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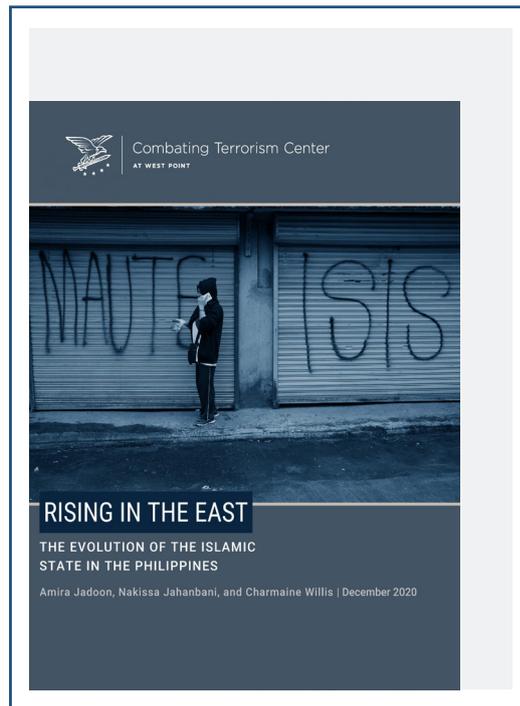


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RISING IN THE EAST THE EVOLUTION OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN THE PHILIPPINES



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Director General

Major General Mohammed bin Saeed Al-Moghedi

Secretary-General of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition/Acting

Editor-in-Chief

Ashour Ibrahim Aljuhani

Director of Research and Studies Department

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TAOQ تائق

E-mail: info@taoqresearch.org

Phone: +966 114890124



RISING IN THE EAST THE EVOLUTION OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippines is the only country in Southeast Asia ranked in the top 10 list of countries most impacted by terrorism in the world. The downward ranking from the 10th place in 2019 to the 9th place in 2018, the decline came into play due to a decrease in the number of terrorist attacks by 18%; from 424 attacks in 2018 to 348 attacks in 2019.

Equally important, the Philippines is the only country in Southeast Asia that has been ranked among the top ten countries most affected by terrorism. According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2020, the New People's Army (NPA) was the most active terrorist organization in the Philippines, responsible for more than 35% of deaths and 38% of terrorism-related incidents in 2019. ISIS is the second deadliest group in the Philippines.

Must-Have Questions

The previous statistics shows the importance of the Philippines as one of the countries most impacted by terrorism globally, making research centers much interested in and focused on terrorism in the Philippines, led by the Counter-Terrorism Center of the US Military Academy West Point, which issued a series of analytics reports on terrorism in Southeast Asia, especially ISIS and other extremist groups linked or affiliated to ISIS.

After the Center issued the first report in 2019 on the activity of ISIS in Southeast Asia, it investigates the development of ISIS in the Philippines between January 2014 and July 2019, and further examines the factors contributory to the ISIS emergence and activity in the local context of the Philippines following the Battle of Marawi. The analysis in this report highlights the local tools that made room for presence and influence in the face of ISIS. The co-editors of the report specifically sought answers to several key questions:

- What are the social, economic and political factors that contributed to the influence of ISIS in the Philippines?
- How has ISIS-related activity in the Philippines snowballed into reality over the years, in terms of locations, methods, and goals?
- What are the motives of local armed groups to join ISIS?
- What are the factors influencing the future threat associated with ISIS?

The authors of the report devoted the bulk of the report for the trajectory of ISIS in the Philippines, and the factors that contributed to the development of the influence of ISIS. The analysis included the most important internal factors that aided the emergence of ISIS and persistence in the region. Specific facts fundamental to the ISIS situation in the Philippines are highlighted, known as the Battle of Marawi and the siege.

The report draws attention to an important aspect that may pass unnoticed to many outside the Philippines, which is the network of relationships and links that brought together the central core of ISIS and other extremist organizations that ballooned primarily in the Philippines, often attributed to the Battle of Marawi and the five-

month long siege. Marawi is an alluring city, which was once controlled by ISIS fighters, making it their stronghold. In response, the official security forces laid a five-month long siege to the city. Other members belonging to other terrorist groups joined ISIS during this period.

