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POSTGRADUATE  
SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

**THESIS**

**THE PERSISTENCE OF TERRORISM: A CASE STUDY  
OF MINDANAO**

by

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June 2021

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**THE PERSISTENCE OF TERRORISM: A CASE STUDY OF MINDANAO**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis considers why terrorism persists in Mindanao, Philippines, despite the government's many counterterrorism measures. This thesis reviews the historical narratives, socioeconomics, and political challenges of the Moro problem. It finds that terrorism and violence continue for a number of reasons, including but not limited to unresolved grievances such as Islamist ideology. Other grievances include displacement by internal north-to-south migration, relative deprivation, and perceptions of marginalization. Moreover, terrorist groups continue to evolve and adapt to the changing security and political landscape, presenting new challenges to the state. Hence, this thesis also examines the Philippine government's various counterterrorism (CT) strategies and finds some gaps, particularly a lack of centralization and synchronization unifying all CT efforts. This thesis concludes that terrorism continues because of a government response that focuses on security rather than the root causes of the conflict, including socioeconomic and political factors. Thus, this thesis recommends that the Philippine government should not only consolidate CT efforts into a single institutional framework, but also pursue comprehensive and sustainable economic policies and effective governance that actually address the root causes of the persistent conflict in Mindanao.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ARMM	Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASG	Abu Sayaff Group
BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
BIFF	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters
BOL	Bangsamoro Organic Law
CAB	Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro
CMO	Civil Military Operations
CPP	Communist Party of the Philippines
CT	Counterterrorism
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
EU	European Union
FPA	Final Peace Agreement
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
HSA	Human Security Act
IDB	Independent Decommissioning Body
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IH	Isnlon Hapilon
IRRO	International Islamic Relief Organization
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
KM	Kabataang Makabayan
MBG	Misuari Breakaway Group
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MIR	Mindanao Islamic Republic
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NISP	National Internal Security Plan

NTF-ELCAC	National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict
OIC	Organization of the Islamic Conference
OPAPP	Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process
PAMANA	Payapa at Masaganang Pamayanan
PNP-SAF	Philippine National Police-Special Action Force
PSA	Philippine Statistic Authority
RSM	Rajah Solaiman Movement
UN	United Nations
U.S.	United States



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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. RESEARCH QUESTION

The threat of terrorism and violence in the Philippines, especially in Mindanao, persists despite the government's counterterrorism measures. Acts of terrorism have cost lives and have continuously undermined the development and stability of the country. Terrorist incidents that have happened in recent years, like the Maute/IS/ASG siege of Marawi city, suicide bombings in Sulu province, and other atrocities in Mindanao, indicate that the counterterrorism strategies and approaches of the government are not sufficient to effectively address the threat of terrorism.

Against this backdrop, this thesis explores the following question: Why have terrorism and violence continued to persist, particularly in Mindanao? The purpose of this study is to provide a clearer understanding of the root causes and other factors enabling terrorism to continue.

## B. LITERATURE REVIEW

To address the major research question, this literature review critically analyzes, evaluates, and compares prior research studies and other scholarly sources on terrorism.

### 1. Definition and Causes of Terrorism

Bruce Hoffman defines "terrorism as the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in pursuit of political change."<sup>1</sup> Terrorism is typically perpetrated by terror groups that have grievances that lead them to commit these acts. It has become an attractive strategy for organizations of diverse ideologies who want to attract attention for their cause, air their grievances, provoke a government, appeal for sympathy, or promote the adherence of the faithful.<sup>2</sup> Violence has become a means for terrorist groups to pursue their causes and goals.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (July 1981): 396, <https://doi.org/10.2307/421717>.

The root causes of terrorism are often attributed to “causal relationships in social, economic, political, and demographic conditions.”<sup>3</sup> Poverty and social inequality are among the primary root causes of terrorism. According to William O’Neill, “poverty of resources, combined with poverty of prospects, choices and respect, help enable terrorism to thrive.”<sup>4</sup> Poverty stems from underdevelopment, poor or weak governance, and poor education that lacks capacity to reduce terrorism.<sup>5</sup> Economic inequality within a certain group or between groups often drives conflicts.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, poverty has become a driver of terrorism as it makes recruitment easy to lure poor and uneducated individuals.

Factors such as lack of access to resources, positions in the government, or to territory have been connected to the grievances of terrorist groups. Similarly, grievances arise when people perceive that a government’s political orders are denying their basic rights as individuals and as a group.<sup>7</sup> These can manifest in the political and economic deprivation of certain marginalized groups. Ethno-nationalism has become a common grievance that can be found in some narratives of extremist groups in recruitment and terroristic activities. Furthermore, demographic elements have been also offered significant conditions for the emergence of terrorism. Key demographic conditions include uneven migration, quick population growth, and urbanization.<sup>8</sup> These factors have produced unemployment and poverty and brought disaffection when economic opportunities have been denied a group of people, creating ethnic and social imbalance in the society.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Newman, “Exploring the ‘Root Causes’ of Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (December 2006): 749, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100600704069>.

<sup>4</sup> William O’Neill, “Beyond the Slogans: How Can the UN Respond to Terrorism?” (paper presented at International Peace Academy (IPA) Conference on “Responding to Terrorism: What Role for the United Nations?,” Chadbourne and Parke, New York City, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> O’Neill.

<sup>6</sup> Jeni Klugman, *Social and Economic Policies to Prevent Complex Humanitarian Emergencies Lessons from Experience* (Helsinki, Finland: UNU/WIDER, 1999), <https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/PB1999-002.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> O’Neill, “Beyond the Slogans: How Can the UN Respond to Terrorism?”

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Ian Ross, “Structural Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism: Towards a Causal Model,” *Journal of Peace Research* 30, no. 3 (August 1993): 30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/424809>.

<sup>9</sup> Ross, 30.

## 2. Enablers of Terrorism

Globalization has dramatically contributed to the dissemination of ideologies, technology, and support systems that enable terrorism. According to Audrey Kurth Cronin, “the current wave of international terrorism, characterized by unpredictable and unprecedented threats from nonstate actors, not only is a reaction to globalization but is facilitated by it.”<sup>10</sup> Globalization has importantly enabled terrorist methods and activities by facilitating terrorists’ movement, providing the use of new technologies, and expanding or changing their sources of support.<sup>11</sup>

Specifically, globalization has aided terrorist groups to reach other countries where they can access commerce and international businesses.<sup>12</sup> This reach has also permitted terrorist groups like Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups to cross international borders and form terrorist cells.<sup>13</sup> Movement across porous and unguarded borders has enabled terrorist groups to bring in illegal materials like explosives, firearms, money, and other items to support their terrorist activities, including teaching, training, and attacks.<sup>14</sup> These movements have also allowed terrorist groups to gather, disseminate, and act on different information.<sup>15</sup>

Technologies have similarly aided terrorist groups’ activities, especially in communicating and coordinating their actions.<sup>16</sup> As an example, the coordinated attacks on the U.S. embassies in 1998 and on the New York World Trade Center in 2001

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<sup>10</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, “Behind the Curve: Globalization and International Terrorism,” *International Security* 27, no. 3 (January 2003): 30, <https://doi.org/10.1162/01622880260553624>.

