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## Analysis on Past Literature Review: Abu Sayyaf's Expansion Strategy and Its Impact on Sabah

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### Abstract

The emergence of Abu Sayyaf militants (ASM) from the Philippines is a dark corner of Malaysian history that threatened harmony, especially in Sabah. Linked to various dangerous criminal activities since the 2000s, these efforts aim to achieve their ideological goals. Consequently, the narrative of the Abu Sayyaf Group's strategy towards Sabah and Malaysia is studied by scholars through articles, books, and reports. A literature review of the last five to six years was carried out to identify militant strategies and conclude research problems for security experts and researchers. Through this analysis, the study concludes: First, research on the ASG criminal network in Sabah must be updated, as it involves international and domestic networks like the Maute group, BIFF, and small militant groups in Southeast Asia. Second, government changes affect militant activities in Malaysia, especially in Sabah and neighboring countries; hence, analysis is needed to generate new counter-narrative implications. Third, security cooperation in Southeast Asia must cover social media networks and include Singapore. This is because the Abu Sayyaf Group's expansion narrative strategy covers not only Sabah and Indomalphil but the whole of Southeast Asia, including Singapore.

**Keywords:** Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), diaspora movement, expansion, Sabah, the Philippines.

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## Introduction

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is a militant terrorist organization that has generated widespread fear among the Filipino population due to its claim of struggling for independence through the establishment of an Islamic state or *Daulah Islamiyah*. The ideological foundations of its struggle are largely derived from Salafi-jihadi doctrines associated with Ibn Taymiyyah and later Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, as well as their followers, and have been further propagated by contemporary militant organizations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS/Daesh, and Jemaah Islamiyah.

The emergence of ASG has raised serious concerns across Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, as the group has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity for violence through kidnapping, murder, armed robbery, and other criminal activities. These activities have persisted since the early 2000s and continue to represent one of the most pressing security threats confronting governments in the region. Malaysia, especially the state of Sabah, has been particularly affected due to its geographical proximity to the southern Philippines. Although ASG's militant activities are often perceived as fragmented or weakened, their long-term effects continue to leave deep psychological, social, and economic scars on the people of Sabah and on foreign tourists who have fallen victim to such violence.

Accordingly, this literature review seeks to identify developments in ASG activities in Sabah by analyzing scholarly works published within the last five years, while also incorporating earlier studies as conceptual and historical foundations. The discussion is organized into three main sections: first, an overview of past studies on the Abu Sayyaf Group; second, previous research on ASG's expansion strategies in Sabah; and third, studies examining the security threats posed by ASG in Sabah.

## Abu Sayyaf Group

When discussing the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), it emerges as a significant and widely debated research theme, particularly whenever issues of militant violence in Southeast Asia are examined. Zack Fellman (2011: 3) notes that ASG's expansion has attracted global attention since the early 2000s due to its inhumane activities. The group's continued existence has persistently disrupted social order and security across Southeast Asia. As such, ASG represents a threat that must be addressed not only by regional states but also by the international community, given the wide range of security challenges arising from its activities.

Fellman (2011: 2) identifies three main factors contributing to the existence and sustainability of the Abu Sayyaf militant group (ASMG). First, widespread public dissatisfaction and frustration with the Philippine political system—particularly repeated failures to achieve independence—have contributed to the adoption of terrorist tactics against both Muslim and non-Muslim populations in the Philippines. Herdi Sahrasad et al. (2018: 384) observe that this situation was exploited by Moro Muslims in the southern Philippines, leading to the formation of ASG under the influence of transnational militant organizations such as the Islamic State (IS), Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), and al-Qaeda, in pursuit of independence for the region.

Consequently, ASG has become closely linked to historical legacies of colonialism, territorial disputes, and socio-cultural and political marginalization. Religion and ethnic identity thus play a critical role in sustaining prolonged tensions and violent conflict in the Philippines and Southeast Asia.

Second, ASG's development was significantly shaped by the leadership of Abdurajak Janjalani, a veteran of the Afghan–Soviet conflict. His involvement in overseas jihad inspired ASMG members, who regarded him as an ideal leader to advance their cause (Fellman 2011: 2). Janjalani's experience in armed conflict facilitated the dissemination of Salafi-jihadi ideology, which, according to Kumar Ramakrishna (2018: 8) and Syafawani and Wan Fariza (2020: 113), has been reinforced by the widespread influence of Wahhabi ideas that render young individuals particularly vulnerable to violent extremist narratives.

