

## DETERRED BUT NOT DEFEATED: THE CASE OF ABU SAYYAF'S RESILIENCE

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### ABSTRACT

*The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is known for its criminal and terror operations. Since the group's base is located in islands in the southern Philippines such as Basilan and Sulu, its notorious activities have extended to neighbouring countries; Malaysia and Indonesia. Thereby, making the group a destabilising force for regional security. This article discusses the factors that shaped the resilience of the ASG by looking at the evolution of the group for more than three decades. The evolutionary phases of the group will be divided into four: the early years (the 1980s-2001), the post-9/11 tragedy (2002-2014), the rise of ISIS (2014-2017), and the post-ISIS (2018-Present). Based on the analysis of the group's evolution, this article argues that the ability of the ASG to shift its focus of operations from criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom and piracy to terrorist acts and vice versa has contributed to its resilience. Three interrelated factors have made possible for the fluidity of the group: the factionalised structure of the group, the existence of an international terrorist organization as a patron, and the convenience of committing crimes.*

**Keywords:** Abu Sayyaf, resilience, terrorism, crime, Southeast Asia

### INTRODUCTION

Coming into the second decade of the twenty-first century, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) has operated for more than 30 years as a notorious terrorist and criminal organisation that brings instability to the Philippines and regional security. While the group's influence has been declining in recent years, its threat should not be undermined. As of July 2023, the authorities in Sabah, Malaysia have continued to implement the curfew of selected districts specifically due to the fear of kidnapping and crimes from the ASG (Fong, 2023). After more than 30 years of operating, it clearly shows that the group is remarkably resilient. Thus, the pertinent questions arise, why has the ASG persevered throughout the decades and what has shaped its resiliency?

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This article intends to answer the above questions by analysing the evolution of the ASG since its inception in the late 1980s. The group's evolution will be analysed in four phases which are the early years (1980s-2001), the post-9/11 tragedy (2002-2014), the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (2014-2017), and the post-ISIS (2018-present). As we shall see, the ASG did not evolve linearly as it has experienced ups and downs continually even within a selected period. Thus, the rationale behind the selection of the four phases is not just due to the important events or phenomenon that has impacted the group but also due to the expediency of organising the article.

Looking from a historical perspective, the emergence of the ASG is simply another product of the religious and ethnic conflicts in the southern Philippines. During the colonial rule of Spain and America, efforts were taken by the colonisers to pacify the Muslims with the way of transforming the area into a Christian-majority area which the Muslims strongly resisted. Since the independence of the republic which is a Catholic nation in 1946, the central government has continued to implement the colonial policies of altering the demography of the southern Philippines through the mass migration of Christians from the north to increase the Christian population and thus, marginalising and dispossessing the Muslims of their lands. Religious and ethnic tensions erupted when events that pitted the Muslims and the Christians occurred such as the 1968 Jabidah Massacre that led to the death of 28 Muslim military trainees without a fair trial and the killing of 70 Muslims in a mosque by the Christian militant groups in June 1971 (Liow, 2006). Since the 1970s, various secessionist groups have been formed as a response to the marginalisation of Muslims by the state and the ASG is one of them.

The ASG was founded in the late 1980s by a veteran of the Afghan-Soviet war, Abdurajak Janjalani. Influenced by the radical Islamist ideology, the main objective of the group was to establish an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines. To achieve their objective, the ASG has resorted to terror and malignant activities such as bombing, kidnapping for ransom (KFR), and assassination. In the early years of the group, the ASG managed to quickly build their reputation as one of, if not the most violent Islamist group in the southern Philippines. However, with the disruption of the group's external funding and the death of Abdurajak in 1998, the group went into disarray in terms of its organisational structure and ideological commitment. The ASG split into two major factions that were based in Basilan (the group's birthplace) and Sulu. Furthermore, the absence of foreign funding has forced the group to abandon its terror activities. Instead, they resorted to KFR for the sake of money. The group has become less ideological and more profit-driven.

Ironically, the intense military and police operations against the group after the 9/11 tragedy and the subsequent context of the Global War on Terror have reverted the ASG from a group of criminals into a genuine terrorist group. The intense campaigns have resulted in the death of several prominent figures in the group and this has opened the opportunity for the brother of the late Abdurajak Janjalani, Khadaffy Janjalani to solidify and realign the group with the radical Islamist ideology under his leadership. Nevertheless, the momentum of the reinvigorated ASG did not last long. The military campaigns waged by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in 2006 with assistance from the U.S. have led to the untimely death of several ASG leaders including Khadaffy. The group once again

degenerated into KFR activities and abandoned their ideals. With the rise of ISIS, the ASG pledged their allegiance and fought in the battle of Marawi in 2017. The devastating outcome of the battle led to the death of hundreds of militants as well as the group's pro-ISIS and ideologically committed leader, Isnilon Hapilon. Since then, the group's engagement in either terrorist acts or KFR has been declining gradually. The authorities continued their operations against the group and the local governments have introduced the reintegration programs to encourage the surrender of the former members and eradicate the threat from the group.