<sup>11</sup> Cronin, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Cronin, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Cronin, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Cronin, 48–49.

<sup>15</sup> Cronin, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy E. Denning, “Activism, Hacktivism, and Cyberterrorism: The Internet as a Tool For Influencing Foreign Policy,” in *Networks and Netwars*, ed. John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), 281, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mr1382osd.13>.

demonstrated the use of technologies in planning and execution.<sup>17</sup> Technology also has broadened the range of sources for collecting and distributing funding for terrorist activities. These sources include “nonprofit organizations and charities” being used as fronts and legal financial institutions to divert funds for illegal activities.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, globalization has provided networks and systems that facilitate terrorists’ administrative and operational requirements as they conduct their activities.

### 3. Adaptations of Terrorist Groups

As different states have developed new approaches to address terrorism, extremist groups have been able to innovate and adapt over time. According to Bill Braniff and Assaf Moghadam, terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda have persisted in the Middle East despite U.S. and its allies’ pressure.<sup>19</sup> After the 9/11 bombings and with U.S. military actions, terrorist groups adapted according to what resources they had.<sup>20</sup> These adaptations manifested themselves in evolutionary changes pertaining to three realms: strategy, ideology, and structure.

In the realm of strategy, terrorist groups have planned their actions using available resources and technology that can help them in their activities.<sup>21</sup> In the case of Al-Qaeda, they used media production to compensate for the loss of their infrastructure (like the training camps in Afghanistan) and their corresponding centrality among jihadist groups.<sup>22</sup> Using available resources, terrorist groups were able to reestablish limited safe havens in their respective regional jihadist movements and were able to share ideologies and

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<sup>17</sup> Simon Reeve, *The New Jackals: Ramzi Yousef, Osama Bin Laden and the Future of Terrorism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999) 260–266.

<sup>18</sup> Raphael F. Perl, *Terrorism, the Future, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, CRS Issue Brief No. 95112 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2001), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB55/crs20010913.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> William Braniff and Assaf Moghadam, “Al Qaeda’s Post-9/11 Evolution: An Assessment,” START, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/al-qaedas-post-911-evolution-assessment>.

<sup>20</sup> Braniff and Moghadam.

<sup>21</sup> Braniff and Moghadam.

<sup>22</sup> Braniff and Moghadam.

resources. In the ideological realm, terrorist groups have continued to conduct propaganda and ideological indoctrination to recruit as many vulnerable people as possible.<sup>23</sup> The Al-Qaeda “harmonized and globalized” their local grievance narratives to other countries, enabling Al-Qaeda to call for a global religious war.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda have evolved structurally; creating geographically connected terrorist groups, giving terror groups advantages to adapt to existing security environments.<sup>25</sup> These regional and global connections have created formal affiliations among “geographically dispersed groups, informally partnered with geographically co-located groups and has fostered a virtual safe-haven with few barriers to entry.”<sup>26</sup> These connections originally came from the Middle East and are now seen in other parts of the world, offering new evidence of the transfer of knowledge, skills, and tactics to different regional cells and countries.<sup>27</sup>

Looking into these different causes and factors enables us to better understand why terrorists continue to commit terrorism. It is also important to examine the drivers and enablers to influences and ideologies that were inculcated in these people, persuading individuals to commit acts of terrorism. The understanding of terrorists’ motivations, environments, and dynamics of terrorism is necessary to have an effective counterterrorism response.

### **C. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES FOR THE CONTINUED TERRORISM IN THE PHILIPPINES**

Terrorism persists in southern Philippines, as seen by terror attacks such as the 2017 Marawi Siege and the 2019 suicide bombings in Sulu province, which resulted in the death of civilians and destruction of properties and rocked the country’s security and stability. This thesis tests the hypothesis that Islamic terrorism persists in Mindanao because the root

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<sup>23</sup> Braniff and Moghadam.

<sup>24</sup> Braniff and Moghadam.

<sup>25</sup> Braniff and Moghadam.

<sup>26</sup> Braniff and Moghadam.

<sup>27</sup> Assaf Moghadam, “Shifting Trends in Suicide Attacks,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, January 15, 2009, <https://ctc.usma.edu/shifting-trends-in-suicide-attacks/>.

causes and grievances of the Filipino Muslims have not been comprehensively and holistically addressed by the government. These root causes and grievances include the historical marginalization of Filipino Muslims, political deprivations, and socio-political factors drastically affecting the lives of the Muslims in Mindanao. Despite the gains of the government against terrorists, extremist groups continuously evolve and adjust their strategies and tactics in pursuing their political and religious goals.

To better understand why terrorism persists, it is necessary to know the grievances and root causes of terrorism. It is also necessary to examine the different factors that enable and drive terrorism to continue. Likewise, it is important to look at the groups' adaptations that enabled them to survive through time. Finally, looking at the government's response to the problem can also provide lessons to improve the government's efforts in countering the challenges of terrorism.

#### **D. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This thesis intends to present a single case study of the persistence of Islamic terrorism in Mindanao. This thesis primarily reviews historical narratives of the origin of the Moro problem during the Spanish colonization up to the present period. This study also examines the organizational structure of the different extremist groups in Mindanao and the internal adaptations that enable them to survive the counterterrorism efforts of the government. To enable the analysis, this study will use scholarly articles as well as relevant data from departments and agencies of the Philippine Government.

#### **E. THESIS OVERVIEW AND CHAPTER OUTLINE**

This thesis is organized in five chapters to provide readers with a clear understanding of the different factors driving terrorism and the efforts of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to counter this pernicious problem.

Chapter I has provided a brief background of the study and the main research question it seeks to answer. It also covered the importance of the study and briefly discusses the literature available and the research methodology used in the study.



Chapter II provides the reader with insight into the root causes and grievances leading to the rise of different Islamist groups in the Philippines. The chapter then explains the complexities of the sources of those grievances in terms of social, economic, political, and demographic conditions affecting the region.

Chapter III analyzes the different Islamist groups' characteristics and means of survival despite the government's counterterrorism efforts. The chapter then examines the different patterns and trends enabling these Islamist groups to adapt and survive.

Chapter IV covers the Philippine government's counterterrorism strategy and approaches. An examination of the effectiveness of the government's effort in addressing the different factors that drive terrorism in Mindanao is presented.

Chapter V provides the findings of the study, presents conclusions, and provides recommendations for policy improvements and further research.

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## II. CONFLICTS AND TERRORISM IN MINDANAO: UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT CAUSES

The threat of terrorism and conflict persist in Mindanao, Philippines, despite the government's effort to address the problem. In fact, violence here has persisted from the colonial era to the present and is considered "one of the world's longest and bloodiest running armed conflicts."<sup>28</sup> Because of this recurring problem, the country has suffered many negative impacts such as loss of infrastructure and businesses, armed conflicts, and the death of innocent unarmed civilians.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the negative impacts of terrorism have put the country in a bad light and created a dreadful image that the "Philippines is a virtual war zone and a haven for terrorists and insurgents."<sup>30</sup> Given the negative impacts and complexity of terrorism, it is imperative to study the multi-faceted root causes contributing to the security problems in Mindanao, which include historical, political, and socioeconomic factors.

