SPECIAL REPORT

The Marawi crisis—urban conflict and information operations

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Note from the authors

This report draws on insights from interviews with academics, members of the Philippine military in Manila and Marawi, and local government stakeholders and displaced residents in Mindanao during a research trip in October 2018. As a co-authored report, it takes a bifurcated approach based on our respective expertise in the kinetic and propaganda domains. Accordingly, it's divided into two distinct lines of inquiry: hard-power and soft-power lessons.

Cover image: A member of the Armed Forces of the Philippines looks out over the remains of Marawi, with the Great Mosque ahead, 11 October 2018. Photo: Katja Theodorakis.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The seizure of Marawi in the southern Philippines by militants linked to Islamic State (IS) and the response to it by Philippine authorities provides useful insights to Australian and other policymakers, with relevance for force structure, concepts of operations and the breadth of activity required to deal effectively with the consequences of an urban seizure. One overall insight is that the increasing urbanisation of global populations, combined with proliferating information technologies, means there's a need to be prepared both for military operations in urban environments and for a widening of what policy/decision-makers consider to be 'the battlefield' to include the narrative space.

The siege showed the unpreparedness of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) for an urban fight: the AFP took five months to recover the city, leaving it in ruins and sustaining a notable number of casualties. This will obviously provide a set of lessons and insights to the Philippine military and authorities, but it also can allow other governments and militaries to assess their own readiness to deal with urban operations, either as assisting partners or in their own territories. This seems especially relevant to considering capability options for supporting allies facing comparable challenges, which could reduce military and civilian casualties in future operations.

The insurgents' seizure of Marawi was accompanied by a systematic IS propaganda campaign (online and offline) aimed at projecting an image of triumph and strength. The AFP engaged in active counter-messaging to undermine militants' narratives, encompassing the online space as well as more traditional methods of messaging, such as leaflet drops, banners, and radio and loudspeaker broadcasts. In the tactical sphere, this was aimed at avoiding civilian casualties as well as stemming further recruitment by and popular support for the insurgents. In the longer term, the overarching goal was to morally denounce the militants and undercut their support bases. Considering the centrality of ideology and information operations (IOs) in the future operating environment, the Marawi crisis offers an instructive case when preparing for the challenges of an evolving threat landscape. This report therefore examines both the capability aspects of kinetic hard power and the lessons from soft-power IOs, and how they intertwine in the urban environment. There are lessons here for the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

This report makes the following observations and recommendations.

Hard power

Urban operations generally, and particularly urban seizure by a *jihadi* enemy equipped with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), present a serious political and military challenge. Any force retaking urban terrain from a determined enemy will suffer heavy casualties unless it employs measures to protect its advancing soldiers, and the only significant protective measure available is explosive firepower. If firepower is used, there will be casualties among any civilians present. Adversaries exploit this to present political and military leaders with the brutal dilemma of trading off their own casualties against civilian casualties. The reputational risk for the ADF in any future urban fight is acute, as the Australian public has come to expect a degree of discrimination that's unlikely to be possible. We need to consider approaches that will enable or encourage civilians in urban conflict areas to evacuate as well as develop means of fighting with reduced casualties.

Contingency planning and policy debate should address the likelihood that asymmetric adversaries will learn to 'seize, defy and discredit'; that is, take and hold sections of a state's urban territory and be able to retain that control for a period, while generating a mass-media profile and narrative that portray their success, contrasted with the failure of the responding state. Whole-of-government capacity development should address measures that enable and encourage populations to leave cities during armed conflict.

Capabilities that reduce risks to soldiers and civilians during urban combat operations should be acquired. They include unmanned 'robots' for reconnaissance and for entering and clearing buildings in the presence of IEDs; systems that lay obscurants (smoke) with low hazard to civilians; and special weapons to breach holes in walls or attack targets inside buildings with reduced collateral damage. Such systems are within the capacity of Australian industry to deliver and have export potential.

The ADF should raise an Australian Army combat engineering entity that's able to conduct unmanned combat search-and-clear operations in an urban environment in support of our own or friendly nations' operations.

Soft power

The Philippine political and media environment is distinctly different from the Australian one; given the tight government control of media narratives during the Battle of Marawi, we can't uncritically extract universal lessons. The Marawi IO nevertheless provides an instructive case study in that it highlights some key principles of legitimacy-building. Those principles can be applicable beyond military operations to the ensuing political process and wider practice of preventing and countering violent extremism.

The destruction of the city has given rise to accusations of the use of excessive, indiscriminate force by the AFP—a source for further extremist recruitment if the truth of the AFP's challenges in retaking the urban territory isn't managed with transparency. This highlights that clear, open communication is needed on the realities and dilemmas of urban warfare in order to avoid a loss of legitimacy. Ultimately, Marawi demonstrates that the most important elements in a successful soft-power campaign are credibility and legitimacy beyond mere persuasion— moral authority can arise only when there's no gap between rhetoric and action.

In urban operations, the narratives surrounding the conduct of operations aren't just a supporting element but are equally as important as—if not more important than—the military objective. Effective use of soft power plays a crucial part in achieving a favourable political outcome.

The moral dimension matters. Responding to the sociopolitical and emotional realities of the target audiences is crucial. Political victory can be brought about only by avoiding dissonance between military/government effects and narratives. Legitimacy requires a close match between words and deeds.

There's a need for cultural intelligence as a future capability: IO shouldn't be regarded as a technical exercise but a human one, premised on a thorough understanding of the causes and drivers of political violence. This includes a focus on values and ethical stances, and how they're constructed on the ground.

WHY MARAWI MATTERS

An increasing element of future land warfare is expected to be urban as the dynamics of global conflict and terrorism play out in densely populated urban environments. War can be understood as an inherently sociocultural phenomenon that now largely occurs 'among the people' as conflicts have become more political in nature. And, in the information age, this includes the online space, thereby affording a greater role to communications technologies to shape perceptions and affect military and political outcomes.[1]

History shows that urban areas reduce the advantages of better equipped conventional armies over irregular forces or non-state actors. This comes at the cost of civilian populations trapped in the fighting as the insurgents embed themselves among urban populations.[2] The war-ravaged cities of the 21st century—Fallujah, Sana'a, Gaza, Aleppo, Mosul—are testament to the brutality of the urban fight, and their destruction starkly displays its tactical, technological and moral challenges. Marawi fits into this sad line-up as a city largely reduced to rubble during a five-month-long campaign by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) against *jihadi* insurgents (Figure 1).

Figure 1: **The destruction that, absent special capability, is the price of ejecting militants from urban terrain**

Photo: Charles Knight, 11 October 2018.

The Battle of Marawi, from May to October 2017, marked the first time that militants aligned with Islamic State (IS) joined forces to claim territory in the Asia–Pacific, notably with combat techniques and media strategies imported from IS's operations in Syria and Iraq.[3] Unprepared for an urban fight, improvising and 'learning on the job', the AFP struggled to clear the city, and airstrikes and heavy artillery left much of it as rubble.[4] Through what we define as a 'seize–defy–discredit' strategy, the alliance of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Maute Group and several smaller militant factions sought to draw the AFP into an urban battle in which civilian casualties would be inevitable— bringing international condemnation, reinforcing IS's narratives and inspiring popular resistance as, for example, occurred when US Marines attacked the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004. This goal was as much about winning the information war as about holding the territory of Marawi, and this is why information operations (IOs) are a key part of this report.