Favorable Domestic Environment

The report has warned of an invisible aspect of terrorism and armed violence in the Philippines. The domestic environment of the Philippines represented a breeding ground for the emergence and spread of extremism and terrorism given the internal chronic turmoil that swept through the region many decades ago. Such disturbances were triggered by social disparities, sectarian and ethnic conflicts, and deteriorating economic conditions. Taken together, these reasons rose to prominence in the southern Philippines, especially Mindanao, which alone accounts for 37% of the poor in the Philippines, including four of the five poorest provinces there. The disturbances have plunged the Philippines into an extended state of instability and armed conflicts that have been and continue to be a source of constant threat to the government and society.

Equally important, one more key factor is the inability of the Philippine central government until 2019 to reach peace with the main rebel groups, such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). These internal facts, established over decades, have become self-propelled drivers of a state of deep tension, and the increasing tendency to use violence and weapons.

Among the most important features of this scene that feeds violence are the ethnic and religious conflicts linked to historical divisions between the majority of the Catholic population and the Muslim minority, which makes up only 11% of the population, and is widespread in Mindanao and the Sulu Islands.

The turmoil between Muslims and Catholics dates back to the stage of American colonialism when the Americans successfully established political alliances with local figures and leaders. Thanks to these alliances, they achieved stability in Mindanao, but they encouraged the migration of Christians on a large scale to the region. This caused first to a decline in the proportion of Muslims in the

population, and later Christians began to acquire large swaths of territory, and a sharp conflict erupted between Muslims and Christians over land ownership.

Following the exit of the Americans and the Spaniards, the religious conflict dragged on across the Philippines; more so, the situation was further exacerbated when Ferdinand Marcos, former President of the Philippines, used excessive violence, especially between 1968 and 1972. One of the bloodiest moments at this stage was the Jabidah Massacre, which was a direct cause of fueling the rebellion in Mindanao, turning it into a separatist wave and the emergence of the Moro National Liberation Front and others. The tense situation was cemented by the declaration of Marcos martial law in the region in 1972.

The stage well pushed the Muslims in the Philippines to shut themselves off, as a minority social sect; this was an automatic reaction to the oppressive practices, and religious belief and ethnic origin became symbolic of the Muslim identity, not Filipino citizenship.

Following decades of constant turmoil, slow and soft negotiations, the Philippine government agreed in 1989 to establish relative autonomy in what became known as Islamic Mindanao (ARMM), which included the southern provinces of Lanao del sur, Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. This allowed for the establishment of a local government with the powers to levy taxes and partially apply Islamic laws in the said areas.

However, the move failed to defuse the rebellion and turmoil in the said areas, and the government entered into protracted negotiations to conclude peace agreements with the rebel groups. For various reasons, the most critical is the previous negative perceptions of all parties, the negotiations paid off to reach only partial agreements, which were accepted by some groups while rejected by others. Disagreements arose about the implementation of and commitment to the agreements due to mutual suspicions. The turmoil continued for more than a quarter of a century, which fueled the emergence of extremist members and violent factions; some rebel groups, for national or political reasons, also covered multinational fighters and members of religious groups, coming to fight to confront the common enemy, which is the central government.

Given the poor government control over Mindanao, in contrast to clan hegemony politically and economically, forms of corruption became notoriously rampant, such as vote buying campaigns that lobbied hard for gaining or strengthening political influence. Also, the tribes have prime motives to ally themselves with a huge organization, such as ISIS, which not only can it provide significant funding; rather, but the alliance with ISIS also promotes the name of the clan and its standing in the face of other clans.

In addition to the religious and political aspects of such domestic conflicts, ethnic and tribal factors are strongly persistent in the consolidation of such divisions; the deeply ingrained violence is imbued



with domestic specificity that makes religious motives and tribal motives yoked together (tribal identity). Equally important, the poor economic and social situation in most provinces and regions of the Philippines has also come into play, making youth an easy target for extremist ideologies, decoyed for financially paid employment.

The report reveals that the difficult environment in the Philippines has prompted youth to join armed organizations rebelling against the central government, hoping for a financial return through recruitment.

