF applied Islamic law in the areas under its control and believed that the creation of an independent Moro state would eventually follow. Some Filipino Muslims resisted the MILF's interpretation of Islam, which was more fundamentalist than the version practiced by most Moros.<sup>60</sup>

Generally, the MILF seeks meaningful self-determination for Filipino Muslims. The MILF sometimes expressed willingness to accept autonomy for the Moro regions rather than full independence, especially in its earlier stages and again in recent years. In 2010, the group officially dropped its demand for full independence in favor of regional autonomy.<sup>61</sup> Currently, the MILF seeks the ratification of the BLBAR, which is under consideration in the Philippine Congress. This law would establish the new autonomous region of the Bangsamoro and effectively complete the peace negotiations between the MILF and the Philippine government.<sup>62</sup> President Rodrigo Duterte has insisted that the law must be passed and put into effect before the end of 2018.<sup>63</sup> On January 21, 2019, there will be a plebiscite for citizens to vote for ratification of the BLBAR.<sup>64</sup>

### B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Historically, the MILF's most prominent political activity has been its participation in negotiations with the Philippine government. These talks have continued on and off in different forms since the 1980s, almost from the MILF's beginnings. The MILF seems to have privileged a strategy of negotiations, supported by armed strength, for achieving Moro self-determination.<sup>65</sup> In seeking legitimacy, the MILF has incorporated foreign actors, and it has appealed to other states to participate in MILF-Philippine government negotiations. As a condition for restarting peace talks after the war in 2000, for example, the MILF required that negotiations occur outside the Philippines and under the purview of OIC members like Malaysia or Libya.<sup>66</sup>

Upon Benigno Aquino III's assumption of the presidency in 2010, the Philippine government and the MILF began peace negotiations to replace the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) with a new political entity called the Bangsamoro. In the same year, the MILF officially dropped its demand for full independence, instead seeking regional autonomy.<sup>67</sup> The Philippine government and the MILF signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) in 2012 and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in 2014. Among other stipulations, these agreements will create new power and wealth-sharing arrangements between the Philippine and Bangsamoro governments, allow for multiple judicial systems within the new region—such as Shariah-based courts for Muslims and separate courts for non-Muslims—and facilitate the transition of MILF members back to civilian life.<sup>68</sup>

Increasingly, the MILF is becoming integrated into the Philippine political system. On March 7, 2015, in accordance with the CAB, the Philippine Commission on Elections conducted the first of several voter registration events for MILF members—including fighters—and their relatives.<sup>69</sup> In May 2015, the MILF officially registered its own political party, the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP). All MILF members are listed as UBJP members, but anyone outside the MILF can also register with the party. The UBJP fielded candidates in the 2016 Bangsamoro elections for a new regional government.<sup>70</sup>

On June 16, 2015, the MILF surrendered 75 weapons in its first round of arms deactivation in accordance with recent negotiations, and 145 BIAF members were decommissioned. These former members received small payments from the government, to be used for education, job seeking, or other expenses in order to ease their integration into society.<sup>71</sup>

Currently, the MILF is urging ratification of the BLBAR, which is under consideration in the Philippine Congress. This law would effectively complete the peace negotiations between the MILF and the Philippine government.<sup>72</sup> In 2018, Philippine President called for the law to be passed and enacted before the end of 2018, thus vowing to fulfill the long-standing agreement.<sup>73</sup> As stated previously, on January 21, 2019, there will be a plebiscite for citizens to vote for ratification of the BLBAR.<sup>74</sup>

### **C. TARGETS & TACTICS**

In its earliest years, the MILF largely avoided significant confrontations with the government. Instead, it concentrated on the quiet development of its own organization and armed division, the latter known as the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF).<sup>75</sup> The MILF sought to establish Shariah-based societies in the areas under its control, claiming to liberate the Moro regions from the Philippine government. In recent years the MILF has seemed to focus more on politics and negotiations than carrying out violent attacks.<sup>76</sup>