Based on the analysis, the main argument of this article is that the resilience of the ASG is shaped by its ability to shift the focus of operations between criminal activities and terrorism. Three interrelated factors were identified to explain this unique ability of the group which are the factionalised structure of the group, the presence of an international terrorist organisation as a patron, and the convenience of committing crimes. The next section will start by discussing the concept of resilience and past literature on the ASG's resilience. Then, followed by the four phases of the group's evolution. The analysis of factors that make the group resilient will be in the penultimate section. The final section will include some policy recommendations and concluding remarks.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE FACTORS OF RESILIENCE**

This section will start by discussing briefly the link between ethnic conflict, terrorism, and criminal activities. Ethnic and religion as a factor have been commonly analysed in the literature of terrorism studies from various perspectives. Soeters (2005), for instance, argued that the sense of group binding along racial and religious lines can lead to violence and terrorism when one group starts to feel insecure over its livelihood matters such as employment and access to resources, and perceives the other group as the cause of its misfortune. Together with the miserable social conditions, the political exclusion of minority ethnic groups also drove them to resort to terrorism (Choi & Piazza, 2016; Hansen et al., 2020). Moreover, ethnic-related issues can be utilised to garner support and mobilise people for criminal and terrorist agendas (Kemp, 2004). Indeed, in the case of the ASG, the ethnic and religious elements are the underlying forces of its emergence and purpose. However, the resilience of the group which is the key focus of this article should be analysed more thoroughly.

The resilience of a terrorist group or organisation refers to the survival and recovery of the group after withstanding internal pressures such as group in-fighting and splintering, and external pressures such as military campaigns from the authorities. By using this definition, the ASG is proven to be resilient after managing to survive for more than three decades. The important question is what has contributed to its resilience?

In discussing the resilience of terrorist organisations, there are myriads of contributing factors such as organisational, ideological, socioeconomic, political, and operational factors. For example, when analysing Boko Haram, Hassan (2021) has argued that there is a confluence of internal and external factors that have contributed to the

group's resilience. Internal factors include the decentralised nature of the organisation, maintenance of resource flow, support from the local communities, and the group's intelligence-gathering capability while external factors refer to the corruption and sabotage from the Nigerian military. In brief, resilience should be looked at from a comprehensive viewpoint instead of only focusing on a solitary aspect.

Similarly, there are studies on the ASG that have pointed out several factors that contributed to the group's resilience. This article will group the factors into three factors. The first common factor shared among the experts is the organisational nature of the ASG. Hart (2017) has argued that the existence of factions in the group will make them harder to be plotted against by the enforcement agencies and thus, difficult to be completely defeated. Also, the existence of such factions led by semi-autonomous commanders gives them the ability to operate independently and will not jeopardise the integrity of the whole group in the event of one of the commanders being captured or killed (Van Ginkel, 2021).

On a similar note, Ugarte (2008) claimed that the ASG is not a conventional and traditional organisation with a clear hierarchical structure, instead, the group is made up of small groups that base their relations on friendship and kinship ties. This analysis, then, gives the implication that not every member of the group will subscribe to the same ideology (which, in the case of the ASG, is radical Islamism)—they might have different interests and motivations. Therefore, the absence of an ideologically committed leader will not cripple the group because they can abandon their ideological commitments and resort to criminal activities. On a different take, Henshaw (2019) argued that the ASG is a meritocratic organisation instead of a familial type. This is because the members of the group did not necessarily follow the leader with familial ties. Instead, they based their judgement on the ability of the leaders whom they want to follow. The existence of two factions in Basilan (led by Khadaffy) and Sulu (led by Ghalib Andang) after the death of Abdurajak serves as an example. Henshaw further argued that the meritocratic structure of the group is what has made possible the fractioning and splintering that occurred in the evolution of the group. This fraction and splintering, then became one of the group's "greatest resilience mechanisms. ...that made Abu Sayyaf harder to target by incumbent and U.S. forces, compared to one homogenous organisation that may reside in one place" (p. 258). In short, the unorthodox and decentralised nature of the group's organisation is a crucial factor in its resilience.