The Filipino case can be distinguished from others, with regard to the recruitment criteria and motives for extremist and terrorist groups. In the cases of Indonesia and Malaysia, the motive was purely religious, which was the aspiration to establish a caliphate; whereas in the Philippines the very same motive was not the only one; rather, the direct worldly motives were strongly present, especially the social motive manifested in the disintegration and heated competition between local groups and sects.

Taken together, with ISIS snowballing into the Middle East, the scene of violence in the Philippines developed more activity and self-interaction. ideology was not its only driver; all the other key factors contributed to making the Philippines a breeding ground like other countries for infamous terrorism and religious violence.

Emergence of ISIS

The various armed groups operating in cahoots with each other under the guise of religion, with many groups pledging allegiance to ISIS, did not help ISIS in Southeast Asia to be united, albeit theoretically leading all affiliated organization; the grip over the global branches loosened.

For example, there is a clear difference between the groups that pledged allegiance to ISIS and affiliated with it in the Philippines, and those that pledged allegiance to it in Indonesia. The difference is not limited to structures and operational methods; rather, activities and operations are orchestrated according to their respective objectives and priorities and are implemented with complete independence.

Such a cluster pattern in the operational methods of the branches of ISIS is not limited to the groups or provinces in Southeast Asia; rather, it is one of the new

characteristics that distinguished ISIS in various parts of the world, as ISIS abandoned the idea of the complete link between the center and the branches, which was followed and adhered to by Al-Qaeda. Of note, ISIS accepts the pledge of allegiance from any group that wishes to join it in any part of the world, and it does not impose conditions or restrictions on such affiliates. Each loyal group sets its own goals and action plans according to the peculiarities of the regions, at the discretion their respective branch leaders.

ISIS is satisfied such affiliated branches declare their loyalty and allegiance to it and raise the ISIS flag, Such resilience has given a great advantage to both ISIS and the local armed groups lurking across different regions of the world.

ISIS has obtained great support, a balance of free ubiquity and propaganda, and gained moral weight, and influence that does not show the actual capabilities, be it belligerent, organizational and cooperative. The nominal and moral connection contributed to the consolidation of the mental image of ISIS as a globally widespread entity, operating across the entire world, including Southeast Asia, as if it were a large cluster network with influence throughout the earth.

Equally important, the ISIS branches enjoyed great freedom in making and implementing decisions, and derived ideological ground and moral prestige from the reputation acquired by ISIS ever since inception, for its appalling atrocities and horrendous crimes against civil societies. One of the important approaches to understanding the development of ISIS in the Philippines is analyzing the relationship between ISIS and the armed groups and the fighting and separatist factions there. Such terrorist groups, given their multiplicity alongside uneasy and troubled interrelations helped ISIS to successfully change the scene of the rebellion and the pattern of violence that prevailed in the Philippines. The ubiquity of ISIS was a factor contributory to gathering and attracting such groups that once operated in silos. ISIS lured such groups to cooperate in tandem and pool resources and expertise.

Although some local groups, such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) had previous links with non-local fighters, we find that ethnic and tribal differences prevented local groups from cooperating in concert. ISIS was not the decisive factor in bringing such



armed groups together; the Battle of Marawi helped to cause such rapprochement and coordination, and it became a crucial common challenge that pushed them to overcome the traditional divisions under the umbrella of ISIS.

One of the factors that facilitated this rapprochement is the ISIS use of foreign fighters, especially those coming from Indonesia and Malaysia. The foreigner members provided a major advantage, which is not being bound by tribal ties and not being influenced by traditional sectarian identities there. Such fighters displayed resilience and freedom of movement and maneuverability between factions and armed groups with technical expertise and channels of communication for different parties in the world.

The most notorious local armed group that has joined ISIS is the Abu Sayyaf, a network of small groups with members led by a highly influential leader. It is the largest opposition and rebel group in the Philippines, after the Moro Liberation Front. Of note, Radullan Sahiron, Leader of the Abu Sayyaf Network, did not prefer to work under the banner of ISIS, unlike the faction led by Isnilon Hapilon, in the Basilan region and the faction led by Hatib Hajan; They declared their allegiance to ISIS. Despite their differences regarding the limits of integration or affiliation with ISIS and its bases, they cooperated in tandem and with ISIS temporarily.