The AFP's struggle to eject the militants from Marawi reflects the enduring nature of urban warfare. The advantages a city has always offered a determined defender are now compounded by contemporary adversaries with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) who intend to die with the attackers. This presents a tactical problem that can't be solved by high standards of training and outstanding leadership alone. As recent battles in the Middle East also illustrate, progress requires using heavy firepower, risking grave humanitarian consequences. Urban warfare specialists stress that, without effective alternatives, even highly skilled militaries may find that the only option is to 'destroy the city to save it'.[5] However, it must be acknowledged that in Marawi the political cost of an unavoidable resort to heavy firepower has been aggravated by the subsequent failure to begin rapid, effective rehabilitation and reconstruction.

The recapture of Marawi took at least twice as long as comparable urban battles. The protraction was attributable to capability shortfalls, especially training, which the AFP acknowledged and, with the help of outside partners such as Australia, Singapore and the US, sought to address. The resulting tendency for outside observers to understand the Marawi operation through a lens of AFP training shortfalls discounts some AFP strengths and experience and also risks underestimating both inherent and emerging challenges. This analysis treats the crisis as an instructive case study that casts light on capability needs for future urban missions for Australia and other partners, whether as combatants or to support allies.

Importantly, the AFP's focus on soft power through IOs alongside hard kinetic operations is pertinent. According to the Australian Army's *Future land warfare report*, control over information is a key factor shaping the evolving operating environment:

> No country will have complete control over its communications infrastructure or control over the information that its citizens can access. Global telecommunications networks coupled with omnipresent communications technology will continue to empower non-state and semi-state actors. The effect will be disproportionate to their size and stature … Large populations are also likely to be permanently connected to global networks, providing constant access to new 'real time' information. Access to social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, is widespread and accessible to both friend and foe, potentially allowing any individual to influence political outcomes, transform perceptions of events, and create positive or negative responses. This may dramatically affect the future use of military force.[6]

War is a contest of political will. Hard power provides the means to apply violence, while soft power is employed to disempower the adversary without coercion and to influence affected populations. Soft power, in the context of the so-called hybrid-warfare paradigm, can be defined as 'the ability to get what you want through attraction and persuasion' via the strategic use of (dis)information and influence campaigns.[7] In the case of Marawi, the goal of a soft-power approach was defined as legitimising government action and countering violent extremist narratives to prevent the spread of the insurgent ideology. According to the AFP's official documentation on the battle, this soft-power approach was applied across all the levels of army operations—strategic, operational and tactical. This meant a focus on the IS–Maute fighters, hostages and trapped civilians within the main battle area, internally displaced persons outside of Marawi City and the wider national community.[8]

Revisiting Marawi is topical since—despite the defeat of the Maute–ASG alliance in the city itself—Mindanao remains a possible location for future conflict and is central to counterterrorism efforts in the Asia–Pacific. Since the southern Philippines is the only place in the region where IS has managed to assert itself through holding physical space, the seizure of Marawi has, to a certain extent, been considered a propaganda victory and strategic success for the wider *jihadi* cause. This continues to make Mindanao an attractive destination for transnational jihadists following the territorial demise of IS's caliphate in the Middle East; the January 2019 Jolo bombings as well as ongoing reports of the presence of foreign fighters in the southern Philippines illustrate this trend.[9]

Figure 2: The devastation wreaked at the dockside to eliminate the final handful of militants

Photo: Katja Theodorakis, 11 October 2018.

Introducing hard power

The hard power part of this report describes how, after a confused initial response amid an evacuating population and a long pause to regroup, the AFP slowly and systematically recovered Marawi. It doesn't seek to examine tactical and training lessons from the battle or dissect errors of the AFP in any detail. Those aspects are covered in an extensive series of internal documents, the more sensitive aspects of which can't be shared for security reasons. An excellent selection of insights is at *The Cove* blog in James Lewis's overview of the hard-power battle, which is a considered critique of the three main stages and examines how major challenges of an urban fight played out in this case. As Lewis highlights:

> The lessons learned by the [AFP] in the Battle of Marawi, fighting a determined, ruthless enemy, are invaluable to the Australian Army … Urbanisation trends—as well as the existential reality of conflict amongst people, where they live—compel us to be expert at this most difficult of environments.[10]

A crucial factor in the outcome of the kinetic battle is that the population chose to leave, and thus heavy civilian casualties were avoided and the militants' hopes of a 'Fallujah effect' were confounded. Furthermore, the fight didn't inspire significant violent resistance elsewhere, much less the general uprising that the militants sought. The AFP attributes this to its effective use of soft power.

Introducing soft power

IS, typical of modern insurgents, relies on the use of IOs. Marawi is an instructive case of how digital media has been employed as a new weapon by a well-equipped, media-savvy enemy. Globally, IS Central in the Middle East took a significant interest in Marawi, making it the focus of a targeted media campaign that presented Mindanao as the hub for a new regional and global *jihadi* insurgency. This created a sense of momentum to IS's pursuit of global impact and built on IS narratives of growing capability and reach, as a counterbalance to its continued loss of territory in its 'caliphate'.

In the Philippines, the local militants, making calculated use of IS media tactics and resources, sought to position themselves as the more 'ethical actors' in comparison with the government and the AFP. In response, the AFP engaged them in a 'battle of the narratives' or 'battle of perceptions' framed around themes of 'moral power' and 'cultural friction'.

In the context of Marawi, the term information operation was used by the AFP to describe its coordinated, sustained efforts to counter the IS media campaign. In this paper, IO therefore refers to how the IS-aligned insurgents leveraged existing local grievances through strategic messaging as well as the AFP's targeted response to (re)gain a favourable reputation and establish legitimacy.

The purpose of this analysis is not to examine whether Marawi can be seen as an overall, long-term success. That would require more extensive fieldwork among affected populations that generates independent data on community perceptions in the post-conflict rehabilitation phase. It's been rightly pointed out that insurgencies are hardly defeated on the battlefield. Marawi clearly demonstrates that the real battle 'is won in the way a nation provides physical reconstruction, economic recovery and human rehabilitation post-conflict'.[11] That process is still ongoing in the Philippines, where the government is reportedly struggling with post-conflict community building, reconstruction and communication with affected populations[12]—all of which are crucial to preventing further radicalisation.

Instead, this report highlights key themes and principles relevant to an effective soft-power approach and underscores the IO elements that achieved successful outcomes during the AFP operations in Marawi itself. Recognising the centrality of whole-of-government approaches to countering extremist discourses, such insights are valuable for the wider political process and the prevention of further radicalisation.

Figure 3: Nature reclaims a destroyed mosque a year after the battle ended, highlighting the vital reconstruction work to be done

Photo: Katja Theodorakis, 11 October 2018.