The second factor refers to the strong support from the local communities. The majority of the ASG members are from the Tausug ethnic group and as Ugarte (2008) noted in his study, the organisational system of the ASG closely resembled the system used by the Tausug for their social and political organisation. The organisational system employed by the Tausug is based on close familial relations. Therefore, the ASG who employed the same system will have the advantage of securing support from the local communities such as in Sulu that to some extent, are related to each other. Some of the support given by the local communities includes hiding the ASG members who are in pursuit and tapping the local youths as recruits. In addition, the group is also known to capitalise on the impoverished condition of the local communities in the southern Philippines and use material inducements such as monthly allowances and basic supplies to attract recruits (Banlaoi, 2010; Van Ginkel, 2021). Other than the religious appeal, the image of

“economic provider” and “warrior” shown by the ASG members from their high-risk criminal ventures was respected by the Tausug communities as part of their cultural ethos (Ugarte, 2008). This assessment points to a more structural issue that plagued the southern Philippines which is poverty and the continued impoverished condition that is conducive to terrorism and criminal activities (Ahmad, 2012; Hart, 2017). Unless and until the Philippine authorities enact measures that address the socio-economic condition of the southern Philippines, the allure of terrorism and criminality will remain.

Third, scholars pointed out the political-related factors. For instance, Abuza (2008) stated that even after successive operations against the ASG that were supported by financial, operational, and intelligence assistance from the U.S., the group still managed to survive. This is due to the lack of eagerness from the AFP to sustain its operations and the need to secure continuous funding from the U.S. for the benefit of the military. Moreover, some of the ASG members received protection from the local politicians in exchange for their service as private militias or hitmen (Banlaoi, 2010). There are also cases where corrupt officials are involved in helping the ASG conduct their operations (AFP, 2015; Talabong, 2020).

This article intends to build on these existing arguments regarding the factors that influenced the resilience of the ASG by looking at the history of the group from its inception until its current presence. Based on the analysis of the evolution of the ASG, this article found out that there are fluidity or fluctuations as some researchers called it, in the character of the group. Throughout the years, the ASG has been known to fluctuate between committing intensive criminal activities motivated by profit and resorting to terror operations for political gains. While there are studies that recognise the fluctuations of the group and the reasons behind them, this article intends to bring forward the argument that the group’s fluidity or ability to shift its nature of operations is what makes the group resilient.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF THE ABU SAYYAF**

The analysis of the evolution of the ASG will start from the 1980s before the formation of the group to lay down the necessary context that led to the formation. It then focuses on the impact of the 9/11 tragedy on the dynamic of the group before moving to the period that examines the influence of ISIS. The final phase will be looking at the post-battle of Marawi in 2017 and the receding influence and strength of the group in recent years.

However, a brief discussion on the development of political movements demanding the independence of the South Philippines is necessary for a better grasp of the emergence of the ASG. Before the independence of the republic in 1946, the southern Filipinos including Muslims and non-Muslims had a history of resistance against colonial Spain and America. The label Moro which is more associated with the Muslims of the southern Philippines was a more comprehensive label that included non-Muslims in their fight against domination from the colonial powers and later, the central government (Liow, 2006). Since the independence, the leaders of the southern Philippines were perceived by

the people as being accommodative towards the central government that imposed discriminatory policies towards the Muslims such as altering the demographics.

Infuriated at the discriminatory policies by Manila and frustrated over the hopeless local leaders, several young leaders such as Nur Misuari and Hashim Salamat formed the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1972. Under Misuari's leadership, he vowed to destroy the old political order and to unite the 13 ethnolinguistic groups such as Tausug, Maranao, and Maguindanao under an independent state (Buendia, 2005). Armed clashes between the MNLF and the military took place until both sides negotiated in 1976 to establish an autonomous region. Salamat, an influential leader of MNLF with Islamic credentials disagreed with the watered-down proposal from independence to autonomy and perceived Misuari's vision as secular and not Islamic. Then, he and his followers broke away from MNLF and form a new secessionist group with a strong Islamic basis called the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 1984.

### **The Early Years (1980s-2001)**

The origin of the ASG has been largely attributed by scholars to a single man, Abdurajak Janjalani. Abdurajak was a resident of Basilan located among the chain of islands in between the Sulu-Celebes Seas. He received his Islamic education at Ummul Qura University, Saudi Arabia. After finishing his studies in the early 1980s, he went back to Basilan to spread Islamic teachings to the local community. He was, then, argued to travel to Peshawar, Pakistan to learn about the Islamic revolution of Iran and eventually went to Afghanistan to participate in the Afghan-Soviet war.<sup>3</sup>

It was during his time in Peshawar that Abdurajak met and befriended Osama Bin Laden and formed the foundation of the eventual ties between Al-Qaeda and the ASG (Banlaoi, 2006).

After returning to his home in the late 1980s, Abdurajak gathered together a group of veterans from the Afghan war as well as the dissatisfied members of MNLF and MILF to form a new organisation with the mission of establishing an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines. Although it shares a similar Islamic outlook with MILF, the ASG was more extreme in its approach that justifies criminal and unlawful activities in the name of *jihad* or struggle compared to a more defensive approach adopted by MILF that justify armed resistance when confronted by the state (Buendia, 2005; Liow, 2006). Having said that, the creation of the ASG was a variation and continuation of the Moro-Muslim struggle for independence.