Third, Fellman (2011: 2) highlights the role of terrorist patronage in sustaining ASG's activities. External support in the form of training, financial assistance, and ideological reinforcement enabled the group to operate effectively in small, mobile cells. This patronage was primarily associated with the Islamic State (IS), one of the most feared militant organizations globally. Jacob Zenn (2019: 87) argues that although IS failed to maintain territorial control in Syria and Iraq, it continued to adhere to its ideological principles and identified organizations in the Philippines, such as ASG, as suitable affiliates capable of holding territory and fulfilling the criteria for designation as an IS province. This relationship significantly strengthened ASG's operational capacity and increased its threat level.

Nevertheless, the emergence of ASMG cannot be attributed solely to foreign militant ideology. D.Y. Chen (2019: 1) finds that many ASG members were drawn to the organization due to the perceived attractiveness of its lifestyle, particularly among local Muslims in the Philippines who continue to experience socio-economic marginalization. In a similar vein, Christoph Schuck (2020: 12) explains that a substantial number of ASMG followers are not committed Islamists but instead exploit Islamist narratives and Islamic political discourse to portray themselves as ideological fighters while pursuing personal or criminal interests.

### ASG Expansion Strategy in Sabah

In the previous section, it was stated that the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) evolved from pirate groups operating in the waters of the Sulu Sea from approximately 1963 until the late 1990s. Abdul Rashid and Ramli Dollah (2020: 3) explain that the emergence of ASG in Sabah did not originate in the early 2000s, as is commonly assumed. Rather, its presence in Borneo can be traced back to the sixteenth century. The expansion of ASG represents the evolution of the *Mundu*, or pirate groups, whose activities extended from the Sulu Archipelago to the islands of Borneo in Southeast Asia. This historical continuity situates ASG as part of a long-standing security phenomenon in the state of Sabah.

This finding is closely related to the study by Ramli Dollah and Kamarulnizam Abdullah (2018: 718), which highlights the influx of foreign immigrants from Indonesia and the Philippines who subsequently became undocumented workers in Sabah. This issue constitutes not only a national concern for the Malaysian

government but also a broader regional challenge for Southeast Asian states, posing significant risks to Sabah's economic security. The study further argues that the problem remains difficult to control due to multiple interrelated factors, including domestic political dynamics, federal-state relations, economic conditions, and international pressures. These factors help explain the Malaysian government's longstanding inconsistency in policies governing foreign labor in Sabah. At the same time, Tasrifin Tahara et al. (2022: 2077) observe that immigrants from Kaledupa, Indonesia, who later worked as fishermen in Sabah, were frequently targeted as victims of ASG kidnappings, to the extent that diplomatic intervention by the Indonesian government to protect its citizens in Malaysia became increasingly complex.

Within this context, members of the Abu Sayyaf Group exploited opportunities to enter Sabah by blending into the foreign worker population. A case study by Bilveer Singh (2018: 10) demonstrates the existence of linkages between criminal networks and terrorist groups within ASG in the Philippines and foreign militant organizations. The study clarifies that these relationships emerged because criminal activities became an integral component of ASG's political-economic security structure. ASG's terror-related crimes expanded in parallel with its international linkages, forming a deliberate strategy to generate financial resources and stabilize the organization's operations. Consequently, ASG targeted the southern border regions of the Philippines, eastern Malaysia—particularly Sabah—and the Sulawesi Sea, areas commonly described as a tri-border zone, to conduct its terror activities.

Drawing on Justin V. Hastings' (2020: 5) analysis of how pirate groups and ASG executed their attacks with devastating impact, it is evident that kidnapping for ransom constituted the primary form of violent activity aimed at income generation. As such, it is unsurprising that militant terrorist groups like ASG were able to operate independently even with relatively small numbers. This operational resilience stemmed from their engagement in sporadic but carefully planned high-impact attacks that yielded substantial profits, including cargo seizures and hostage kidnappings occurring in Sabah, Malaysia, and across Southeast Asia.

Previous studies indicate that ASG's expansion in Sabah was largely facilitated by its infiltration through foreign worker networks and its reliance on violent criminal activities to stabilize the organization's economy. These strategies could not have been sustained without a sufficient pool of members, as noted by D.Y. Chen (2019: 1), who explains that many ASG recruits were attracted to the organization due to the promise of a more stable lifestyle, particularly from the perspective of economically marginalized local Filipino Muslims.