In order to draw out implications for future scenarios, it's necessary to consider not only how the AFP countered IS messaging but also how IS messages could resonate so strongly that they could enable the Marawi crisis in the first place. This examination of IS's messaging and the AFP's approach therefore focuses on:

- identity factors and cultural and moral justifications ('just war')
- gaps between rhetoric and deeds
- legitimacy and credibility.

This demonstrates how effective, credible messaging needs to be closely attuned to the sociopolitical and emotional realities of the particular target audiences. Taking into consideration the causes and drivers of political conflict—in particular, the underlying moral context—is vital for credibility.

Background to the Marawi crisis

The seizure of Marawi needs to be understood against a background of existing separatist insurgency, poverty, marginalisation and lack of inclusive governance. The militants' plans for taking over the city exploited its physical and political geography as well as Muslim grievances, including a profound sense of disconnect from the Philippine state and its predominantly Christian identity.

Marawi, located on the island of Mindanao (Figure 4), is the capital of Lanao del Sur, one of the five provinces of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). It's officially known as the Philippines' only 'Islamic city', giving it symbolic significance in a predominantly Catholic nation. Mindanao has a history of revolutionary resistance against colonial powers and subsequently the postcolonial Philippine state; its Moro population is accustomed to fighting for self-determination and independence. The Moros, comprising different ethnic and tribal groups of the Muslim region, were traditionally seen as the subversive Muslim 'other' within an otherwise homogeneous national identity. In parallel, the Moro sociopolitical and religious identity is constructed in sharp opposition to what's regarded as an oppressive state that marginalises them.[13]

Figure 4: The location of Marawi on Mindanao

The seizure of Marawi was preceded by decades of separatist resistance and enabled by a pre-existing culture of conflict in the form of feuds (*rido*) between warring Moro clans and traditional honour codes that make it obligatory to join the fighting. Violence was furthered by the presence of armed groups, private militias and illegal firearms. The Islamist militant groups operating on Mindanao include ASG, the Maute Group, Ansar Khalifa Philippines and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters—all with longstanding ties to either al-Qaeda or Jemaah Islamiyah, albeit for opportunistic reasons.

The leader of the ASG, Isnilon Hapilon, swore allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014; Ansar Khalifa Philippines and the Maute Group followed shortly thereafter. In 2016, these newly allied groups cooperated in several operations, including a bombing

in Davao City and the short seizure of the Maute Group's hometown of Butig by 300 militants. The militant groups had also been joined by foreign (mostly regional) *jihadis* who infiltrated Mindanao, adding funds and weapons. It appears that the local militant leaders were eager to establish their credibility with the IS leadership, while the latter were looking to 'franchise' their operation beyond the Middle East. While clan and tribal rivalries run deep, IS seems to have brought the 'ideological glue' that—aided by social media as a connector—prompted unification and operational cooperation on the goal of a regional caliphate.[14]

Marawi is hence a case in point as a 'glocal' manifestation of jihadism, in which localised objectives and grievances become enmeshed with the meta-narratives and ideology of jihad at the global level. This is evidenced by the wider ideological, strategic and financial links to *jihadi* militants globally that Muslim separatist insurgents in Mindanao have had for decades.

The Marawi crisis stalled the Bangsamoro peace process, which had been underway to grant full autonomy to the ARMM. The creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), led by former commanders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), is the only hope for ending the conflict. In 2014, the MILF signed the Bangsamoro agreement to demilitarise in return for Muslim self-rule in parts of the southern Philippines, after having worked since 2005 to fight *jihadi* extremists. But pro-IS (or alternatively pro-al-Qaeda) sentiments combined with insurgent and warlord control of territory opposed their initiative in an ongoing dynamic that continues to endanger the full implementation of the BARMM.

Given this context, the stakes for alienating the Muslim population in Mindanao were extremely high, as were the opportunities to exploit existing grievances and division that would have made the ensuing political process of ratifying the BARMM outright impossible. During the Marawi seizure, capitalising on entrenched Muslim resentment, the *jihadis* sought to portray the Philippine Government and the AFP as the cause of suffering and injustice and as enemies of Islam and humanity, holding them responsible for the destruction of the city. Specifically, a key reason IS could even attempt to establish a caliphate in Mindanao was because militants exposed flaws in the government's approach to democracy and equality, playing on genuine grievances. As highlighted by Sidney Jones, 'whatever happens to the pro-ISIS coalition in Mindanao, it has left behind the idea of an Islamic state as a desirable alternative to corrupt democracy'.[15] Coupled with a global jihadist narrative of historical injustice against Muslims, this makes fertile ground for ongoing *jihadi* activity, posing significant security challenges for neighbouring countries, with implications beyond the immediate region.

Figure 5: ISIS graffiti found on houses in Marawi's main battle area

Photos: Katja Theodorakis, 11 October 2018.

ANALYSING HARD POWER

This section gives a chronology of the Marawi operation and draws some conclusions about the use of hard power in urban environments.

Overview of the battle

After the alliance of local militants with IS, the AFP was keenly aware of increased activity and had vague reports of a planned seizure. What it didn't know was that militants had infiltrated several hundred men, weapons and a range of IT equipment into a city suited for defence, bounded on two sides by a lake and with only three approach roads. Furthermore, many buildings have ready-made 'Buho' ferro-concrete bunkers, which the local population build and stock with food and illegal weapons to take shelter from regular outbreaks of clan warfare. When news reached the military that the militant leadership was meeting in a safe house in western Marawi, it took action.

The raid on 23 May to arrest the militant leaders involved an all-arms team. As they approached the safe house, up to 100 militants appeared from nearby buildings, resulting in a firefight that had the arrest team pinned down for days while the militant leaders escaped. The raid led the militants to prematurely launch an operation that was planned for the start of Ramadan. Militants across the city took hostages and seized the hospital, police station and prison, killing police officers, setting prisoners free and arming them. A large group of militants also attacked the army camp, while others occupied the City Hall, desecrated the cathedral, set fire to the Catholic college and rampaged through the streets hoisting black flags. On the edges of the city, their checkpoints asserted control and killed escaping non-Muslims. Police and troops in armoured vehicles who rushed into the city to relieve trapped comrades were ambushed; crews were killed and survivors trapped. President Rodrigo Duterte declared martial law, and a nationwide response began.

The situation in Marawi was confused. In the suburbs, the AFP recaptured ground quickly from constantly moving militants, while in the city well-sited snipers stopped its advance. Inhabitants began to leave, shocked by the brutality of foreign fighters and wanton destruction by 'local boys'. Most of the population of 200,000 fled in the first days, although several thousand were trapped—held as hostages, caught in the crossfire or hiding in fear of militant brutality. Using phones and two-way radios, they called for help and passed on militant threats to kill hostages unless AFP attacks stopped.