One of the reasons for the enthusiasm of some of the leaders of these factions to cooperate with ISIS or to pledge allegiance to ISIS is to benefit from the ISIS branding and reputation. Raising the ISIS flag was a guarantee for these factions to increase the ransom required to free the hostages in their kidnapping operations. The ISIS flag and branding gave such operations higher confidence in possibly carrying out gruesome executions against the hostages kidnapped. In general, the Isnilon Hapilon faction in the Basilan Region was the most important of such factions, which early joined ISIS in Southeast Asia, in 2014.

ISIS appointed Hapilon as the emir of the operations, as a step to declare a mandate for ISIS across the region; this faction had an important impact on the growth of the ISIS plans and support for the operations in Southeast Asia, which attracted many foreign members, especially Malaysians. They had a major impact in strengthening the operational and financial activities of ISIS. However, the killing of Hapilon at the hands of the Philippine army in 2017 was a severe blow to this armed faction. Then Furuji Indama took over the leadership and announced that he was following the path of his predecessor, but there were reports of his death in September 2020.

Among the other key allies of ISIS in the Philippines is the Maute group, which is known by this name in relation to its founders in 2015, the Maute brothers;



(Omar Khayyam and Abdullah), in the province of Lanao del Sur. They named the group Islamic State Organization in Lanao branch, and it pledged allegiance to ISIS in April of 2016.

The Maute Group pledged allegiance to ISIS not because of the ideological rapprochement, as it was motivated by polishing up the group's image and flexing its notoriously extremist muscles, cruel and violent faction. Like many other rebel groups in the country, the Maute fighters had links with the Moro Liberation Front. One of the manifestations of their rapprochement was that the rebel leader of the front, Bravo, opened the front's camps to train Maute fighters, before it established its own training camp, and began to attract the fighters who defected from the front.

In addition to the reasons for the strength of the Maute Group and the increasingly growing number of fighters, the use of universities to recruit youth, especially the University of Mindanao has also come into play. After the group pledged allegiance to ISIS, it had an important contribution to several attacks linked to ISIS, and a significant impact on the ISIS seizure of Marawi in 2017, and the long battle that took place there. The group, in coordination with ISIS, created the coalition that imposed control over the Marawi territory, and brought together Maranao, Tausug, Maguindanao, the Isnilon Hapilon faction of the Abu Sayyaf group, an ISIS cell from Cotabato, and the Ansharul Caliph Filipino group, Khalifa Philippines (AKP) is based in Sultan Kudarat.

In addition to the penetration of the Maute Group into the local shadow economy, it successfully established hideouts inside Marawi, making it an ambush to lure and decoy the Philippine army into such a trap. The group brilliantly made use of the traditional reinforced concrete buildings known as Hobbs, in keeping the Armed Forces of the Philippines in limbo for several months. However, the group at the end suffered heavy losses in the battle; its leaders, Omar and Abdullah Maute, were killed.

There are other groups that are less powerful and influential in the scene of violence in the Philippines, such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), a group that was established in 2010 following the separation from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, given the dissatisfaction with the slow pace of the MILF negotiations with the Philippine government regarding the autonomy of Mindanao. The group branched out following the death of its leader, Amirel Cato, and disintegrated into three factions, only one of which pledged allegiance to ISIS – Ismail Abdul Malik, nicknamed Abu Tarif, who declared his allegiance to ISIS in 2016.

The real contribution of the Abu Tarif faction in the Battle of Marawi is unknown; however, it later became one of the important components in the network of groups linked to ISIS in the Philippines, given the killing of the main leaders of the first groups that formed the terrorist organization's network. Of note, one of the key results of the Battle of Marawi was the predominance of decentralization on the map of groups linked to ISIS in the Philippines and their activities. The report

attributed this to the killing of the Mawt brothers and the killing of Hapilon, the three leaders who had a great impact in bringing the armed groups closer, forming ISIS into one interconnected network.