Beyond lifestyle-related motivations, Bilveer Singh and Jasminder Singh (2019: 409) highlight that ASG's long-term durability and organizational strength are also rooted in its consistent use of religiously framed violence as a recruitment tool. By invoking jihadist ideology, ASG legitimized acts of violence as religiously permissible, thereby attracting followers from the southern Philippines and beyond. This strategy facilitated the organization's ability to generate economic resources through criminal activities in pursuit of its vision of establishing an Islamic state. Consequently, Malaysia has been perceived as a strategic terrorism hub that provides

financial resources to militant groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), particularly the Abu Sayyaf Group, as discussed by Harisi Hasih et al. (2019: 9) and Bilveer Singh and Jasminder Singh (2019: 403). This ongoing dynamic can therefore be understood as a central component of ASG's expansion strategy in Malaysia, especially in the state of Sabah.

## ASG Security Threats in Sabah

The security threat posed by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) to the state of Sabah in Malaysia is not a recent phenomenon. A preliminary study by Wan Shawaluddin and Ramli Dollah (2008: 49) documents that ASG had already been involved in kidnapping incidents in Sabah's waters, including the Sipadan Island case, since the early 2000s. Sabah continues to face multiple security challenges arising from militant terrorist groups operating both domestically and transnationally, which indirectly threaten Malaysia's national sovereignty. The study highlights various security issues affecting Sabah, including illegal immigration, territorial claims, maritime piracy, political developments in the southern Philippines, and questions surrounding the loyalty of Malaysians of Filipino descent. Based on these findings, the authors suggest that a negotiated and diplomatic approach is necessary, given that ASG-related security threats involve neighboring countries.

However, more recent research by Tasrifin Tahara et al. (2022: 2077) indicates that trilateral negotiations among the affected countries remain difficult to implement. These challenges stem from Indonesia's internal issues related to migration chains originating from Kaledupa, Southeast Sulawesi, as well as the Philippine government's continued inability to effectively address criminal activities perpetrated by ASG in the southern Philippines. These unresolved issues, in turn, place additional pressure on the Malaysian government. Nevertheless, the study recommends that the Indonesian government fulfil the fundamental needs of communities in Sulawesi and provide sustainable employment opportunities in order to reduce migration flows into Sabah, Malaysia.

Regional peace and security cooperation in Southeast Asia has also been examined by Ramli Dollah and Eko Prayitno Joko (2015: 77) in their analysis of Malaysia's involvement in the peace process between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the southern Philippines. Their findings indicate that Malaysia's engagement in conflict-affected regions is driven by the need to mitigate spillover effects that directly affect national security, including refugee influxes, kidnappings in Sabah, and the presence of undocumented migrants. Malaysia's participation in the peace process is therefore aimed at curbing the security threats posed by ASG and other militant terrorist groups and preventing further radicalization.

As demonstrated in the study by Izyan Dahlia and Zuliah Hamid (2020: 347), security threats posed by militant groups in Sabah affect not only local communities but also international tourists, particularly in parts of the eastern coastal areas (Siti Nur Azilayati 2020: 98–101). The findings reveal that political instability, militant terrorism, and both physical and social risks are among the primary factors contributing to heightened security concerns in the region.

In response to these threats, Izyan Dahlia and Zuliah Hamid (2020: 356) propose several measures for the Malaysian government and relevant authorities, including the establishment of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) within the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE), to strengthen security measures in the tourism sector. These initiatives aim to prevent incidents of murder and kidnapping involving international tourists, which have negatively affected Malaysia's image, particularly that of Sabah. At the same time, international tourists are encouraged to seek accurate and up-to-date information regarding travel destinations before making travel decisions. Justin V. Hastings (2020: 5) further explains that ASG and maritime pirate groups have relied on kidnapping for ransom as a profitable tactic, adapting their violent strategies to prevailing economic conditions to maximize financial gain. Similarly, Abdul Rashid and Ramli Dollah (2021: 33) reiterate that the most serious security threat posed by ASG in Sabah remains kidnapping for ransom (KFR), a profit-driven pattern of violence that has notably occurred in areas such as Sipadan Island.

Rahma Aulia Vinanda's (2021: 57–76) study categorizes the threat posed by militant groups such as ASG as a form of international terrorism, affecting countries including Indonesia and Malaysia. The study analyses the Philippine government's response to ASG by focusing on strengthened counter-terrorism (CT) strategies, enhanced policy frameworks, and intelligence partnerships with neighboring countries. One outcome of these efforts is the Trilateral Indomalphi cooperation, as discussed by Frizdi Rahmat and Rusdiyanta (2021: 78), involving Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. This initiative serves as a maritime security response to the widespread threat of ASG kidnapping for ransom. Although the cooperation has contributed to a reduction in ASG-related violence, several challenges persist, including Malaysia's reluctance to conduct certain operations within Indomalphi-designated areas due to regional sensitivities in Sabah, as well as limitations in military enforcement capabilities.