Uncertainty, unexpected militant strength and threats to hostages made an AFP with little experience in urban operations hesitant. Units that advanced were ambushed both within buildings and on the streets, and a Philippine Marine Corps company (about 100 personnel) was hit with a sophisticated multilayered firebomb attack[16] that killed 13 and injured many more. AFP reliance on firepower to strike militants became increasingly controversial, especially after airstrikes also killed soldiers. Setbacks led troops to 'learn on the job' and improvise—for instance, putting timber armour on vehicles, using sledgehammers to knock holes through walls to avoid moving on streets, and erecting walls or screens to pass across laneways. Concurrently, friendly nations provided training, weapons, equipment and specialist capabilities, such as surveillance flights provided by the Royal Australian Air Force. The Joint Task Force (JTF) formed to retake Marawi gave priority to cordon security, managing displaced civilians and IOs. For example, a force of female 'hijab warriors' was assembled to ensure that control in the evacuation centres

was culturally appropriate, while military engineers were assigned to construct refugee shelters even while they were in demand for the urban fight. While the tactical concern was security—to stop other *jihadis* joining the rebellion or spreading it among the evacuated refugees—the crucial point was to act in a way that signalled respect for Islam and concern for evacuees' welfare.

The hiatus while the AFP tightened a cordon around the city core and regrouped for the urban fight enabled several hundred militants to withdraw to the city core and prepare for a long fight. However, it did allow the military to concentrate on *ad hoc* rescue efforts, in cooperation with community and civil society groups, while ceasefires and evacuations were negotiated by the MILF. This unprecedented cooperation and focus on civilian welfare provided narratives to counter those of the militants.

The AFP describes the approach that it developed for the systematic recovery of the city as 'SLICE-ing' (strategise, locate, isolate, constrict and eliminate). It *strategised* by dividing the city into three sectors, each allocated to Marine or Army units with armoured vehicles and artillery attached. In each sector, it *located* and then *isolated* the militants by arranging forces or fire effects around their position, then *constricted* them by shifting soldiers and fire effects inwards, and finally *eliminated* them with explosive firepower followed by infantry assault. The evolved SLICE approach was slow and deliberate; the attack on each building was planned in detail and rehearsed, and its capture was followed by full preparation for defence before proceeding. It took five months to clear the city (Figure 6).

Figure 6: The Battle for Marawi

Source: Charles Knight, using Google Earth.

The challenges of kinetic urban operations

The AFP struggled to retake Marawi. The time taken, in particular, highlights a shortfall in capability. However, closer examination of the fight shows that the destruction largely reflects the challenges of using capabilities that traditional militaries possess when confronting an enemy exploiting urban structures and intent on martyrdom. To clear urban terrain with less destruction requires specific capabilities—leadership and training alone won't suffice. The battle showed how the environment presents opportunities for defenders and acute challenges for attackers.

The initial raid

Some media criticised the execution of the initial arrest raid as 'botched'.[17] However, the use of a company-sized force including elite troops and armoured vehicles was a prudent response in an unexpected task, vindicated by the force having low casualty rates. The lesson, relevant well beyond the Philippines, is that, wherever the population is intimidated or alienated from the forces of the state, an adversary might use urban cover to assemble and prepare a force undetected.

Responding to the seizure

Urban cover offered further opportunities to the relatively untrained militants as the Philippine forces responded. Fighting at close range increases the value of surprise and decreases the necessity for weapons skills. By concealing themselves within, on or behind structures, the militants were able to spring ambushes at point-blank range, knocking out armoured personnel carriers (APCs) using anti-armour weapons and petrol bombs. The militants' obsolescent rocket-propelled-grenade launchers (RPG-2s) penetrated police and army APCs, killing and maiming crew and disabling the vehicles. In one case, after surviving soldiers abandoned their APC, they were trapped for five days. This is a stark reminder of the vulnerability of the ADF's APC fleet in urban terrain—a problem repeatedly rediscovered by the Israeli Defence Force with its M113s since 1973.[18] The AFP might have avoided this risk by having the infantry moving dismounted, but that would have been too slow to save the police who were being attacked. Furthermore, the militants were ready to exploit the extreme exposure of dismounted movement on streets. Leading troops were shot by snipers, who then moved between well-concealed protected positions.

The AFP's reputation as tough fighters has been maintained over 60 years of counterinsurgency since General MacArthur famously said 'give me 10,000 Filipinos and I will conquer the world'. Jungle fighting skills and determination couldn't compensate for lack of training in urban operations and special tools such as smoke grenades. The AFP's experience is a reminder to the ADF of the inherent vulnerability of any soldier or vehicle advancing into an 'urban threat canyon' and the need for a capability to reduce it. A partial answer may lie in the use of unmanned aerial and ground vehicles (UAV/UGV) to 'prove' routes and highly protected vehicles (which the ADF may acquire under Project Land 400). Laying smoke within the urban area would greatly inhibit a militant force, but current ADF smoke munition types present a lethal hazard to civilians.

Figure 7: Initial seizure tactics—images that help explain how militants initially held off the AFP

Notes

The Mapandi (Baloi) Bridge over the Agus River was a key obstacle to the AFP for two months. A reaction force in armoured personnel carriers was ambushed on the far side and trapped for five days. Later, a Marine company that pushed across suffered 53 casualties.

1 **A militant about to fire a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG-2) at an APC.** RPG ambushes hit APCs, killing troops and imposing caution.

2 **Ambushed APC firing at militants above.** This image, filmed from a few metres away, shows APC vulnerability among buildings.

3 **Militant throws petrol bomb.** Troops were hit with petrol bombs, explosive flame-bombs and grenades thrown from above.

4 **Militant sniping.** Concealed, experienced shooters engaged any exposed movement on approach roads, paralysing the AFP advance.

5 **Hostage pleads to the camera.** Hostages were taken and their presence was publicised to produce hesitation, doubt and political dissent.

6 **Hobby drone.** Militants used drones to observe AFP deployments and coordinate counterattacks.

7 **Militant fires machine gun wildly.** Roving teams conducting 'shoot and scoot' attacks caused few casualties but much fear and confusion.

8 **Improvised explosive device.** As troops were driven into buildings by sniping they suffered increasing losses from IEDs.

Source: Composite by Charles Knight; images from AFP sources or screen grabs from militant propaganda.

Were there ways to disrupt the militants' preparations, other than an immediate and risky counterattack? Inserting a force by helicopter to secure dominating features within the city would require that force to be too large to be overrun, enough aircraft to deliver troops and supplies in one lift, and good intelligence. Those enablers weren't available to the AFP, and the risks are well illustrated by the 1993 'Black Hawk down' incident in which a US helicopter was shot down in Somalia, or the 1987 Tamil Tigers' ambush and destruction of an Indian Army heliborne attempt to seize Jaffna Hospital.[19] Small UAVs armed with precision bullet-firing weapons would appear to offer the capability to rapidly respond and disrupt a militant force preparing to defend an urban area; however, such systems remain controversial.

Retaking the city

Critics of the destruction and length of time taken to clear Marawi attribute both to AFP failings.[20] Training deficiencies, which were acknowledged by the AFP, partially account for the time taken. The combat clearance operations took two or three times as long as battles for similarly sized cities such as Fallujah and Grozny. However, the destruction is common to similar battles and better explained by the nature of urban combat and the need to use explosive firepower to reduce one's own casualties.