In the early years, the ASG managed to develop its reputation as a notorious organization through its terror operations such as bombing and assassinations specifically targeted at the Christian missionary community. Some of the operations are the bombing of *MV Douulous* in 1991 which killed two missionaries, the killing of an Italian priest in Zamboanga City in 1992, and the raid in the town of Ipil which is a Christian-majority

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<sup>3</sup> However, there is an argument that Abdurajak did not participate in the Afghan-Soviet War, see Banlaoi (2016).

town that resulted in more than 50 deaths. It was after the group claiming responsibility for the 1991 bombing that the name Abu Sayyaf was officially used. Before that, the name Abu Sayyaf was used by Abdurajak as a pen name for his writings, pamphlets, and fatwas as a sign of admiration towards a prominent figure of the Afghan Mujahideen, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf.

The strings of success in the ASG terror operations have not come without funding and support from external sources. Al-Qaeda has provided financial assistance to the ASG through an Islamic charitable organisation, International Islamic Relief Organisation under the helm of Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, Bin Laden's brother-in-law. An Al-Qaeda operative, Ramzi Yousef who is the mastermind behind the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing is also known to have trained the ASG members in bomb-making. However, these external supports were severed when Yousef was captured and Khalifa was denied entry into the Philippines due to their roles in the foiled Bojinka plot that attempted to bomb several American planes in 1995.

It was the disruption with the funding and support from its external patron, and later the death of Abdurajak in 1998 that significantly impacted the group. In terms of organisational structure, the group had split into two factions; the Basilan faction led by Khadaffy, the younger brother of Abdurajak and the Sulu faction led by Ghalib Andang also notoriously known as Commander Robot. The existence of factions became a permanent structure of the group that differed radically from Abdurajak's vision of having a systematic and highly organised group (Banlaoi, 2006; Ugarte, 2008). Also, the two factions marked a distinct inclination from each other with one faction striving to commit to their ideological aspiration while another faction focuses on conducting criminal activities for the sake of money (Henshaw, 2019).

Another significant impact is on the group's ability to conduct its terror operations. With the loss of funding, the group is not able to pull off major operations that might require capital for the equipment needed. Also, the absence of funding has impeded the group from sustaining not just their operations but also their members' day-to-day lives. This has led some members of the group to abandon their ideological commitment and resort to criminal activities such as KFR that provide lucrative returns. Since then, the ASG has embarked on a kidnapping spree with a peak of 20 incidents in 2000 alone. Among the well-known incidents was the abduction of 21 hostages at a resort in Sipadan Island, Malaysia which effectively put the ASG as a threat to Malaysia's security and the abduction of 20 tourists at the Dos Palmas resort in Palawan (La Vina & Balane, 2009). According to one estimate, the group managed to accumulate around US\$35 million of ransom money from 1992 to 2008 and can reach up to US\$5 million per ransom (O'Brien, 2012). With such lucrative returns, the ASG can sustain their operations such as buying weapons and ensuring the subsistence of its members.

### **Post-9/11 Years (2002-2014)**

With the 9/11 tragedy and the ensuing Global War on Terror campaign led by the United States, the Philippines' authorities were able to conduct intense military and police operations against the ASG with support from the U.S. Among the various supports offered

were financial aid, military equipment, deployment of U.S. personnel for advice and training, intelligence sharing, and eventually the direct involvement of U.S. personnel in selected missions.<sup>4</sup>

However, the result of the intense operations was ambivalent. On one hand, several prominent figures of the group were either killed or captured including the head of the Sulu faction, Ghalib Andang who was captured in 2003, and the number of the group members was significantly reduced from more than a thousand in the late 1990s to less than 500 in 2003 (Banlaoi, 2006; Niksch, 2007). On the other hand, the capture of Andang and later his death in 2005 during a prison break has created an opportunity for Khadaffy to consolidate his leadership, unify the group, and realign the group towards its original ideological commitments. It was under his leadership that the group managed to experience its revival or resurgence as a terrorist group (Banlaoi, 2006; Fellman, 2011).

Under the reinvigorated leadership, the ASG did not bide their time in pulling off attention-grabbing terror operations. In 2003, a bombing took place at the Davao International Airport that killed 21 people and injured 166 others followed by a tragic explosion of *Superferry 14* in the year after that claimed 116 lives. In 2005, several bombings took place in three different cities on the eve of Valentine's Day that resulted in more than 10 deaths and injured 70 others. Apart from the disastrous bombings, another crucial element that characterises the reversal of the ASG from banditry to terrorism was that kidnappings that occurred from 2004 to 2007 mostly resulted in executions instead of ransom (Abuza, 2010).