When the MILF has targeted the Philippine military in the past, it primarily did so utilizing guerrilla tactics.<sup>77</sup> Over time, the MILF's BIAF developed from a decentralized band of unconventional fighters into a semi-conventional force, complete with a regular infantry, and the MILF engaged in extended gunfights with Philippine authorities.<sup>78</sup> During times of peace talks, the MILF's sincerity has been questioned when members killed Philippine troops, but the MILF has generally blamed "rogue" units or accused the government of encroaching on its territory. Clashes often occurred when government forces entered MILF-controlled zones for other operations without notifying the MILF.<sup>79</sup> Unlike in organizations such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), from which the MILF has tried to distinguish itself, indiscriminate targeting of civilians has not been a consistent part of the MILF's strategy.<sup>80</sup> However, at least in the early 2000s, the MILF blocked major highways and reportedly bombed power lines to undermine the Philippine government and increase its own influence.<sup>81</sup>

In addition, the MILF has employed terror tactics against local officials, Christian communities, and businesses to elicit payments to the MILF. The organization has used bombs and other weapons to attack cities in Mindanao and has also conducted kidnappings. The Special Operations Group (SOG), the alleged terrorist division of the MILF founded in 1999, is the division responsible for conducting these attacks.<sup>82</sup>

### **MAJOR ATTACKS**

**Disclaimer:** These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.



**February 25, 2000:** Bombs exploded on one or more buses aboard the *M/V Our Lady of Mediatrix* ferry that was traveling to Ozamiz City. MILF commanders were among those blamed for the attack (39-44 killed, 41-50 injured).<sup>83</sup>

**February 27, 2000:** A bomb exploded outside dxMS, a Catholic radio station in Cotabato City. The attack was blamed on the MILF, especially because one dxMS host had received MILF death threats. The organization denied involvement (unknown killed, 7 wounded).<sup>84</sup>

**March 17, 2000:** A MILF commander named Abdullah Macapaar, also known as Commander Bravo and generally considered rogue, led an assault on Kauswagan Municipal Hall, reportedly taking 294 hostages and leaving several dead (unknown killed, unknown wounded, 294 hostages).<sup>85</sup>

**March 3, 2003:** A bomb exploded at Davao City International Airport. The MILF was allegedly responsible for the attack. The Philippine government subsequently ordered the arrest of various MILF leaders, although the organization denied involvement (22 killed, 148 wounded).<sup>86</sup>

**July 10, 2007:** Philippine Marines were attacked in a MILF-controlled zone while trying to rescue an Italian hostage from the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Several Marines were decapitated. The MILF admitted to the attack, and the attacking group also reportedly included ASG members (18-43 killed, 9+ wounded).<sup>87</sup>

**January 25, 2015:** Philippine Special Action Force (SAF) troops targeted two key bomb-makers in an operation in Maguindanao. During the pursuit, the troopers were attacked by rebel forces that included MILF members. The MILF acknowledged the involvement of its members, although it also stated that the SAF operation was not coordinated with them as required by a ceasefire agreement with the government. Consideration of the BLBAR was temporarily suspended after this attack (approximately 55 killed, 12+ wounded).<sup>88</sup>

**April 17, 2017:** The MILF claimed responsibility for two attacks coordinated in Tacurong, Sultan Kudarat, Philippines. One explosive device detonated near a gas station and a second device targeted police personnel responding to an earlier blast. There were no casualties, but 5 civilians and 9 police officers were wounded (0 killed, 14 injured).<sup>89</sup>

## INTERACTIONS

### A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

The MILF is not designated as a terrorist organization by the United States or the European Union.<sup>90</sup>

### B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The MILF seems to enjoy substantial support in the southern Philippines. From its beginnings, it has permeated society by setting up a parallel government in the areas under its control, offering marriage and birth certificates as well as other services that the Philippine government often did not provide.<sup>91</sup> MILF communities and camps encompass mosques, schools, factories, and more. Within its controlled areas, the MILF has implemented Shariah-based societies, but tension has arisen because some Moros have opposed the MILF's rigid imposition of Islamic law and social structure.<sup>92</sup>

In order to govern its claimed territories, the MILF established an extensive committee structure, which it called Political Committee Set-Ups. Besides its own central leadership and committee structure, the MILF has created Provincial Committees, such as the Basilan Provincial Committee or the Sulu