From a different perspective, Rustam et al. (2022: 180) identify four key factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the Indomalphi cooperation. First, the collaboration is not merely symbolic or passive, as all participating states demonstrate consistent commitment to their assigned roles and responsibilities. Second, the cooperation exhibits a strong capacity for problem-solving despite involving three sovereign states. Third, it reflects a high level of intensive coordination among the participating countries. Fourth, the prevailing political context supports sustained and constructive collaboration throughout the Indomalphi process, as evidenced by the collective resolve of the three countries to address issues related to national sovereignty and maritime territorial security.

## Discussion

Based on the literature reviewed over the past five years, the expansion of the Abu Sayyaf militant group in Sabah appears to have begun with a series of serious threats that hovered over the state, prompting heightened vigilance by the Malaysian government and its neighboring countries in Southeast Asia. Accordingly, studies by Frizdi Rahmat and Rusdiyanta (2021: 78), Rahma Aulia Vinanda (2021: 57–76), and

others demonstrate that Southeast Asian governments have implemented appropriate measures and preparations to address the threat posed by militant terrorist groups, particularly the Abu Sayyaf Militant Group (ASMG). Nevertheless, from a research perspective, several developments remain problematic, especially those related to the evolution of ASG narratives in Sabah and neighboring countries. These issues are discussed as follows.

### ASG Criminal Liaison Network in Sabah

Scholarly analyses over the past five years on militant groups, such as that by Bilveer Singh (2018: 10), have primarily focused on criminal linkages between major terrorist organizations, including the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Islamic State (IS), and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Earlier findings by Zack Fellman (2011: 2), followed by Harisi Hasih et al. (2019: 9) and Bilveer Singh and Jasminder Singh (2019: 403), indicate that groups other than ASG have also provided assistance to militant organizations in their criminal activities in the Philippines and Malaysia. However, in Sabah, ASG is not the only militant group engaged in violence. The former Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the southern Philippines has given rise to several militant factions, including the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Maute Group, both of which are well-known militant organizations that have operated as fugitive groups evading local security forces, particularly due to their proximity in the Sulu Islands to the state of Sabah, Malaysia. According to the International Crisis Group (2022: 2), another militant group that emerged from former MILF elements is the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), which remains active primarily in Mindanao, southern Philippines.

Despite their differing names, these three groups share a common ideological objective of establishing an Islamic State. They are frequently categorized under the broader label of the Abu Sayyaf Group, recognized as the largest militant organization in Southeast Asia based on reports by the Counter Extremism Project (n.d.: 2–27) and the International Crisis Group (2022: 2–37). This suggests that the militant phenomenon in Sabah does not cease with the elimination, expulsion, or flight of ASG operatives by Malaysian security forces. As long as remaining members and sympathizers continue to exist and remain active, militant movements are likely to re-emerge and receive support from affiliated groups (Bilveer Singh 2018: 10). Groups such as BIFF and the Maute Group maintain both international and domestic criminal networks.

This dynamic has contributed to the resurgence of militant movements in the southern Philippines and subsequently extended their threat to Malaysia, particularly Sabah. Although these groups have been repeatedly weakened, they continue to create uncertainty among both government authorities and the public. Consequently, studies on militant groups operating in Sabah must be continuously updated and presented in a manner that is accessible to all segments of society, including Malaysians, foreign residents, and tourists. In ensuring that the Malaysian government remains committed to implementing effective security measures, policymakers may still draw valuable insights from earlier foundational studies, such as that by Wan Shawaluddin and Ramli Dollah (2008: 49).

## Malaysian Government Change and Its Impact on Militant Activities

Previous research has called for substantial improvements in security measures. These include the establishment and strengthening of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM), as discussed by Izyan Dahlia and Zuliah Hamid (2020: 356), as well as enhanced regional security cooperation among Southeast Asian states, as examined by Frizdi Rahmat and Rusdiyanta (2021: 78) and Rustam et al. (2022: 180). Collectively, these studies indicate positive outcomes and suggest that Malaysian maritime authorities and regional partners are making concerted efforts to eradicate criminal activities associated with militant groups. However, Kevin Fernandez (2019: 1–2) notes that internal political issues continue to pose challenges for the Malaysian government in safeguarding long-term public security. Malaysia's current administration under Pakatan Harapan, which adopts a more open and inclusive Islamic approach that emphasizes the welfare of all citizens regardless of race or religion, may unintentionally create conditions exploited by extremist groups.