While Khadaffy's committed ideological leadership has been able to revert the group into terrorism, an equally important factor that led to this resurgence was the support from other terrorist organisations inside and outside of the country, for example, MILF and the Indonesian-based Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The ideological renewal of the ASG has led the radical elements within the MILF to offer their support for the ASG's ultimate objective which is the independence of the Muslim political community. Among the support provided was access to MILF bases for training and sanctuary. Furthermore, it was through the MILF that the ASG and JI managed to establish relations because JI had also acquired access to MILF bases since the 1990s due to their connection with Al-Qaeda (Niksch, 2007). Two key JI operatives who were responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings, Umar Patek and Dulmatin were reported to have provided training in bomb-making techniques to the ASG members when they took sanctuary in the Philippines. Also, funds were flowing from JI to the group. In short, the strengthened links between MILF-JI-ASG complemented by Khadaffy's ideological determination have bolstered the group to realign with the path of terrorism.

However, the momentum of the reinvigorated ASG did not last long. With the series of disastrous bombings, the AFP with strong assistance from the U.S. launched a new set of intense military campaigns named Operation Ultimatum against the group beginning in August 2006. The campaigns yielded significant results such as the death of Khadaffy in September and eventually, other prominent figures followed suit. The death of Khadaffy

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed information on the U.S. support, see Niksch (2007).



has gradually weakened the group's links with JI. Once again, the absence of adequate funding has led the group to resort to criminal activities such as KFR and piracy under the helm of figures such as Albader Parad and Furuji Indama who were known for their tendency towards criminality (O'Brien, 2012). Since 2008, the group has extensively engaged with KFR albeit this time with more focus towards high-profile targets such as public figures, politicians, and foreign nationals that can bring in more ransom money. Among the examples were the abduction of ABS-CBN broadcast journalist Ces Drillon and two other cameramen in 2008, three International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) workers in 2009, and Baker Atyani, a Jordanian journalist for Al Arabiya News Channel in 2012.<sup>5</sup> Based on an estimate from 2011 to 2015, the ASG has conducted 105 kidnappings with a total number of 183 victims and in 2015 alone, the group managed to secure about US\$3.3 million in ransom money (as quoted in Banlaoi, 2016).

However, it is important to note that there were instances of terror attacks conducted by the group following the years of Khadaffy's death albeit on a low-intensity scale. This is to show that even with the rampant kidnappings, there are members that still cling to the group's ideological aspiration which will later resurface when the time is right.

### **The Rise of ISIS (2014-2017)**

The series of kidnappings continued until 2016 particularly surrounding the neighbouring countries in the Sulu-Celebes Seas which includes Malaysia and Indonesia. This has led the three countries (including the Philippines) to mull the idea of forming a trilateral cooperation in terms of joint maritime and air patrols to effectively tackle the maritime security threats of kidnappings, piracy, and illicit smuggling in the surrounding waters. It was only in the second half of 2017 that these patrols, the Trilateral Cooperative Agreement (TCA) were formally conducted. Despite this major development involving the ASG, there was another major development that had been brewing a few years prior which was the group's allegiance to ISIS in 2014 which culminated in the battle of Marawi in 2017 between the pro-ISIS affiliates and the military. The battle was also an important catalyst for the execution of the TCA (Storey, 2018).

In July 2014, the ASG uploaded a video of Isnilon Hapilon, a senior leader who belongs to the faction that is strongly committed to the group's ideological aspiration together with other members taking their oath and pledging allegiance to ISIS on YouTube (Ressa, 2014). This was the first event that the ASG formally announced their association with ISIS. However, as early as December 2012, the black flag of ISIS was used by the group as a display in their video demanding ransom money (Banlaoi, 2016). ISIS is a Sunni Muslim extremist group that intends to establish the Islamic Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. It started when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi formed the Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to resist the American forces in Iraq since its invasion in 2003. After his death, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took up the mantle and expanded their operation towards Syria leveraging on the civil war that erupted in 2011 following the Arab Spring. By mid-2014, the group managed to capture several cities in Iraq and al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself as the caliph of the new Islamic State. ISIS is particularly distinctive for its caliphate ideology, violent tactics such

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on the other high-profile kidnappings by the ASG, refer Banlaoi (2016).

as suicide bombing and car bombing, and utilisation of social media to spread its message and ask for allegiance from Muslim terrorist groups and individuals throughout the globe in return for funding and operational support.