Provincial Committee, to enact MILF policies across the southern Philippines. Upon consulting with the local communities, the MILF Central Committee appoints provincial chairmen. The MILF's committee structure also extends to the municipal and Barangay—or village—levels, where it is largely modeled on the Philippine government's structures. By engaging the local Moros in their own governance, the MILF has been able to win popular support. Consequently, the AFP has reported difficulties in gaining cooperation from the public in MILF-controlled zones.<sup>93</sup>

Besides citing its engagement of communities through committees, the MILF supports its claim to being the legitimate representative of Moro interests through its General Consultations, also called Consultative Assemblies or the Bangsamoro General Assembly. These consultations gather thousands of MILF supporters and commanders to encourage unified political positions, and the events also serve to demonstrate the level of local backing enjoyed by the MILF. The most prominent MILF General Consultation occurred between May 29 and May 31, 2005, attracting approximately 900,000 supporters and reportedly even foreign dignitaries. Another Consultative Assembly occurred between July 7 and July 9, 2012, during MILF peace negotiations with the Philippine government.<sup>94</sup>

### **C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS**

Since splitting from the MNLF in 1977 and officially becoming the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in 1984, the MILF has been in competition with its parent organization for resources, support, and political legitimacy. From its beginnings as an anti-Misuari splinter group, the MILF attempted to differentiate itself from the MNLF in various ways, portraying itself as more religious as well as more or less radical, depending on circumstance.<sup>95</sup> The MILF has rejected the Philippine government's peace agreements with the MNLF, most notably a 1996 agreement in which the MILF believes that the MNLF sacrificed Moro welfare for political gain. Similarly, the MNLF has opposed the MILF's ongoing negotiations with the government on the grounds that its own 1996 agreement had already settled the question of Moro Muslim status in the Philippines.<sup>96</sup>

Although the MILF has formally condemned the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), another MNLF offshoot, there is evidence of at least low-level relationships between the MILF and the ASG. Individual units or members from both organizations have participated together in attacks.<sup>97</sup>

Beyond Philippine organizations, AQ influenced the MILF in its early years, as demonstrated by the cooperation between the MILF and individuals linked to Osama bin Laden in the mid-1990s. The MILF also received AQ money funneled through various charities.<sup>98</sup> Some MILF fighters had fought earlier against the Soviets in Afghanistan, making contacts with future AQ members, and by the end of the 1990s, AQ operatives were training MILF operatives.<sup>99</sup>

Beginning in the late 1990s, the MILF harbored AQ and JI operatives in its bases, where they sought refuge and trained. Around 2003 or 2004, the MILF officially cut ties with AQ, JI, the ASG, and other terrorist organizations in order to strengthen its standing with the Philippine government, the United States, and other states.<sup>100</sup> As with the ASG, the relationship between the MILF and JI seems to have continued on an informal level.<sup>101</sup> Local MILF units and JI members may have continued joint training, support, or attacks even after 2004, although the extent to which the MILF's central leadership knew about or could control this collaboration is unclear. Alleged ties with AQ, JI, and the ASG jeopardized the MILF's negotiations with the government several times throughout the peace process.<sup>102</sup>

### **D. STATE SPONSORS & EXTERNAL INFLUENCES**

Before the 1990s, the MILF may have received weapons and support from Libya and Malaysia, among other Muslim countries.<sup>103</sup> Libya's Muammar el-Qaddafi supported Moro separatists in general throughout his rule, and beneficiaries included the MILF as well as the MNLF and the

ASG. Libya supplied weapons, funds, and training to the MILF, and it also played a role in mediating MILF-Philippine government peace negotiations and ceasefire agreements.<sup>104</sup>

In the early 2000s, Malaysia began to play a similar role as mediator between the MILF and the Philippine government. Malaysia has often expressed security concerns about conflict in the southern Philippines as well as wariness regarding separatist threats to sovereign states. Besides acting in their own interests, both Libya and Malaysia also acted in their capacity as members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)—now known as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation—to monitor some of the peace agreements between the Philippine government and the MILF.<sup>105</sup>

The MILF also reportedly receives money from various Islamic states, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, and individuals in those states. Other funding sources include money diverted from foreign Islamic nongovernmental organizations and remittances from Moro members of the United Overseas Bangsamoro.<sup>106</sup>

## MAPS

- Philippines

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