### A. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The terrorism and armed conflict evident in Mindanao today dates back more than 300 years to the Spanish colonization of the Philippines and its quest to Christianize the whole country.<sup>31</sup> The second-largest island and southernmost part of the Philippines (see Figure 1), Mindanao is home to the majority of Filipino Muslims in the country. This group comprises about 5.6% of the country's total population of 110 million Filipinos and about 24% of the island's entire population.<sup>32</sup> The experiences of the Muslims from the colonial

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<sup>28</sup> Fatimah Husein, Jerson Benia Narciso, and Bernard Adeney Risakotta, "A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines," *Journal Kawistara* 2, no. 2 (August 2012): 106, <https://doi.org/10.22146/kawistara.3966>.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Tan, "The Indigenous Roots of Conflict in Southeast Asia: The Case of Mindanao," in *After Bali: The Threat of Terrorism in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Stallion Press, 2003), 110–12, [https://doi.org/10.1142/9789812561749\\_0005](https://doi.org/10.1142/9789812561749_0005).

<sup>30</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, "A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines," 106.

<sup>31</sup> Tan, "The Indigenous Roots of Conflict in Southeast Asia," 98–99.

<sup>32</sup> "Factsheet on Islam in Mindanao," Philippine Statistics Authority Region XI, September 28, 2017, <http://rssl11.psa.gov.ph/article/factsheet-islam-mindanao>.

period up to the present time have been continuously feeding the grievances and causes of conflicts in Mindanao. The deep historical and domestic roots affecting the Muslim population can be traced from the Spanish colonial period, through American occupation, and up to Filipino rule in the post-colonial period.



Figure 1. Map of Mindanao and the Philippines<sup>33</sup>

## 1. Spanish Colonial Period

Muslim rebellion in the Philippines began during the Philippines' colonization by Spain, which halted Islamization of the country in 1565.<sup>34</sup> Spanish colonizers branded the

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<sup>33</sup> Source: "Map of Mindanao and the Philippines," National Counterterrorism Center, January 2014, [https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/abu\\_sayyaf.html](https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/abu_sayyaf.html).

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Tan, "Southeast Asia as the 'Second Front' in the War against Terrorism: Evaluating the Threat and Responses," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 2 (June 2010): 115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550312331293067>.

Muslims as *Moro* like the North African Moors, who were described as “outlaws, bandits, pirates, and slave traders,” which started the origin of a specifically *Moro* identity.<sup>35</sup> When the Spaniards arrived, the Muslims already had Sultanates in different parts of Mindanao, Sulu, Tawi-tawi, Palawan, and other parts of the country including Manila.<sup>36</sup> The Spaniards were able to defeat the Muslims in Luzon but failed to totally conquer the sultanates of Mindanao and Sulu due to strong resistance.<sup>37</sup> In their attempts to further colonize and suppress the *Moros*, the Spaniards recruited Filipino Christians as mercenaries to fight against the Muslims.<sup>38</sup> This resulted in the opposition of the Muslims not only to the Spaniards but also to the Filipino Christians. The Muslims showed by words and deeds their opposition to the Spaniards’ colonial attempts to deprive them of their independence. One of these actions was the appearance of the *sabilallahs*, or *juramentados* as the Spaniards called them, which were Moro fighters waging an Islamic jihad and whose only mission was to kill as many enemies as possible.<sup>39</sup> The Moro struggle of the Muslims against the Spanish colonizers created deeply entrenched ethnic and religious stereotypes, and Americans and Filipinos inherited this culture of mistrust toward Muslims in Mindanao.<sup>40</sup>

## 2. American Colonial Period

During the American occupation (1899–1946), violence and armed conflict in Mindanao had become more intense as Moros refused to be subjugated by their new

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<sup>35</sup> Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, “Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 3, no. 1 (April 2016): 66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797015626046>.

<sup>36</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 106.

<sup>37</sup> Tan, “The Indigenous Roots of Conflict in Southeast Asia,” 99.

<sup>38</sup> Reuben R. Canoy, *The Quest for Mindanao Independence* (Davao, Philippines: Mindanao Post Publishing Company, 1989), 30.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel K. Tan, *A History of the Philippines* (Manila: University of the Philippines Press, 2008), 63.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald May, “History, Demography and Factionalism: Obstacles to Conflict Resolution through Autonomy in the Southern Philippines,” in *Autonomy and Armed Separatism in South and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2012), 289, <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/17535>.

colonizers.<sup>41</sup> Although Mindanao was not totally conquered by Spain, it was handed over to the United States through the Treaty of Paris, which forced the integration of the Moros into the new American system of government.<sup>42</sup> This ignited new Moro resistance that resulted in bloody confrontations between the Americans and the Muslims. However, the Moro resistance weakened, which led to the speedy integration of the Muslims in the newly organized and “*Filipinized*” Philippine legislature where politics and governance were controlled by Filipino Christians.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Christians from Luzon and the Visayas began to migrate south with the support of the American administration, and later the Philippine Commonwealth, as part of a policy to develop Mindanao as a new frontier.<sup>44</sup> Data and trends show that migration of non-Muslims increased through the occupation and post-occupation years (1918 to 1970) in Muslim majority areas, especially in Cotabato and Zamboanga (see Table 1).

Table 1. Population Trends in Muslim Areas of the Philippines (1918–1970)<sup>45</sup>

Population	Year				
	1918	1939	1948	1960	1970
Muslim population of the Philippines (%)	4.29	4.23	4.11	4.86	4.32
			Cotabato		
Muslims	110,926	162,996	155,162	356,460	424,577
Non-Muslims	61,052	135,939	284,507	672,659	711,430
Ratio	0.55	0.83	1.83	1.89	1.68
			Lanao		
Muslims	83,319	162,632	237,215	412,260	497,122
Non-Muslims	8,140	80,805	106,703	236,670	308,328
Ratio	0.10	0.50	0.45	0.57	0.62
			Sulu		
Muslims	168,629	230,553	226,883	310,926	401,984
Non-Muslims	4,147	16,584	1,393	15,972	23,633
Ratio	0.03	0.07	0.01	0.05	0.06
			Zamboanga		
Muslims	44,789	92,028	133,348	194,444	191,527
Non-Muslims	102,544	263,956	288,593	829,389	1,251,870
Ratio	2.29	2.87	2.16	4.27	6.54

<sup>41</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 107.

<sup>42</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, 107.

<sup>43</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, 107.

<sup>44</sup> May, “History, Demography and Factionalism: Obstacles to Conflict Resolution through Autonomy in the Southern Philippines,” 279.

<sup>45</sup> Source: Tristan James Mabry, *Nationalism, Language, and Muslim Exceptionalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 182, <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/38225>.