Furthermore, the introduction of the *Madani* governance framework under Pakatan Harapan has been interpreted by some Salafi-jihadi groups, including ASG, as a provocation, particularly following incidents such as the death of Muslim firefighter Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim during unrest at the Sri Mariamman Temple in Seafeld, Selangor, on 27 November 2018. According to Fernandez (2019: 3), such events have fueled perceptions among takfiri-oriented militant groups that Muslims in Malaysia are under threat. As a result, these groups closely monitor government responses and perceived inaction. Dissatisfaction with official measures could potentially escalate threats not only in Sabah but across Malaysia as a whole. Consequently, political dynamics surrounding Islam and governance remain an important area of research, particularly for developing counter-narratives that can effectively mitigate militant threats and maintain national harmony.

### Regional Security Across Southeast Asia

The analysis of security measures should not be confined solely to issues affecting Sabah but must also consider broader concerns related to governmental stability and the long-term well-being of the Malaysian populace under the prevailing administration. Although ASG's terrorist activities appear to have subsided and been contained within the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) (Abdul Rashid & Ramli Dollah 2020: 3; 2021: 33), continuous research and policy updates remain necessary to address potential threats that may persist into the future (Fellman 2011: 6–7).

Security negotiations should therefore extend beyond cooperation among the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia to include Singapore. Muhammad Fajar (2023: 23) argues that ASG maintains indirect affiliations with smaller militant groups across Southeast Asia, including those operating in Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore. Supporting this view, Hummel and Biscaichipy (2023: 9) reveal recent cases in Singapore involving children engaging with extremist narratives through digital platforms such as the Roblox application, suggesting that radicalization

processes may have begun earlier than previously recognized. This development indicates that Singapore, like other regional states, is not immune to the threat posed by militant organizations such as ISIS and ASG.

Accordingly, this review reinforces the findings of Bilveer Singh and Jasminder Singh (2019: 409), who reaffirm that ASG recruits members not only within the Philippines but also internationally to sustain its ideological struggle. Consequently, social media and digital security networks must be continuously strengthened by government agencies and local communities across all age groups. This is particularly important given that existing Indomalphi security frameworks and collaborative mechanisms in Southeast Asia remain insufficiently integrated and synchronized. Moreover, the predominant focus of earlier studies on Sabah alone has generated unresolved research questions that require decisive and coordinated responses from both Malaysian society and Southeast Asian governments. This is necessary because the narrative and operational scope of ASG's militant movement extend beyond Sabah and the Indomalphi region to encompass Southeast Asia as a whole, including Singapore.

## Conclusion

This review of literature published over the past five to six years demonstrates that the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) employs a range of adaptive strategies to advance its ideological objectives. These strategies position ASG as a persistent security threat not only to the Philippines but also to neighboring states, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia. In response, Southeast Asian governments have undertaken various countermeasures, including the establishment of regional security cooperation frameworks, to mitigate the risks posed by ASG's transnational terrorist activities.

Despite these collective efforts, the findings indicate that counter-terrorism discourse and policy responses remain constrained by unresolved analytical gaps within existing scholarship. Several areas of ambiguity and underexplored dimensions continue to characterize the literature, underscoring the need for sustained academic engagement and critical reassessment. As such, there is limited scope for complacency in addressing militant threats, and further empirical and theoretical inquiry remains necessary.

Accordingly, it is imperative that research on ASG's criminal and militant networks in Sabah be continuously updated. ASG's operational resilience is not solely dependent on international linkages but is also reinforced through local and regional networks, including the Maute Group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and other smaller militant formations operating within Malaysia and the wider Southeast Asian region. Ongoing scholarly attention to these interconnected networks is essential for deepening regional security understanding and for informing more effective, coordinated policy and counter-terrorism responses.

In sum, sustained scholarly attention to the evolving criminal and militant networks of the Abu Sayyaf Group—particularly within Sabah and its regional linkages—remains essential for advancing security knowledge and informing coordinated, forward-looking counter-terrorism strategies across Southeast Asia.

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. All contributions were made objectively without any personal, financial, or institutional influence that could compromise the integrity of the work.

## Authors' Contributions Statement

All authors contributed to the conceptualisation, methodology, and analysis.

1. **Mohd Syahmi Mohd Kamil & Ahmad Nawir Abu Amri** prepared the first draft.
2. **Kamarudin Salleh** handled the restructuring, review and editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles and academic integrity. All procedures were carried out responsibly, with informed consent obtained from participants (when applicable) and strict confidentiality maintained.

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