To clear a city, a force must clear every room, in every building, in every block. A soldier entering is at a lethal disadvantage to a waiting enemy. In earlier urban battles among the lightly constructed buildings of Butig and Zamboanga, the AFP had suffered casualties from shots through walls when using American room-combat drills, but had learned to use firepower to sweep militants out. It brought that experience to Marawi but found the method

less effective among the concrete walls of the city, and the militants compounded their advantage by cutting small loopholes in interior walls to shoot from behind protection. Militants with IEDs or suicide vests could also wait until the troops entered before detonating them. The most effective answer was weapon systems that could punch high-explosive munitions through concrete to explode in the voids immediately ahead of attacking troops.

The most 'surgical' option was fire from the cannon of an APC, and the AFP innovated to get those vehicles into positions where they could get a line of sight onto a building. Though far more vulnerable than tanks, they could move in tight spaces. The AFP paired them with bulldozers clad with improvised armour to clear a path through rubble, and even constructed a ramp to enable an APC to fire from an upper level (Figure 8). It found the 105-mm pack howitzer, long retired from ADF service, invaluable because it could be manhandled among buildings and fire high-explosive shells that could be fused to detonate after entering a building. Instructively, AFP discussion documents examining the requirement for a tank assess the 105 mm to be the optimal projectile for urban combat. It's notable that the ADF no longer has artillery that can be manhandled, that our main current APCs don't have cannon, and that the future well-protected vehicles will be too large to manoeuvre in confined urban spaces.

Figure 8: AFP employment of direct fire. Left: A 105-mm field gun firing directly in support of clearing operations. Right: An M113 fitted with ad hoc wooden armour intended to provide protection against obsolescent and improvised warheads.

Photos: AFP.

When cannon or guns couldn't be brought to bear on the target, the AFP solution was aircraft bombs—with an attendant risk of the errors that on several occasions caused multiple own casualties. It seems likely that small armed UGVs, robotic platforms with infantry-type weapons, might move more readily in, among and around buildings to deliver fire precisely where it's required, with no risk to one's own soldiers and reduced risk to civilians —and that this would be a valuable capability in a future urban fight.

The militants made extensive use of IEDs, which were often sophisticated and ingeniously hidden (for example, some were concealed in ceiling spaces). The AFP suffered many IED casualties in doorways or hallways and learned to always enter a building via a newly created breach in the wall, preferably one created with explosives. The value of a clearing approach that was dependent on explosives and explosive firepower is illustrated by the 'natural experiment' that occurred when they weren't used. President Duterte directed that explosive weapons weren't to be used on mosques, yet mosques were used to fight from and hold hostages (Figure 9). The consequence was that assaults on mosques were repeatedly beaten back with casualties. Eventual success there was associated with the employment of CS gas grenades.

Figure 9: The structural challenges of the Marawi fight. Left: A street too narrow for vehicles but so swept by sniper fire that a sandbag wall had to be built to cross the gap and holes smashed through every concrete wall to avoid street exposure and IEDs in doorways. Right: The cellar below a mosque where militants sheltered with their hostages for dual impunity.

Photos: Charles Knight, 11 October 2018.

The fundamental challenge that militants in an urban area can present is evident from the fact that it took over a month to clear the last 50 militants from a 1,000-metre by 800-metre area (Figure 10). At this stage, the AFP had learned fast, been substantially re-equipped and retrained, had new systems for air attack and was supported by allied surveillance systems and special forces. The method of deliberate attack described to the authors appears similar to techniques used in recent battles against IS in the Middle East and approximates to 'best practice'. The resulting level of destruction despite that highlights the urgent need for new capabilities.

Figure 10: Protracted seizure tactics—images that help explain why it took months for the AFP to clear the main battle area

Notes

The main battle area, looking towards the 800-metre by 1,000-metre zone where 50 militants held out for the final month. The well-prepared and cunning enemy intended to die with as many AFP casualties as possible. Avoiding that required deliberate methods.

1 **A sniper's view.** Streets became no-go areas that could be crossed only by erecting sandbag walls or screens or in armoured vehicles.

2 **An IED.** Hundreds of IEDs, often in entrances and stairwells, made every building a potential deathtrap when entered.

3 **An RPG is fired from a building.** The RPG threat, added to that of IEDs in the rubble, limited the use of armoured vehicles.

4 **Militant observer–sniper pair.** Using loopholes deep inside buildings and moving after a few shots, they remained unseen.

5 **Tunnel dug by hostages.** Combined with existing bunkers, tunnels allowed militants to survive bombardment and manoeuvre.

6 **'Ratholes' and loopholes.** Militants prepared holes to both move through buildings and fire into rooms from adjacent ones.

7 **Militant waiting with IEDs and rifle.** Militants used 'hugging' tactics, staying hidden in a building or infiltrating back inside after the AFP assaulted. This denied the troops their heavy firepower, while the militants fired and threw IEDs from cover.

Source: Composite by Charles Knight; images from AFP sources or screen grabs from militant propaganda.

A final but major consideration is that most of the population successfully evacuated Marawi, which demonstrates the militants' miscalculation of popular support and a failure of their IOs. Had evacuation not occurred, significant civilian casualties would have been inevitable, with profound political consequences. In similar crises, facilitating rapid evacuation is desirable from a humanitarian point of view. The capability to assist with an effective evacuation, and especially to provide confidence-building measures among a fleeing population, might be a vital Australian contribution.

Hard power: conclusions

The Marawi crisis highlights the challenge presented by urban operations in general and urban seizures in particular. The urban problem is a challenge that has historically been neglected—SLA Marshall called it 'a curious void in the history of war'.[21] Simply attributing the delays and destruction of the response to lack of AFP capability—real though that was—risks continuing complacency. The drivers and trends shifting conflict towards the urban environment are clear, and non-state adversaries have clearly learned about seizure as a strategy and about methods of fighting in cities. Contemporary *jihadi* enemy equipped with IEDs represent a special problem. We need to think hard about countering this, both as a nation and to help our friends. The starting point is recognising that a determined defender on urban terrain with local knowledge and IEDs presents a problem that can't be solved by high standards of training and outstanding leadership alone. A force will take heavy casualties unless it employs measures to protect its advancing soldiers from lurking threats—and the only protective measure currently available to most armies is explosive firepower. If firepower is used, there will be casualties among civilians present—and in Marawi most had left. In future urban fights, political leaders and decision-makers are very likely to face the dilemma of balancing their own casualties with civilian casualties—with attendant reputational risk.

Technology appears to offer new options for protecting soldiers. We should pursue these:

1. Factor the likelihood that asymmetric adversaries will 'seize, defy and discredit' into contingency planning for domestic and overseas responses.

    In many situations of urban crisis, humanitarian interest will be served by the early evacuation of the civilian population. The capacity to offer support for a secure evacuation makes it more likely to happen. It's similar to the capacity that we would already seek to offer in other humanitarian crises.

2. Review the suitability of current and planned Australian Army capabilities for operating in a Marawi-like environment.