As an outcome, by 1976, the Moros who once owned and occupied 98% of the land in Mindanao now owned less than 17%; these lands are mostly remote and in unproductive areas.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the proportion of Muslims in the population of Mindanao had fallen to 23% by 1980, down from an estimated 76% in 1903.<sup>47</sup> The migration programs eventually altered the religious, political, cultural, economic, and ethnic balance in Mindanao, causing the marginalization of Muslims not only by colonial powers but also by Christian Filipinos.<sup>48</sup>

### **3. Post-Colonial Period**

After the Second World War, with Christians in control of political affairs in the Philippines, perceived deprivation and marginalization among the Muslims continued. Christians were able to control the “economic and political spheres even in some predominantly Moro areas.”<sup>49</sup> This demographic change brought conflicts in different Muslim areas, which further threatened the religious and political authority of Muslim leaders.<sup>50</sup> The continuous migration of Christians angered the Muslim leaders, who began pushing for a separate land and government to be led and governed by Muslims. Thus, it was socio-political, religious, and economic deprivations that led to the rise of separatist Islamist groups fought against the Philippine government.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Leonardo N. Mercado, *Dialogue and Faith: A Philippine View* (Manila: Logos Publication Inc, 2009), 224–25.

<sup>47</sup> May, “History, Demography and Factionalism: Obstacles to Conflict Resolution through Autonomy in the Southern Philippines,” 280.

<sup>48</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 107.

<sup>49</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, 107.

<sup>50</sup> May, “History, Demography and Factionalism: Obstacles to Conflict Resolution through Autonomy in the Southern Philippines,” 280.

<sup>51</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 107.

## B. POLITICAL CONTEXT

From 1965 to 1971, Muslim students started gaining awareness and began to form political movements to fight for their rights of “self-determination as a people with distinct history and identity.”<sup>52</sup> These political movements and organizations eventually led to the emergence of different Islamist groups. Although divided, some Muslim groups believed that Mindanao must be a separate Islamic state that deserves freedom and independence.<sup>53</sup> This awareness and desire for independence was further triggered by the alleged killing of Muslim military recruits in Corregidor Island. In 1968, the Jabidah Massacre, also known as the Corregidor Massacre, heightened the Moros’ grievances against the Philippine government. Young Muslim army trainees were allegedly executed by the country’s armed forces for “*Operation Merdeka*,” a code name for an operation to regain Sabah from Malaysia by force to strengthen the territorial claims of the Philippines.<sup>54</sup> Even so, it has been argued by the national government in Manila that the Jabidah Massacre was a hoax and did not happen at all. The alleged massacre, however, led to the Moro political movement to aim for a separate Islamic state.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the incident led to the establishment of secessionist groups including the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) that splintered into different radicalized factions—the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Abu Sayaff Group (ASG), and the Maute /Islamic State (IS) of Lanao del Sur group.

The different Islamist and violent extremist groups continue to pursue their respective political goals. The MNLF, the oldest Islamist extremist group, was established in 1969 by Nur Misuari, an ethnic Tausug from Sulu, “aimed to liberate Mindanao from ‘Filipino colonialism’ and establish an independent *Bangsamoro Republik*.”<sup>56</sup> The MILF, a splinter group of the MNLF, established in 1978 by former MNLF Vice Chairman

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<sup>52</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, 107.

<sup>53</sup> Rommel Banlaoi, *Philippine Security in the Age of Terror: National, Regional, and Global Challenges in the Post-9/11 World* (Boca Raton, FL: Auerbach Publications, 2009), 49.

<sup>54</sup> Banlaoi, 49–50.

<sup>55</sup> Banlaoi, 50.

<sup>56</sup> Quimpo, “Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace,” 66.



Hashim Salamat, aimed to create a Moro Islamic state in Mindanao through *jihad* or holy war against its enemies.<sup>57</sup> The Islamic state that the MILF aspired to would be named the *Mindanao Islamic Republic* (MIR) that would have an established government system that upholds and applies *Shariah* law.<sup>58</sup> Both the MNLF and the MILF groups have engaged in separate peace negotiations and agreements with the government for their respective demands and goals that were not totally settled. The BIFF, a faction of the MILF that was established in 2010 by Umbra Kato, has aimed to disrupt and hamper the peace negotiations between the government and the MILF, which subsequently announced in July 2014 its alliance with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).<sup>59</sup> Another splinter group of the MNLF, the Abu Sayaff Group (ASG), which means “bearer of the sword,” was founded by a former MNLF jihadist in Afghanistan named Adburajak Abubakar Janjalani with the main goal of creating an independent and exclusive Moro Islamic state in Mindanao.<sup>60</sup> The ASG espouses violent religious extremism and is notable for the group’s acts of terrorism such as kidnappings, bombings, and assassinations.<sup>61</sup> Lastly, the Maute Group or the Islamic State (IS) in Lanao, a splinter of the MILF, was established by brothers Omar and Abdullah Maute and pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2015.<sup>62</sup> The Maute Group, which led the Marawi Siege in 2017 with fractions of ASG and BIFF together with foreign fighters, sought to form an Islamic territory in Marawi as part of an “East Asia Wilayah” for ISIS.<sup>63</sup> While the groups differ in their respective ideologies, motivations, and approaches, their

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<sup>57</sup> Banlaoi, *Philippine Security in the Age of Terror*, 2009, 53–54.

<sup>58</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 109.

<sup>59</sup> Ashley L. Rhoades and Todd C. Helmus, *Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines: A Snapshot of Current Challenges and Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA233-2.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA233-2.html).

<sup>60</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 110.

<sup>61</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, 110.

<sup>62</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, *Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines: A Snapshot of Current Challenges and Responses*.

<sup>63</sup> Quinton Temby, “Cells, Factions and Suicide Operatives: The Fragmentation of Militant Islamism in the Philippines Post-Marawi,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 1 (April 2019): 116, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26664207>.

central political goal is to establish an autonomous or independent Islamic state governed by the Filipino Muslims.<sup>64</sup>

### C. SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

The Moro struggle for an independent Mindanao state has a complex historical background emanating from different factors such as economic and socio-political causes.<sup>65</sup> The different socioeconomic issues have continuously been included in the narratives for recruitment and propaganda by these groups. These socioeconomic issues—including poverty, economic hardships, ethnic and religious marginalization, and frustrations with the government—serve as the critical drivers in the radicalization of Muslims in the Philippines that push individuals or groups to terrorism and violent extremism.<sup>66</sup>

Colonial powers have greatly affected the economic life of the Muslims in Mindanao. Both the Spaniards and the Americans disrupted the “flow of trade between the Muslims and outside traders,” which was aggravated by the influx of Christian migrants from Luzon and the Visayas.<sup>67</sup> Mohagher Iqbal, the MILF peace panel chair who used the pseudonym Salah Jubair, contends that “Spain came to the Philippines not so much for the cross, but in most instances, religion was merely used to justify Satanic lust for worldly gain and glory.”<sup>68</sup> The disruptions in the productive economic life of Muslims pushed them to extreme poverty. Likewise, the Christian transmigration program started by Americans and continued after independence led to the loss of Muslims’ ancestral lands, making it one

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<sup>64</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, *Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines: A Snapshot of Current Challenges and Responses*.