Foreign Fighters and Attacks

Foreign fighters have had a significant impact in facilitating communication and association between ISIS central and local extremist groups in the Philippines. The number of foreign fighters is differently estimated, but in total they are about 10 to 40 fighters, mostly from Indonesia and Malaysia, in addition to fighters from Central Asia, North Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

The choice of foreign fighters affiliated with ISIS is due to the Philippines, specifically Mindanao, being the only place in the region that provided territory to establish an extremist state, especially following the killing of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the decline in the strength of the central organization in Iraq and Syria, and the collapse of the Caliphate State; it became practical and logical for fighters from Southeast Asia affiliated with ISIS or loyal factions to stay around in the areas available in the region.

The report remarks that the deepest impact that ISIS has successfully created in the Philippines is the introduction of a new type of terrorist attacks, the pattern of suicide operations. The co-editors of the report cite that the emergence of this pattern was accompanied by the influx of foreign fighters affiliated

with the organization to the Philippines, who initiated this type of attacks there.

The development of operations by ISIS in the Philippines can be viewed from different angles, including the quantitative development of the terrorist attacks carried out by the factions loyal to ISIS, and the qualitative development that tends to adopt a specific pattern of violence for special reasons, or in a certain period of time. The magnitude together with the nature of the losses is an important indicator for understanding the development and operations of ISIS in the Philippines.

Given the number of attacks, the report divided the period from 2014 to 2019 into three phases. The first phase (2014-2016) and third phase (2018-2019) witnessed some attacks; the first attack claimed by ISIS occurred there in late 2015.

This seems very logical, in light of the modernity of the central organization itself in the Middle East, while the armed groups of the Philippines and others were witnessing differences among themselves, and they were engaged in tension with the Manila government.

The second phase (June 2016 - June 2017) underwent the most heated armed confrontations between these groups and government forces, spearheaded by the Battle of Marawi, which sustained very violent confrontations, and a siege imposed by government forces around the city for more than five months. In



total, the attacks linked to ISIS accounted for 80% of all attacks in these two years, which are 18 attacks in 2016, and 22 attacks in 2017. The increase between the two years is due to the fact that 2017 witnessed the siege of Marawi in Lanao del Sur province, which were exploited by groups affiliated with ISIS to intensify terrorist attacks.

Political developments also increased the terrorist operations. In 2016, the autonomy negotiations between the central government and the Moro Liberation Front faltered, and the Philippine People's Assembly failed to pass the Bangsamoro law, which was being negotiated to grant Mindanao political rights close to autonomy.

The attacks decreased in the third stage; only five attacks took place in 2018, and four attacks in 2019, which is a natural development given the heavy losses incurred by terrorist groups in the Battle of Marawi, and the fall of a number of leaders of the main factions.

There is a remarkable qualitative development brought about by the entry of ISIS into the Philippines, a new type of violence manifested in suicide operations. Throughout the centuries that witnessed unrest between the Muslim minority and the Christian majority, and the continued confrontations between rebel groups and successive governments, no suicide operations were carried out.

The first operation was carried out in 2018, and the perpetrator was of Moroccan nationality, affiliated with ISIS. Most of the suicide attacks that occurred later were carried out by foreign suicide bombers.

However, the intensity of the use of the suicidal pattern requires more research, as the percentage of suicide operations made up 75% of the attacks in the first seven months of 2019.

The development in the type of attacks using suicide operations portends a dangerous shift in the trajectory of terrorism and violence in the Philippines. At the same time, it shows a development worthy of attention and close follow-up, at the cultural and mental level, both for the suicide elements and the fighters of the armed organizations, or for the social breeding environment. Such development calls for research into the characteristics of social and cultural environments, and susceptibility to producing individuals willing to commit higher levels of violence, up to self-sacrifice.

The target regions and parties of terrorist attacks were confined to Mindanao of the Muslim minority, where the armed groups settle. The attacks also affected, albeit to a lesser extent, Manila, due to the presence of the government political and security institutions. Of the 50 attacks between 2014 and 2019, 4 attacks only targeted Manila, and 46 attacks targeted Mindanao. Even it is not certain that those four attacks are all terrorist operations linked to ISIS, which caused in 4 deaths and 26 injuries.