    Some new capabilities might significantly reduce risks to soldiers and civilians in urban combat, such as specialist reconnaissance UAVs/UGVs and tele-operated 'bulldozer-like' engineering platforms. Their value extends to remediating the battlefield after conflict and also responding to natural disasters. Such systems might be plausibly offered to friendly governments in a crisis, and they may use technologies within the scope of Australian industry and the Defence Innovation Program. Other examples include:

    *   stand-off wall-breaching systems
    *   persistent armed drones with a discriminate strike capability against fleeting targets (smaller and cannon-armed)
    *   smoke and other obscurant systems that can be used without risk to civilians
    *   deployable security barrier systems.

3. Develop a deployable organisation with unmanned medium engineering capability.

    Leading-edge ADF counter-IED capability should provide the foundations for an Australian Army entity that's able to conduct unmanned combat search and clear operations in an urban environment.

ANALYSING SOFT POWER

Contextualising information operations and the information environment

'Information operations' is a frequently employed yet ambiguously defined term. Aside from narrow military usage, colloquially it has become a catch-all for propaganda, strategic communications, psychological influence campaigns and Cold-War-style disinformation. Appreciating the nuances, it is therefore important to define its meaning in a concise and context-specific manner.

Relevant for the purposes of this report is the application of IOs in the specific operational context as well as the wider information environment which they're part of. A recent research contribution recognised the basic elements of operations in the information domain as 'the sequence of actions with the common purpose of affecting the perceptions, attitudes, and decision making of relevant actors'.[22] That definition is somewhat broader than the ADF's focus on operations 'against the capability, will and understanding of target systems and/or target audiences'.[23]

The common denominator is a cognitive effect, and the end goal is to shape decision-making in target populations according to strategic and national interests. This can include, as was the case in Marawi, both insurgents and affected populations as well as the wider national audience.

Figure 11: AFP combat cameramen operated among the assaulting troops to capture emotive images in support of a narrative of steady progress against the militants

Photo: Operations Research Center, Philippine Army.

As information can be shared globally in real time by almost any actor, the wider information environment encompasses social, cultural, cognitive, technical and physical attributes 'that act upon and impact knowledge, understanding, beliefs, world views, and, ultimately, actions of an individual, group, system, community, or organization'.[24] Implied in this definition is the widening of the battlefield, as an increasingly connected world has enlarged the audiences of the conflict beyond those immediately affected. Particularly in a conflict zone, the information environment consists of an interconnected system of actors—often with opposing objectives—who all create, influence and disseminate information with different tools and across various platforms.

IS messaging

Establishing legitimacy and authority therefore becomes trickier as populations are subject to a wider array of information and forces that seek to influence them. Characterisations of IS's IOs reflect this new paradigm, highlighting how the group exploited the information environment with multidimensional campaigns that:

> simultaneously target 'friends and foes' … With the use of simple messages, catchy phrases and striking imagery, all augmented by actions in the field, the fundamental purpose of IS's IO is to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of its audiences.[25]

Key parts of IS's propaganda brand have been the centrality of visual images, the so-called 'propaganda of the deed', the sheer volume of its output and its effort to key messages to local audiences to achieve maximum resonance.

Propaganda materials for the Battle of Marawi were produced locally in Mindanao during the battle, as well as by IS Central through its Amaq News Agency. Marawi was mentioned for the first time in *Rumiyah* magazine and several feature videos about the new 'South East Asian province of the caliphate' in mid-2017. The mentions contained familiar tropes: a rallying cry against occupation, highlighting the colonial legacy of Southeast Asia and framing the battle as justified liberation from secular governments, Christians and American involvement in the region. The purity of Islamic governance was contrasted with the failures of the Philippines' version of democracy, zeroing in on the brutality of security forces in Mindanao.

The key objective, as with all other IS media, was to broadcast IS's triumphalist takeover of the city to project an image of global expansion and strength. The importance of visual symbolism could, for instance, be seen in video images of IS fighters smashing Mary and Jesus statues in a Catholic church, ridding Marawi of 'idolatry' and establishing sharia law. This was an example of attempts to reinforce cultural norms and prejudices to 'turn' a population. Moreover, the jihadists also employed more direct 'offline' methods by interacting directly with residents across Mindanao, leveraging existing ties and networks to personally connect with the population.[26] This reportedly involved 'door-to-door' visits whereby IS-aligned militants personally informed residents of their intended plans for Mindanao, as well as coercing local clerics to denounce fatwas they had previously issued against IS.[27]

AFP messaging

In response, JTF Marawi created an IO cell (the Civil–Military Operations Coordinating Center) under Lieutenant Colonel Jo-Ar Herrera and with several subordinate localised joint task groups across Mindanao, which engaged in active counter-messaging to shape public opinion and undermine militants' narratives. This encompassed both the online space as well as more traditional methods of messaging, such as leaflet drops, banners, and radio and loudspeaker broadcasts. In the tactical and operational sphere, it was aimed at avoiding civilian casualties, getting the population to evacuate, and stemming further recruitment by and popular support for the insurgents. In the longer term, the overarching goal was to 'translate tactical gains into a moral and strategic victory'.[28] Alongside the systematic removal of online IS content, this included the strategic deployment of government counter-narratives in the form of emotional combat footage, documentation of civilian rescue operations and solidarity stories that were used to flood the information environment. Additionally, a team of soldiers and civilian contractors created a 24-hour media centre to support the public information campaign.

This was part of a broader soft-power effort aimed at civil–military cooperation, which was regarded as a crucial element during the crisis; the goal was to forge a unifying patriotic narrative to win the support of the national population. Coordinating and reporting about rescue and humanitarian operations formed an important part of the strategy to demonstrate that the needs of the population were a priority. This included symbolic actions such as footage of drones delivering direction-giving mobile phones to hostages, the organisation of 'peace corridors' with the MILF and NGOs to facilitate evacuations, and the setting up of 'stakeholder' desks with provincial officials for press conferences and face-to-face engagements in order to put forward an image of transparency. In this way, the AFP sought to ensure that its community engagement was visible in deed, not word only.

Figure 12: Image from the Civil–Military Operations Coordinating Center

Note: The Civil–Military Operations Coordinating Center was officially branded as the medium where civilian stakeholders (civil society groups, media, private individuals and government organisations) were able to engage the military in three areas— 'information dissemination, continuous dialogue, and the conduct of emergency activities'.

Source: 'Civil–Military Operations Coordinating Center (CMOCC)', *Marawi and beyond*, JTF Marawi, online.

Accordingly, AFP messaging employed a human rights discourse, showing itself as a positive force that cares. This was counterintuitive to what the local population associated with the military, which has a history of violently repressing insurgencies—its response to the 1972 uprisings on Mindanao and its brutal imposition of martial law being prime examples exploited by militants. Given the lingering memory of this, the commander of JTF Marawi, Lieutenant General Bautista, candidly acknowledged Muslim distrust, even hatred, of the military and spoke of avoiding what he called 'cultural friction'. Exhibiting an awareness of the normative nature of the fight, the commander stated that the aim was to build political legitimacy through a narrative of inclusion, humanism and the righteousness of military action. The key frame of government narratives was that 'this was not a war between Muslims and Christians', aiming to reconstitute national identity to be more inclusive.