<sup>65</sup> Tan, “The Indigenous Roots of Conflict in Southeast Asia,” 98.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Koruth Samuel, *Radicalisation in Southeast Asia: A Selected Case Study of DAESH in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), 2016), <https://www.searcct.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Radicalisation-In-Southeast-Asia.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 112.

<sup>68</sup> Salah Jubair, *Bangsamoro, a Nation Under Endless Tyranny* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: IQ Marin, 1999), 39.

of the major issues and grievances that Islamist groups continue to raise in their armed struggle.

The continued violence and armed confrontations have also adversely affected the economic conditions and livelihoods of the Muslims in Mindanao. Due to violence and conflict, people are deprived of economic programs that would attract business opportunities and investments that would eventually improve the living conditions of the Moros.<sup>69</sup> Studies have shown that the provinces with the “lowest income, the highest poverty incidence, and the worst standard of living” are found in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).<sup>70</sup> The latest data from the Philippine Statistic Authority (PSA) showed that five out of six areas had high poverty rates within the Muslim region (see Figure 2).

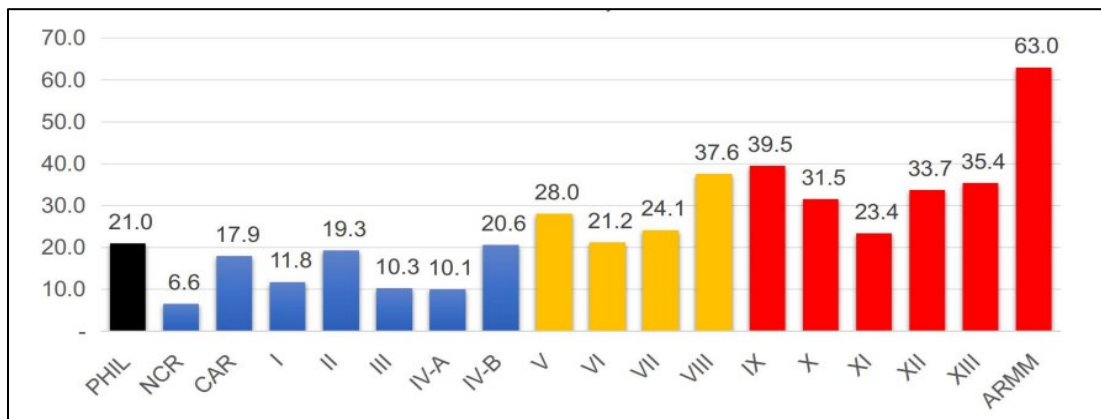


Figure 2. Poverty Incidence by Region (1<sup>st</sup> Half of 2018)<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 113.

<sup>70</sup> Ben Kerkvliet, “Philippine Human Development Report 2005: Peace, Human Security and Human Development in the Philippines,” *Asian-Pacific Economic Literature* 20, no. 2 (Nov 2006): 76–77, [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8411.2006.00184\\_7.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8411.2006.00184_7.x).

<sup>71</sup> Source: Celia M. Reyes, *Inequality of Opportunities in Education among Ethnic Groups* (Manila: Philippine Institute for Development Studies, September 2019), [https://minda.gov.ph/resources/Presentations/2019/5th\\_Mindanao\\_Policy\\_Forum/Inequality\\_PPT\\_Mindanao\\_DPRM2019\\_10Sep2019.pdf](https://minda.gov.ph/resources/Presentations/2019/5th_Mindanao_Policy_Forum/Inequality_PPT_Mindanao_DPRM2019_10Sep2019.pdf).

Moreover, Muslims’ continuing perceptions of discrimination and alienation caused by Christian Filipinos and allegedly by the government have also prevented them from accessing quality social services like education, as well as employment and other economic opportunities.<sup>72</sup> Biases and negative stereotypes and anti-Muslim sentiments have further affected their access to clinical services, proper education, and other essential social services, thus contributing considerably to their economic problems.<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, numerous youth from the rural areas are apparently not attending school and instead working as laborers, thus, making it easier for them to follow those extremist organizations as their only way to success and prosperity.<sup>74</sup> According to the 2017 Department of Education data, the ARMM has the lowest net enrollment rates both in elementary and secondary education (see Figure 3).

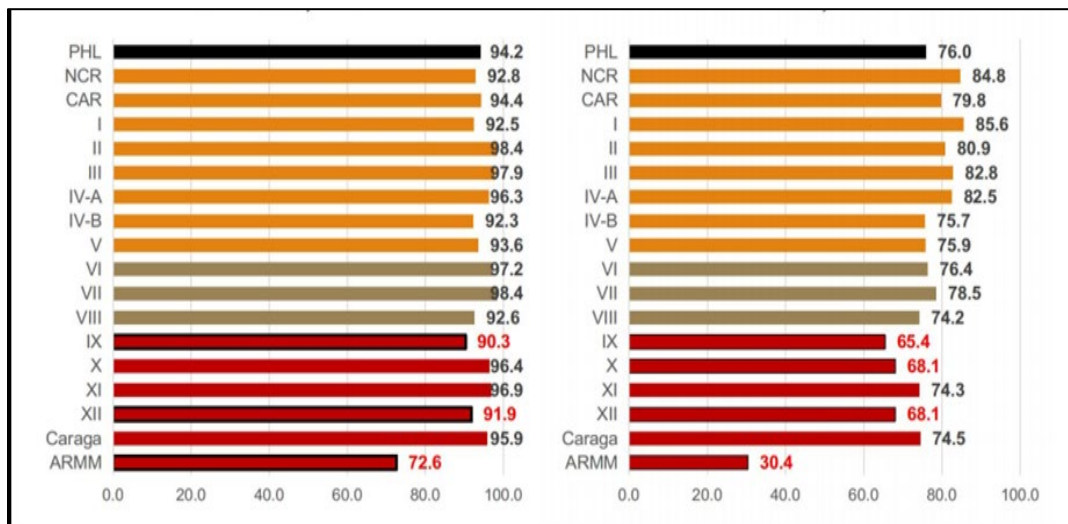


Figure 3. Net Enrollment Rate in Elementary and Secondary Education in the Philippines, 2017<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 113.

<sup>73</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, 113.

<sup>74</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, *Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines: A Snapshot of Current Challenges and Responses*.

<sup>75</sup> Source: Reyes, *Inequality of Opportunities in Education among Ethnic Groups*.

Anti-Moro and anti-Islam sentiment from colonial times has created negative impressions within the present Filipino cultures, contributing to the grievances of different Islamist and terrorist groups. The term “Moro,” which the Spaniards used, arose from biased ideas, and conveyed negative points of view against the Filipino Muslims.<sup>76</sup> Most of the Christians have regarded Muslims as being “troublemakers and violent,” and maliciously associated them with terrorism and extremism due to the high number of terrorist incidents in Mindanao.<sup>77</sup> Negative Moro stereotypes have been opposed by Muslims who claim that Islam is a religion of peace and civilization.<sup>78</sup> The labeling and stereotyping of Islam have been perceived by Muslims as an insult not only to them as a people but most especially to their religion.<sup>79</sup> The different Islamist groups, like the foreign terrorist groups founded by Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, believe that their religion is threatened and Muslims should participate in jihad or holy war in defense of their religion.<sup>80</sup>

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

Threats to Muslim religious beliefs, culture, and identity have driven individuals or groups of Muslims to take extreme actions and terrorist activities in Mindanao. The historical experiences of foreign colonization and the perceived marginalization of Muslims caused by Christian Filipinos have been primarily seen as actions against Islam and have led to a continuous struggle for a separate and independent state for Muslims. In addition to this political grievance, widespread poverty and economic hardships, the seizure of ancestral lands, lack of access to education and opportunity, and other economic deprivations have continuously been included in the narratives of the Moro cause. The root

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<sup>76</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 113.