The influence of ISIS—through the ASG—quickly grew when other terrorist groups and individuals in the Philippines as well as from Indonesia and Malaysia pledged their allegiance and migrated to the southern Philippines to join the fight of establishing a province of Islamic State in East Asia. In 2016, Hapilon received the blessing from ISIS to become the Emir of the Islamic Caliphate in East Asia and subsequently declared Mindanao as the Land of *Hijrah* (Migrate) and *Jihad* (Struggle) (Singh & Singh, 2019). Kalicharan (2019) observed that the idea of establishing an Islamic State province in the Philippines that falls under the global caliphate system espoused by ISIS shows a significant departure from the original struggle of the Moro-Muslim political movements that includes MNLF, MILF, and the ASG themselves which is to create an independent state. Yet, this caliphate ideology has reawakened a new sense of purpose that the members of the ASG and other extremist groups can rally to. With this ideology, the anointed leader which is Hapilon is seen as legitimate by the members of the group and thus, bestowed himself the power and authority to reorganise the group and coherently coordinate the terror operations. More importantly, the number of terror attacks such as bombings, armed assaults, and infrastructure attacks also significantly increased by 104 percent after the ASG pledged their allegiance to ISIS (Kalicharan, 2019). In brief, the financial, operational, and ideological support from ISIS has provided the ASG with the necessary means to once again engage extensively in terrorism.

Perhaps the most important event that marked the resurgence of the group's terrorist character and reflected the extent of ISIS's influence on the group was the battle of Marawi in 2017. The battle started in late May due to the botched attempt by the AFP to capture Hapilon in Marawi, a city located in central Mindanao which then led to a militant uprising comprised of four pro-ISIS groups (i.e., the ASG, Ansar Khalifah Philippines (AKP), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and the Maute Group). According to Hart (2017), the battle of Marawi was a significant event for the ASG because it was the first time that the group was involved in a large-scale armed insurgency, not to mention it was also “the largest urban engagement on Philippine soil since World War II” as reported by the International Crisis Group (2022, p. 2). What was more consequential for the group was the outcome of the battle. It lasted for five months, claimed the lives of more than 900 militants and more importantly, resulted in the death of Hapilon in October 2017. Since then, with the intense military operations that followed thereafter, the group has been on the defensive and both the terror operations and criminal acts have gradually declined.

### **Post-ISIS Years (2018-Present)**

In retrospect, one of the underlying causes of the pro-ISIS groups' capture of Marawi was related to the setbacks suffered by ISIS in their main operational areas in Iraq and Syria (Singh & Singh, 2019). That is the first sign of the waning influence of ISIS and it got worsened when they reportedly lost their last stronghold in Syria in 2019. Despite the ISIS waning influence, however, there were still terror attacks conducted by the ASG after 2017 such as the 2018 Lamitan van bombing by a Moroccan national that killed 11 people and

the 2019 Jolo Cathedral bombing by an Indonesian couple that killed 23 people and injured more than 100 civilians (Banlaoi, 2018; Gotinga, 2019). Afterwards, there was a string of suicide bombings conducted until 2021 involving mostly women and foreign nationals (Yaoren, 2021). However, the employment of suicide bombings by the ASG which was previously considered dreadful due to the group's understanding of the value of life only points to the increasingly weakened and desperate ASG (Henshaw, 2019). According to Hart (2022), "rather than signalling a permanent shift in tactics," these bombings only "appear an explosive last act by extremists aware they were on the run and keen to cause maximum damage before being caught." The Sulu faction that was responsible for the attacks was also slowly deteriorating. Its top two leaders, Hatib Sawadjaan was killed during an encounter with the authorities in July 2020 and Radullan Sahiron reportedly died of natural causes in May 2023, and the strength of the faction was only over 100 members as per a military report in 2021 (Hart, 2022; Pareño, 2023).

The Basilan faction which leans toward the criminal activities might have suffered more than the other faction since the battle of Marawi. The number of KFR cases has significantly dropped over the years from three cases in 2017 to one in 2020, with that being the last reported case ever since (Storey, 2018, 2022). The faction's leader, Furuji Indama was killed by the authorities in September 2020 and his successor, Radzmil Jannatul was also killed in May 2022 (Hart, 2022). The reduced number of kidnapping incidents was largely due to the intense operations by the Philippines authorities against the ASG since 2017. However, the Malaysian authorities particularly the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) have also played a significant role given the prevalence of kidnapping cases in that area. ESSCOM was established in 2013 as a response to the incursion by the Sulu Sultanate militias to claim Sabah and it has been responsible for imposing dusk-to-dawn sea curfew in selected districts in Sabah to ensure the security of the civilians from kidnapping and cross-border criminal activities.