During the period covered by the report (2014-2019), there were 524 deaths and 290 injuries. There were no casualties in 2014, and 8 people were killed in 2015. The number jumped in 2016 to 353, including 158 deaths and 195 injuries. Although it decreased relatively in 2017 to 49 deaths and 144 injuries, and then decreased again in 2018 to 25 deaths and 63 injuries, 2019 witnessed an increase in the victims to 50 deaths and 122 injuries.

Of note, the pattern of suicide operations was prevalent in 2019. This explains the rise in the victims, even though the attacks were much less than in 2016 and 2017.

The operational performance of ISIS in the Philippines displayed a high percentage of successful attacks vis-à-vis those thwarted by the authorities. Of the fifty attacks, only two were thwarted. This is a large percentage vis-à-vis the ISIS branches in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The criterion for success is the completion and purpose of the process as planned.

Since the suppression of attacks is primarily related to the efficiency of the security forces, their informational and logistical capabilities, alongside the availability of a conducive and supportive internal societal environment for the state authorities, these numbers are consistent with the internal situation, especially enabling the central government to tighten their grip and extend their control over the country.

Government Confrontation

Over the decades, the administration of the central government in Manila has sustained a series of religious, ethnic, political and social crises and disturbances with a degree of confusion and miscalculation. In many cases, the security treatment approach of crises added insult to injury, deepening the gap between the government and



society. For example, in 2015, while the government was negotiating with the Moro Liberation Front, Manila launched a raid on Maguindanao, killing 44 officers and leaving a very bad impression of the government's true intent towards the negotiations.

More importantly, the rebels used that raid as propaganda against the government to recruit more extremist militants and criticize the traditional opposition organizations. When the central government took necessary counterterrorism measures, the results were sometimes negative. For instance, in the Battle of Marawi in 2017, the government forces used heavy weapons, including artillery and aerial bombardment to hit the rebels entrenched in the city, causing widespread devastation in Marawi.

The co-editors present a problem arising from the possibility of extremist ideology and the renewal of armed trends among the members in prisons. Rather than limiting the spread of extremism, prison perpetuates it and facilitates the recruitment of more radical members. The report also pointed out that the Philippines and other countries were forced, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to release many arrested members to reduce prison overcrowding.

Despite the importance of touching the negative effect of some measures of counterinsurgency, the report does not fully address it; the report does not come up with workable solutions or views nor does it reveal

whether the Philippine authorities are aware of such a problem. Equally important, one more observation is brushing aside the problem, which is not limited to the Philippines. It is a dilemma encountered by all states that suffer from extremism and terrorism. Taken together, it is one of the many telling signs of addressing such thorny problems of ideological or doctrinal reference if they entirely rely on security and punitive measures.

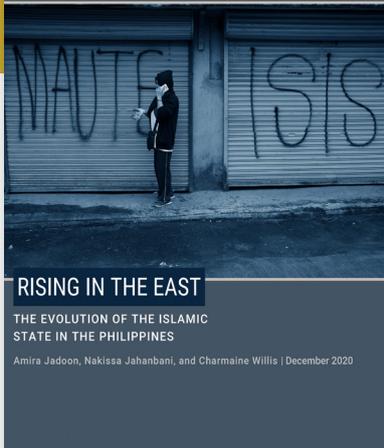
The Philippine government fights off the armed groups with a variety of forces. The authorities develop the combat capabilities of the multidisciplinary forces, backed by American support, including funding, logistical services, and deploying American soldiers in the Philippine; however, these capabilities remain riddled and flawed by some shortcomings at the levels of planning and field implementation.

For instance, the use of heavy weapons is essential to achieve positive results in remote areas, forests, woodlands and rural suburbs with limited population. However, the Philippine forces used the same weapons in confrontations within urban areas, causing many casualties of the civil society, great destruction, heavy losses in infrastructure, facilities and property.

Therefore, it is important for the government forces to employ new and diverse methods, including local partners to encourage defections from armed groups, while reassuring fighters willing to defect.



Combating Terrorism Center
AT WEST POINT



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