The IO accompanying the Battle of Marawi can hence be understood as a battle for the moral high ground: content versus content to claim the 'truth' and establish perceptions as reality. IS narratives highlighted the lack of welfare and social justice for residents and refugees, focusing on what was framed as deliberate destruction and disregard for civilian casualties.

A fighter's comment, posted on the Telegram channel, illustrates this position:

> Remember my dear brothers and sisters. We did not destroy Marawi City. We did not bomb it to ashes …
> We conquered the City for the purpose of implementing the Laws of Allah *azzawajal*. We ordained good and forbade evil … but the response of the Crusader Army was brutal. They fired upon us first in Padian, the civilians know this and as Soldiers of Allah we are obligated to fight back. *Wallaahi*, We never intended harm to the City and its people.[29]

Likewise, the AFP relied on similar arguments to discredit the insurgents' narratives and undermine their credibility, highlighting military efforts to avoid civilian casualties and the AFP's care for the population. Trust, unity and 'truth' were key themes in this discourse; hashtags to support this narrative in public information campaigns included *#AbuSayyafHaram*, *#UnitedAgainstTerrorism*, *#MauteKafirun*, *#IAmfromMindanao*, *#IsupportMartialLaw*, *#Munafiq*, *#UniteforMarawi*, *#NotoViolence*, *#NotoISIS*, *#SupportOurTroops* and *#OurFallenHeroes* (Figure 13).

Figure 13: The official website of JTF Marawi—#SupportOurTroops

Note: According to the official website of JTF Marawi, #SupportOurTroops 'commanded a huge following locally and internationally. People from all walks of life identified with this hashtag, and extended their support.'

Source: 'Social media operations', *Marawi and beyond*, JTF Marawi, 2018, online.

As one of the AFP's official public relations publications on Marawi states, 'if the enemy could come out with a sophisticated campaign of deception, the Public Information Campaign showed them that the Philippine government could counter these simply by telling the truth'.

Results

In the tactical space, it appears that the IO managed to discredit militants' claims about indiscriminate AFP violence to a fair extent. The population heeded AFP directions to evacuate, thereby avoiding significant civilian casualties. The swift humanitarian response, actively spearheaded or supported by the AFP, sent a visible signal of a responsive government providing needed services. There were accusations by residents that AFP soldiers had looted their homes; those claims were denounced and countered by the AFP, which reportedly then sent troops alongside local officials to secure residents' homes to prevent further looting by the insurgents. It emerged later, however, that five individual cases of looting by AFP soldiers were acknowledged by the military, which promised to prosecute them accordingly.[30] The insurgents also didn't manage to inspire notable violent resistance elsewhere, much less win large-scale popular support in favour of their caliphate as a viable alternative government.

Yet, easily reportable actions and effects on immediate decision-making don't automatically translate into improved political relationships in the long term. In this regard, the picture is more complicated. There are some reports that the image of the military had been improved and that, through its efforts to deal with NGOs to facilitate humanitarian aid, greater trust in the AFP as a force 'for the people' was created.[31] As one report stated, 'children in the evacuation centres, who initially depicted the military as the enemy in their drawings, started to portray the soldiers as friends or saviours'.[32] Even though trust in the state overall is very likely still low, especially through poorly managed post-conflict rehabilitation, the AFP worked hard to establish itself during the crisis as a committed actor in the service of the local population. That doesn't equate, however, to successful, holistic counterinsurgency with long-lasting effects (what the AFP termed 'moral and strategic victory'). In particular, interviews with internally displaced persons in camps highlight that the destruction of the city through airstrikes as well as military and police treatment of civilians suspected to be militants are genuine sources of anger against the government and the security forces.[33]

Figure 14: The wrecked Jameo Dansalan Masjiid or Islamic College

Photo: Katja Theodorakis, 11 October 2018.

All this demonstrates that IOs are not only a rhetorical but also a deeply political activity. This means that they're crucial to shaping the overall political character of the conflict and, in this case, even attempting to reconstitute national identity—which is a big responsibility. The normative approach taken by the AFP in Marawi illustrates this recognition. As IS has shown, leveraging perceptions is crucial to influencing populations. In order to counter this, cultural awareness and responsiveness to the sociopolitical and emotional realities of the target audiences are crucial.

But, for a more accurate understanding, it's also necessary to consider the context in which the operations in Marawi were conducted. Existing research has extensively covered the tricky symbiotic relationship between the responsibility of mass media to report on events in the public interest and terrorists seeking to use the media to promote their political agenda. Accordingly, it's well acknowledged that terrorism challenges the media's ability and right to inform on events independently.[34] IS is a case in point for this. The group not only made unprecedented use of its own media channels but also exploited mainstream media, which in some cases (unwillingly) made themselves vehicles for IS's message.[35]

In Marawi, these dilemmas were especially pronounced, which was expressed poignantly by one Filipino journalist:

> As with any other conflicts, the lines between propaganda and factual information are almost always hard to distinguish. But in the battle of Marawi, it was cranked up to the highest level. Access to independent information and to the actual main battle area was tightly controlled by the military, and for good reason. At the same time, though, the proliferation of smart phones with high-resolution cameras made it possible for journalists to take an unfiltered peek at what was happening on the ground.[36]

Despite journalists' efforts, the government was nevertheless the media's primary source for coverage of the siege of Marawi. Such a controlled information environment extended to the kinds of reports that were permitted to come out of Marawi and the AFP's open declaration of a ranking system that only allowed 'positive' media coverage (as documented in its official book series about Marawi). Given that, in the first few days of the siege, insurgents used social media to communicate with the outside world, the Philippine Government also asked Facebook in Singapore to remove content from accounts associated with the IS–Maute Group, which it did.[37]

Aware of how media representations can affect the outcome of an urban battle, the AFP's restrictions on reporting from the main battle area were justified by operational security concerns.[38] This is a general practice reflected elsewhere; for example, US Marine Corps doctrinal guidance on urban operations states that 'enforcing established guidelines helps prevent negative publicity which could jeopardize the operation or national and strategic objectives'.[39]

It's argued that controlling the media environment is driven by the need to look beyond the immediate tactical implications of the battle to long-term security and stability; a tightly scripted narrative is seen as a necessary foundation for legitimacy in the ensuing political process. The implications of enmeshing IOs and psychological operations with public affairs efforts for the sake of projecting legitimacy and containing dissent have been identified as a point of concern in reporting on contemporary conflicts.[40] In the Australian context, Kevin Foster's analysis of the ADF's relationship with the media during operations in Afghanistan illustrates this problem set; Foster was highly critical of ADF efforts to control communications by restricting media access and journalists' freedom of movement among troops in the country.[41] Ironically, the ADF's Operation Augury in support of the AFP during the Battle of Marawi and its aftermath has also been criticised for an apparent lack of transparency about financial costs and personnel involvement.[42]

Such general security considerations and political dilemmas interacted with the particular domestic information environment of the Philippines—notably, the scope of a free press, which has been criticised as severely restricted under the Duterte government. In Freedom House's free press ranking for 2017, the media environment in the Philippines was classified as 'dangerous' for journalists.[43] This is evidenced by the frequent arrests of journalist Maria Ressa, and reportedly also includes coordinated government attempts at 'domestic disinformation' in order to control the domestic information space.[44]

Consequently, we can't simply extract lessons from the 'battle of the narratives' in Marawi in an uncritical manner. Any targeted campaign or operation in today's complex information environment involves cultural and political contestations, but particularly so in a context in which democratic principles are upheld only to a certain extent. In a fully democratic society, ethical debates about means and ends and a responsibility to 'truth' must continue to accompany the practice and analysis of propaganda or information campaigns and journalistic reporting on conflicts and terrorism.