With the waning influence of the ASG, the local governments in Sulu and Basilan have reigned in on that opportunity to introduce reintegration programs to the former members of the group. In exchange for their surrender, they will receive financial and food assistance, vocational training, counselling services, employment, and even housing for selected participants. With these programs, the number of former members who turned in their weapons has been gradually increasing. Despite the positive effort of the programs, there are not without problems such as the lack of funding, lack of protection for the surrenderers from retaliation by certain military and police officers, and lack of coordination among the various agencies in implementing the programs (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2022). These problems, if not addressed, might hamper the effort to eliminate the threat of the ASG in the region.

On that note, any sober analysis of the ASG should refrain from claiming that the threat coming from the group is eliminated. Notwithstanding the economic benefits of the reintegration programs, poverty remains a structural problem in the southern Philippines region, particularly in Sulu and Basilan (Hart, 2022). This condition, then continues to serve as a conducive ground for terrorism and criminal activities. Other than that, there are other factors such as leadership and the presence of international terrorist organisations as a patron that might be the impetus for the ASG to regroup and revive as a potent force.

## **FACTORS OF RESILIENCE OF THE ABU SAYYAF**

Based on the evolution of the ASG, this article argues that the group's resilience and the ability to survive and withstand internal and external pressures over the years is due to the fluidity of the group or the group's ability to shift their nature of operations from engaging extensively in terrorism to committing rampant criminal acts and vice versa. Nevertheless, the shift did not indicate that the ASG completely abandoned an element of their operation in exchange for another element. Instead, both elements co-existed throughout the different phases albeit with one element becoming dormant and another becoming active. This fluidity is made possible due to three interrelated factors which are the factionalised structure of the group, the presence of an international terrorist organisation as a patron, and the convenience of committing crime.

As mentioned earlier, the founder of the ASG, Abdurajak Janjalani had envisioned the group to be a systematic organization with a hierarchy and clear division of labour. Instead, after his death, the group permanently split into two factions with different geographical areas of operation (i.e., Basilan and Sulu) and different leadership with distinct inclinations. The Basilan faction under the leadership of Khadaffy Janjalani was committed to the ideological aspiration of the group which was to establish an independent Muslim state. In contrast, the Sulu faction led by Ghalib Andang was known for his criminal behaviour and links with the underworld. Both were regarded by the members of the group as charismatic and had the merit to lead their factions. Throughout the years, the existence of factions remained, together with two different styles of leadership.

One is the ideological leadership with the likes of Isnilon Hapilon and Hatib Sawaadjan, motivated by the ideological aspiration of the group and closely related to terrorism. Another is the leadership that focuses on conducting criminal activities such as KFR and piracy for the sake of lucrative returns as shown by Albader Parad and Furuji Indama. The effect of a group with a factionalised structure is that if a faction does not appear to be beneficial or effective in the eyes of the group members or the event of the capture or killing of certain leaders, they can concentrate their effort and energy on the other faction. Thus, it makes the group fluid. After the death of Abdurajak, the criminal faction under Andang was more attractive due to its ability to provide cash to the members of the group through criminal activities compared to the ideological faction under Khadaffy which was deemed ineffective with the absence of a foreign funder. Later, the death of Andang and the rising confidence in Khadaffy's leadership propelled the group to re-engage in terrorism before once again resorting to extensive kidnapping after Khadaffy's death.

The second factor that allows the ASG to be fluid is the existence of an international terrorist organisation as a patron for the group. As shown throughout its history, the ASG managed to engage extensively in terrorism—manifested by pulling off shocking terror acts due to the support provided by an international terrorist organisation. In its early years, the group managed to secure funding and training from Al-Qaeda through the personal relationship forged by Abdurajak. Later, under the leadership of Khadaffy, ties with JI were strengthened and financial support and training were provided. The pro-ISIS faction led by Hapilon pledged allegiance to ISIS in exchange for funding, training as well as a renewed

ideology and motivation. By receiving support from their patron, the ASG would not just have the capability to conduct large-scale terror operations but also the ability to provide a living to the members of the group through secured funding. Thus, it makes it attractive and instils confidence among its members to engage in terrorism. Therefore, the existence of a patron coupled with a strong and ideologically committed leadership remains a crucial factor for the ASG to regroup that the authorities must perpetually monitor. Having said that, the absence of a patron will not disintegrate the group, instead some of the group members will abandon their ideological aspirations and concentrate their efforts on criminal activities that can sustain their lives through the profits made. The above discussion has shown that with the existence of a terrorist organisation as a patron, the ASG can fully embrace its terrorist mode but in the absence of such a patron, the group can then embark on profitable criminal activities due to its factionalised structure.