<sup>77</sup> Raul Dancel, “Marawi a Crucible of Filipino Identity, Opinion News & Top Stories,” *The Straits Times*, January 18, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/marawi-a-crucible-of-filipino-identity>.

<sup>78</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 114.

<sup>79</sup> Narciso, Husein, and Risakotta, 114.

<sup>80</sup> Heather S. Gregg, “Fighting Cosmic Warriors: Lessons from the First Seven Years of the Global War on Terror,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 3 (March 2009): 188, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100802670829>.

causes therefore are a combination of political and socioeconomic issues that require a comprehensive and a whole-nation approach in which all sectors of the society, especially the Muslim communities, participate. This complex root cause of terrorism and violence in Mindanao require a deep understanding of Muslim cultural and religious elements to address their grievances and ultimately terrorism. It further requires the need to understand and know more about the different Islamist groups to address the root causes and critical drivers of terrorism.

### III. RADICALIZATION, VIOLENT EXTREMISM, AND EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIST GROUPS IN MINDANAO

The rise of different Islamist groups in Mindanao is the result of a complex mixture of historical, political, and socioeconomic factors that have afflicted the Philippines for centuries. The 2020 Global Terrorism Index indicated the Philippines on the tenth rank in the world for being greatly affected by terrorism.<sup>81</sup> The radicalization of Filipino Muslims finds its roots in the historical struggle against political and economic deprivation, marginalization, and injustices.<sup>82</sup> The abuses and experiences of the Muslims starting from the colonial era up to the disputes with Filipino Christians over the unresolved Moro problems have led to the emergence of different separatist and terrorist groups in Mindanao. Islamist groups have used these grievances to justify violence and terroristic activities in attaining their political or religious objectives.<sup>83</sup> The *Bangsamoro*<sup>84</sup> issue in Mindanao has led to the radicalization and creation of different secessionist groups and violent extremist groups in pursuit of their goals.

#### A. DIFFERENT ISLAMIST GROUPS IN MINDANAO

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the main Muslim groups that have come out of Mindanao are the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Abu Sayaff Group (ASG), and the Maute/IS Group. These groups are examined in the following paragraphs.

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<sup>81</sup> “Global Terrorism Index 2020: The Ten Countries Most Impacted by Terrorism,” Vision of Humanity, January 25, 2021, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/global-terrorism-index-2020-the-ten-countries-most-impacted-by-terrorism/>.

<sup>82</sup> Amina Rasul, *Radicalization of Muslims in Mindanao: The Philippines in Southeast Asian Context*, *Islam and Politics: Renewal and Resistance in the Muslim World* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2009), 17.

<sup>83</sup> Rasul, 21.

<sup>84</sup> *Bangsamoro* is a coined term derived from an old Malay word “*Bangsa*” meaning race or nation and “*Moro*,” which Spaniards used to depict the Muslims in Mindanao like the North African Moors. The term *Bangsamoro* is also used to refer to the present autonomous region in Mindanao.

## 1. Moro National Liberation Front

The MNLF is the oldest Muslim separatist group in the Philippines. The MNLF was organized in the early 1970s by Nur Misuari, a Tausug from Sulu and a professor of the University of the Philippines, who was aligned more towards secular-nationalist movements.<sup>85</sup> The communist orientation of Misuari and the MNLF originated when Misuari joined with some Muslim youths the *Kabataang Makabayan* (KM), organized by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).<sup>86</sup> During the Marcos regime, the MNLF aimed to liberate Mindanao and achieve independence for its own *Bangsamoro Republik*.<sup>87</sup> Although the MNLF was not tagged as a terror group, it was believed that the group was involved in some terroristic activities like bombings in different parts of Mindanao.<sup>88</sup> From 1972 to 1976, the estimated casualties (including both military and civilian) reached about 120,000.<sup>89</sup> The intense armed fighting and bloodshed ultimately led to peace negotiations between the government and Moro rebels.

In 1976, the MNLF and Marcos administration entered peace negotiations with the assistance of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and Libya. This culminated in the signing of the Tripoli Agreement, which resulted in a truce between the government and the MNLF and incorporated the 13 Muslim provinces in the autonomous region in Mindanao.<sup>90</sup> After the fall of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, the Cory Aquino administration resumed the accord that resulted in the signing of the Jeddah Accord in January 1987.<sup>91</sup> This led to the signing into law of the establishment of the ARMM on August 1, 1989.<sup>92</sup> Under

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<sup>85</sup> Quimpo, "Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace," 66.

<sup>86</sup> Banlaoi, *Philippine Security in the Age of Terror*, 2009, 50.

<sup>87</sup> Quimpo, "Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace," 66.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels* (Manila: Anvil Publishing, 1998), 181.

<sup>89</sup> Benedicto Bacani, *The Mindanao Peace Talks: Another Opportunity to Resolve the Moro Conflict in the Philippines* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: United States Institute of Peace, February 13, 2005), 4, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2005/02/mindanao-peace-talks-another-opportunity-resolve-moro-conflict-philippines>.

<sup>90</sup> Quimpo, "Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace," 66–67.

<sup>91</sup> Quimpo, 67.

<sup>92</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, "A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines," 108.



the Ramos administration, the MNLF signed the Final Peace Agreement (FPA) with the Philippine government in September 2, 1996, which led to the end of armed conflicts between the security forces and MNLF and the creation of development of special zones in 14 provinces in Mindanao, including Palawan.<sup>93</sup> President Fidel Ramos supported Misuari who was elected as ARMM governor and was given the authority to implement development efforts in Mindanao.

As the popularity of Misuari and MNLF declined due to organizational problems, the group was sidelined to further peace negotiations with the Philippine government, leading to sporadic attacks and violence, and thus creating instability again in the region.<sup>94</sup> In 2001, when Misuari failed to be reelected as ARMM governor, he organized the Misuari Breakaway Group (MBG) with its operations mainly in Sulu province and other parts of the Zamboanga peninsula.<sup>95</sup> On February 6, 2005, MBG rebels spontaneously attacked several army camps in Sulu, which resulted in 30 soldiers killed and about 35,000 civilians displaced.<sup>96</sup> In 2013, the MBG attacked Zamboanga City (often called the *Zamboanga Siege*), which resulted in the death of 19 soldiers and 208 MBG members, and displaced 24,000 people.<sup>97</sup> Misuari accused the Aquino administration of betraying the FPA signed in 1996.<sup>98</sup> Through the years, Misuari continued to engage the government in political activities. In 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte granted Misuari immunity from arrest and he was designated as the Philippine representative to the Islamic Conference.<sup>99</sup> The present position of Misuari gives the MNLF a role to play in the ongoing peace process launched by the Duterte administration with other Islamist groups like the MILF.