Ultimately, the most important elements in a successful soft-power campaign are credibility and legitimacy beyond mere persuasion; moral authority can arise only when there's no gap between rhetoric and actions. In the case of Marawi, the destruction of the city, in which the main battle area was aptly named 'ground zero', has given rise to accusations of the use of excessive, indiscriminate force by the AFP—a source for further extremist recruitment if the narrative of the AFP's challenges isn't managed with transparency. This highlights that clear, open communication is needed on the realities and dilemmas of urban warfare in order to avoid a loss of legitimacy. It's a must that accusations of disproportionate air and ground attacks are addressed objectively and in a timely way.

Figure 15: JTF Marawi's soft-power approach

Note: JTF Marawi states that the soft-power approach was applied 'across all the levels of army operations: strategic, operational, and on the tactical level. On the tactical level, we applied it within the MBA [main battle area], particularly on the IS–Maute fighters, their hostages, and trapped civilians. On the operational level, we applied it outside the MBA, specifically by focusing on the IDPs [internally displaced persons] of Marawi City, their local and traditional leaders, and the people from the surrounding towns, provinces, and the lake area. On the strategic level, we directed our efforts on the Filipino nation and the global community.'

Source: 'Soft power approach', *Marawi and beyond*, JTF Marawi, 2018, online.

The strategic objective of jihadist groups is to gain recognition as credible ethical actors in global politics. To that end, they leverage grievances and seek to expose hypocrisy and cognitive dissonance in their opponents' narrative. This can be countered only by nuanced knowledge of the cultural and moral context. As Albert Palazzo incisively argued recently, the new master program for future conflict isn't the constant pursuit of a technological edge but knowledge.[45] Part of that's a keen, emotionally aware understanding of how points of views leading to action are constructed.

Soft power: conclusions

Adherence to the international rules-based order is the premise of our national security and defence strategy. But lawfulness, in the form of compliance with the international legal frameworks governing conflict, is only the necessary starting point to establishing credibility. Building legitimacy in a complex urban conflict with its ethical challenges needs to go beyond reputational concerns, proactively avoiding the ethical traps *jihadis* seek to lay. This is especially important when considering whole-of-government responses that are shaped by political imperatives and long-term security and stability concerns.

Conceptions of 'just war' imply a moral righteousness, but that isn't fixed—it's derived from perceptions. As we saw with IS attempts to portray the AFP as the enemy of the local population, moral claims, especially in a conflict situation, are open to interpretation and constituted 'on the ground', among the people and amid the action. Careful attention to credibility gaps contributes to stripping extremist narratives of their perceived moral power and appeal.

An effective soft-power approach that amounts to more than mere persuasion and instead focuses on building relationships should take into account the following insights:

- In urban operations, the narratives surrounding the conduct of operations aren't just a supporting element but are equally as important as—if not more so than—the military objective: the effective use of soft power plays a crucial part in achieving a favourable political outcome.

- The moral dimension matters. Responding to the sociopolitical and emotional realities of the target audiences is crucial. Political victory can be brought about only by avoiding dissonance between military effects and narratives. Legitimacy requires a close match between words and deeds.

- There's a need for cultural intelligence as a future capability: IOs shouldn't be regarded as technical exercises but as human ones, premised on a thorough understanding of the causes and drivers of political violence. This includes a focus on values and ethical considerations and how they're constructed on the ground.

Figure 16: Remnants of St Mary's Cathedral in Marawi's main battle area where IS insurgents smashed holy statues and kidnapped a priest
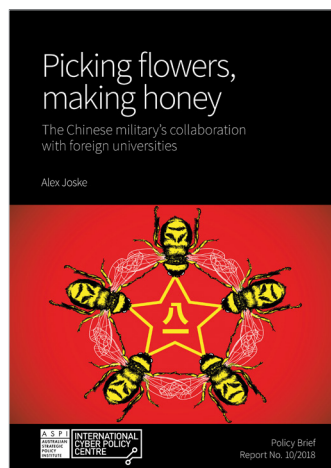

Photo: Katja Theodorakis, 11 October 2018.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADF Australian Defence Force

AFP Armed Forces of the Philippines

APC armoured personnel carrier

ARMM Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao

ASG Abu Sayyaf Group

BARMM Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao

IED improvised explosive device

IO information operation

IS Islamic State

JTF Joint Task Force

MILF Moro Islamic Liberation Front

NGO non-government organisation

RPG rocket-propelled grenade

SLICE strategise, locate, isolate, constrict and eliminate

UAV unmanned aerial vehicle

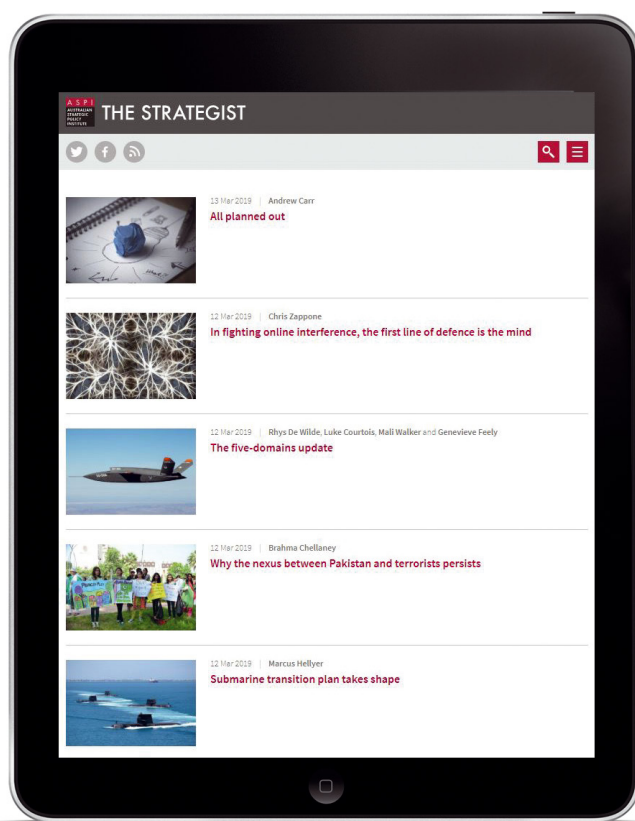UGV unmanned ground vehicle

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