Now, a third crucial factor that allows the ASG to fluidly shift their focus of operation is the convenience of committing criminal activities, particularly KFR and piracy. The “convenience” here means that committing criminal acts is the easiest way for the ASG to acquire profit in the absence of external funding. There are a few points on why criminal activity is the easiest way out. As argued by Banlaoi (2005), one of the reasons behind the ability of the group to undertake maritime terrorism such as the bombing of *Superferry 14* in 2004 is the seafaring tradition among the members of the ASG that gives them an expansive knowledge about their surrounding seas and hence, mastery of the sea. Also, the group possessed the necessary and sophisticated equipment to conduct maritime operations such as “night-vision devices, thermal imagers, sniper scopes, various types of commercial radio, satellites, cellular phones, and high-speed watercraft” (Banlaoi, 2005, p. 71). Both of these factors can also be used to explain why resorting to KFR and piracy is convenient. Furthermore, there were leaders in the group who were known as bandits and had links with other criminal groups inside and outside of the country that allowed the group to pull off criminal activities with ease (Banlaoi, 2010; O’Brien, 2012). By having the advantages of mastery of the sea, sophisticated equipment, and experienced and influential leaders, the ASG can easily resort to criminal activities that can bring in profit to sustain their daily lives and operations if the prospect of engaging in terrorism is deemed bleak.

All three factors above have influenced the ASG to be able to shift its focus of operations back and forth fluidly and it is precisely the fluidity of the group that has made the group resilient over the decades. By having this ability, the ASG can sustain its resources and operations and with the right circumstances, can also become a potent force of terrorism.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

As stated earlier, although the influence of the ASG is declining, the authorities should not be complacent in their approaches to prevent the threat from the group. Therefore, this article would like to propose some recommendations to ensure that the threat will continue to be manageable and minimized. The recommendations come in two forms; military and

non-military approaches. First, for the military approaches, the authorities in the Philippines and Malaysia should increase their engagement with the locals in an effort to utilise them as a source of human intelligence or information. Locals who are more familiar with the ins and outs of a particular area can provide useful information that might be outside the reach of the authorities such as unfamiliar faces and suspicious movements. However, there are a few things that need to be properly managed to ensure the effectiveness of the approach which are the authorities must develop and maintain cordial relations with the local community, and establish a reporting mechanism that protects the integrity and safety of the informer (Benson, 2020). In short, other than gathering information and intelligence through conventional means such as patrolling and aerial surveillance, cooperating with the locals can serve as a low-cost yet effective addition.

Additionally, the contracting parties of the TCA should expedite the expansion of the minilateral cooperation that was announced when the three defence ministers met in April 2022. Among the expansion that was suggested includes the implementation of trilateral maritime exercises in addition to the trilateral maritime and air patrols, deployment of patrol liaison officers to the established maritime command centres in Tawau, Sabah; Tawi-Tawi, the Philippines; and Tarakan, Indonesia to increase coordination, the institutionalisation of the TCA through annual meetings at the ministerial level, strengthening the intelligence-sharing, and the extension of patrol time to 24-hour coverage (Parameswaran, 2022). However, since the change of government in the Philippines and Malaysia in May and December 2022 respectively, the momentum seems to be waning. With the upcoming general election in Indonesia in 2024, it is high time for the participating countries to expedite the expansion process and translate it into concrete actions without risking any further postponement given the urgency of the maritime security threats.

Second, the respective authorities should also employ or strengthen non-military approaches to tackle the threat of the ASG comprehensively. As mentioned earlier, the reintegration programs run by the local governments in Sulu and Basilan are facing several challenges that need to be taken care of. Some of the improvements that can be made are to establish a legal framework that ensures the protection of the surrendering individuals from retaliation, gain financial support and resources from the national government to ensure sustainability, create a task force to improve coordination among the agencies and appoint an independent body to monitor and evaluate the progress and impact of the programs. In addition, the policymakers at the national and local levels should continue to lobby state and non-state actors that have participated in the peacebuilding efforts in the region such as Australia, Japan, and the World Bank. Organisations such as ASEAN which aims to transform the region into an economic and political-security community, and OIC whose objective is to safeguard the well-being of the Muslims worldwide, ought to step up their involvement. One measure that can be taken is by devising economic plans that will encourage investment from the member states and thus, foster economic growth in the region. These improvements are to ensure that the programs are effective and do not turn out to be the cause that will spark the frustration of the former members of the ASG.

Throughout the decades, the ASG has managed to shift their focus of operations back and forth between being a group of bandits known for its notorious kidnapping and a

terrorist organisation with attention-grabbing stunts. While doing so, it did not completely abandon one element for the other. This ability to shift the focus of operations or the fluidity of the group is what has contributed to its resilience. The fluidity is made possible due to three interrelated factors which are the factionalised structure of the group, the presence of a terrorist patron, and the convenience of committing crimes. While the influence and strength of the group have gradually declined in recent years, the relevant authorities should be aware of the said factors and undertake the necessary measures suggested above to prevent the revival of the ASG.

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