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<sup>93</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, 108.

<sup>94</sup> “Mapping Militant Profiles: Moro National Liberation Front,” Stanford University CISAC, January 2019, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/moro-national-liberation-front>.

<sup>95</sup> Banlaoi, *Philippine Security in the Age of Terror*, 2009, 52.

<sup>96</sup> Banlaoi, 52.

<sup>97</sup> Carmela Fonbuena, “Zamboanga Siege: Tales from the Combat Zone,” *Rappler*, September 13, 2014, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/zamboanga-siege-light-reaction-battalion>.

<sup>98</sup> Jonathan Head, “What Is behind the Fighting in the Philippines’ Zamboanga?,” BBC News, September 13, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24079198>.

<sup>99</sup> Banlaoi, *Philippine Security in the Age of Terror*, 2009, 52–53.

## 2. Moro Islamic Liberation Front

The MILF is a splinter group of the MNLF that is “more religiously oriented than the nationalist and secular orientation of the MNLF.”<sup>100</sup> The MILF was established by Salamat Hashim, a high-ranking MNLF commander who had a disagreement with the MNLF leadership in 1983.<sup>101</sup> The majority of the group were Maguindanaons, a major Muslim ethnic tribe that mainly operates in Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur and other parts of western Mindanao.<sup>102</sup> The main political aspiration of the MILF is the creation of a sole “Islamic State known as the Mindanao Islamic Republic (MIR)” that will have its own government implementing *shariah* (Islamic law) to all the Muslims in southern Philippines.<sup>103</sup>

Aside from fighting with government forces after its inception, some members of the MILF participated and trained in Pakistan and Afghanistan with financial support from Middle Eastern countries.<sup>104</sup> It was during this interaction that MILF fighters worked together with the terrorist group Al-Qaeda.<sup>105</sup> In the 1990s, Osama Bin Laden financially supported the MILF through a charitable organization named International Islamic Relief Organization (IRRO).<sup>106</sup> Al-Qaeda then used the Philippines as a base to support Southeast Asian terrorist groups like the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which perpetrated the 2002 Bali bombings in Indonesia.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, the MILF also established links with other local terrorist groups like ASG and the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM) in joint training and operations against government forces.<sup>108</sup> In 1999, the AFP assessed the MILF’s strength to be about 20,000

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<sup>100</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 109.

<sup>101</sup> Rasul, “Radicalization of Muslims in Mindanao,” 28.

<sup>102</sup> Rasul, 28.

<sup>103</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 109.

<sup>104</sup> Quimpo, “Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace,” 68.

<sup>105</sup> Quimpo, 68.

<sup>106</sup> Banlaoi, *Philippine Security in the Age of Terror*, 2009, 54.

<sup>107</sup> International Crisis Group, *Southern Philippines Backgrounder: Terrorism and the Peace Process*, (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2004), <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/80-southern-philippines-backgrounder-terrorism-and-the-peace-process.pdf>.

<sup>108</sup> Banlaoi, *Philippine Security in the Age of Terror*, 2009, 56.

members, making it the largest rebel group and outnumbering the MNLF, prompting the government to negotiate.<sup>109</sup>

President Ramos initiated negotiations and explored terms with the MILF, including the cessation of hostilities.<sup>110</sup> Nonetheless, during the term of President Joseph Estrada, negotiations broke off and the MILF engaged in armed clashes with government forces.<sup>111</sup> On 2001, when Gloria M. Arroyo became the president, peace talks resumed with the MILF reversing the all-out war of President Estrada.<sup>112</sup> After President Arroyo, the peace negotiations gained momentum during the subsequent Aquino administration and resulted in the establishment of an “autonomous political entity called the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM),” replacing the ARMM. While the creation of BARMM was rejected by other provinces, the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) was still formalized in March 2014.<sup>113</sup> At present, the Duterte administration has continued the normalization phase and decommissioning of MILF members supervised by the Independent Decommissioning Body (IDB) as stated in the BARMM organic law.<sup>114</sup> The MILF claims, however, that it still has 40,000 fighters and 7,000 firearms for decommissioning.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, when the MILF began its peace negotiation with the government, new splinter groups emerged to oppose the peace process.

### **3. Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters**

The BIFF is a MILF breakaway group founded by one of MILF’s military leaders, Ameril Umbra Kato.<sup>116</sup> He studied in Saudi Arabia where he learned Wahhabism and aimed

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<sup>109</sup> Quimpo, “Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace,” 69.

<sup>110</sup> Rasul, “Radicalization of Muslims in Mindanao,” 28.

<sup>111</sup> Quimpo, “Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace,” 69.

<sup>112</sup> Quimpo, 69.

<sup>113</sup> Quimpo, 74.

<sup>114</sup> Froilan Gallardo, “Decommissioning of MILF Combatants, Weapons Begins; Duterte to Witness Rites,” *Minda News*, September 7, 2019, <https://www.mindanews.com/peace-process/2019/09/decommissioning-of-milf-combatants-weapons-begins-duterte-to-witness-rites/>.

<sup>115</sup> Gallardo.

<sup>116</sup> Quimpo, “Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace,” 73.

at an independent Muslim state as the MILF became “more amenable to autonomy, instead of independence,” for the Bangsamoro people.<sup>117</sup> The group generally covers the provinces of Maguindanao and North Cotabato where Kato and his group came from.<sup>118</sup> With the death of Kato in April 2015, the group was divided into three groups led by Karialan, Bungos, and Abu Toraife.<sup>119</sup> Estimates of these militant groups’ numbers vary. In 2018, the AFP estimated Toraife’s group to be between 60 to 100, while the other factions totaled over 250 BIFF fighters.<sup>120</sup> Despite the small numbers in each faction, these subgroups of BIFF continue to conduct violence and act as spoilers disrupting military operations, thus affecting the MILF’s peace negotiations with the government.

Despite continuous military operations, the BIFF factions have carried out atrocities and terror attacks in central Mindanao in recent years. They carried out sporadic attacks on Christian communities and military camps, undermining the peace talks between the government and the MILF.<sup>121</sup> In 2012, BIFF rebels attacked 11 communities in Maguindanao prior to the resumption of the planned negotiations.<sup>122</sup> Likewise, in 2014, some BIFF members supported the IS, a move that was seen by the military as a means to gain recognition of their group.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, a series of bombings and attacks against government forces and civilians in central Mindanao were widely attributed to the BIFF. On January 25, 2015, the BIFF, together with the MILF and other armed groups, attacked the Philippine National Police

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<sup>117</sup> “Mapping Militant Profiles: Abu Sayaff Group,” Stanford University CISAC, August 2018, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/abu-sayaff-group>.

<sup>118</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/philippines/301-philippines-militancy-and-new-bangsamoro>.

<sup>119</sup> International Crisis Group.

<sup>120</sup> Benjamin Pulta, “SC Upholds 3rd Martial Law Extension,” *Philippine News Agency*, February 19, 2019, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1062334>.

<sup>121</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, “Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines,” 2020.

<sup>122</sup> “Mapping Militant Profiles: Abu Sayaff Group.”

<sup>123</sup> Guillaume Lavallee, “Philippine Militants Pledge Allegiance to ISIS Jihadists,” *Rappler*, August 15, 2014, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/philippine-militants-allegiance-isis-jihadists>.

Special Action Force (PNP-SAF), where 44 of its members died in the military encounter.<sup>124</sup> Because some MILF members were involved in attacking the policemen, the MILF-Philippine government peace process received backlash.<sup>125</sup> On December 31, 2018, the date of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) referendum, a bombing in Cotabato City occurred that resulted in the death of two and wounded 32 people; security forces believed that BIFF was behind the attack.<sup>126</sup> The BIFF has continued to conduct atrocities and attacks especially in Christian communities to undermine and derail the ongoing MILF-Philippine government peace talks.

#### 4. Abu Sayaff Group

The ASG is a splinter group from MNLF, founded in 1991 by one of its members, Abdurajak Janjalani.<sup>127</sup> The group has aimed for a separate Islamic state in Mindanao.<sup>128</sup> It is believed that Janjalani may have been influenced during his travel as a mujahedeen in the Middle East during the Afghan war.<sup>129</sup> It was also during this time that Janjalani gained monetary and logistical support for the newly created terrorist group.<sup>130</sup> Janjalani recruited other disenfranchised MNLF members who shared the ASG's "radical views" that differed from those of its mother unit.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, with its link to the Al-Qaeda, the ASG gained not only funding through charitable organizations but also training, especially in bomb making.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Yuji Vincent Gonzales, "MILF, BIFF Names Involved in SAF 44 Killing Forwarded to DOJ—PNP," *Inquirer News*, August 13, 2015, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/712737/milf-biff-names-involved-in-saf-44-killing-forwarded-to-doj-pnp>.

<sup>125</sup> Gonzales.

<sup>126</sup> International Crisis Group, "The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro."

<sup>127</sup> McKenzie O'Brien, "Fluctuations Between Crime and Terror: The Case of Abu Sayyaf's Kidnapping Activities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24 (April 1, 2012): 321, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.648679>.

<sup>128</sup> "Mapping Militant Profiles: Abu Sayaff Group."

<sup>129</sup> "Mapping Militant Profiles: Abu Sayaff Group."

<sup>130</sup> Banlaoi, *Philippine Security in the Age of Terror*, 2009, 57.

<sup>131</sup> "Mapping Militant Profiles: Abu Sayaff Group."

<sup>132</sup> Quimpo, "Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace," 69.

Due to its brutality and violence, the ASG caught the attention of not only the local but also the international community. In 1997, the ASG was listed by the United States as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in South East Asia, together with Al-Qaeda and JI.<sup>133</sup> The group not only wages war with government forces but also engages in extreme violence against innocent civilians. Aside from bombings, the ASG also kidnaps for ransom to finance its operations. Most notable were the April 23, 2000 Sipadan kidnapping incident in Malaysia and the May 28, 2001 Dos Palmas Resort kidnapping in Palawan, where foreign and Filipino tourists were kidnapped for ransom.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, the ASG has also perpetrated high-fatality bombings, including the 2004 MV Super Ferry 14 attack where 116 civilians died at sea.<sup>135</sup> In April 2017, an ASG faction under Isnilon Hapilon (IH), the ISIS designated Emir in South East Asia, pledged allegiance to ISIS and along with the Maute group and a faction from the BIFF attacked Marawi City.

## 5. Maute/IS Lanao del Sur Group

Brothers Omar and Abdullah Maute, from Butig, Lanao del Sur, founded an ISIS inspired terrorist group, the Maute group, or the IS Lanao del Sur group. They both reportedly held senior positions in the MILF and broke away following disagreements about the MILF's negotiation with the government.<sup>136</sup> The group has sought to “build an ‘Islamic’ society and mini-state in Lanao Del Sur.”<sup>137</sup> The Maute brothers were able to study abroad in the Middle East, where they are believed to have been radicalized.<sup>138</sup> The Maute group was able to recruit young Muslims with the promise of monetary incentives for their families, ideological

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<sup>133</sup> “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” United States Department of State, October 8, 1997, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.

<sup>134</sup> Banlaoi, *Philippine Security in the Age of Terror*, 2009, 62.

<sup>135</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, “Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines,” 2020.

<sup>136</sup> “Philippines: Update on Complex Militant Attack in Marawi City, Mindanao,” ISS Risk, June 6, 2017, <http://issrisk.com/research/situation-alert/philippines-update-complex-militant-attack-marawi-city-mindanao/>.

<sup>137</sup> Julie Chernov Hwang, “Relatives, Redemption, and Rice: Motivations for Joining the Maute Group,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 12, no. 8 (September 2019): 23, <https://ctc.usma.edu/relatives-redemption-rice-motivations-joining-maute-group/>.

<sup>138</sup> Raju Gopalakrishnan and Manuel Mogato, “The Mautes of the Philippines: From Monied Family to Islamic State,” Reuters, June 12, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-militants-matriarch/the-mautes-of-the-philippines-from-monied-family-to-islamic-state-idUSKBN19E0A9>.

indoctrination, and paramilitary training in Butig.<sup>139</sup> The Maute group was able also to recruit former members of the MILF through their extended families.<sup>140</sup> The group gained further traction in 2016 when the ISIS called its fighters to travel to the Philippines instead of the Middle East (Iraq and Syria) to fulfill their *jihad*.<sup>141</sup>

On May 23, 2017, the Maute/IS group together with the ASG (led by IH) and foreign fighters seized the only Islamic City of Marawi, where a majority of the population is Muslim, prompting the Philippine government to launch a massive counterattack against the group. Adopting the manner of ISIS, the Maute Group burned the Catholic Church and schools and took hostages. During the siege, the combined terrorist groups used modern technologies in support of their operations. The groups used accurate sniper rifles and improvised explosive devices (IED), drones for monitoring the battle area, and cellular phones and radio for communication and propaganda. After five months, the group of terrorists was defeated on October 16, 2017, following the death of Hapilon and Omar Maute, ending the siege. The remaining members of the group splintered into smaller groups in different parts of Mindanao.

Although the Maute group lost militarily in Marawi, the group was able to influence others: the battle of Marawi and the resulting damage to and ruins of the city center, houses, and mosques, and the death of its fighters were used heavily in the group's narratives in recruitment and propaganda.<sup>142</sup> The Maute copied their strategies from those of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, shifting to suicide bombings against government forces and civilians.<sup>143</sup> More recently, the ISIS-inspired group has claimed attacks and suicide bombings at a paramilitary checkpoint in Basilan that killed ten people (July 2018); at Jolo Cathedral (Sulu), accounting for 23 deaths and 102 wounded (January 27, 2019); a Jolo bombing perpetrated by the first Filipino suicide bomber, killing eight and wounding at least 20 (June 28, 2019); and suicide

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<sup>139</sup> Hwang, "Relatives, Redemption, and Rice," 24–25.

<sup>140</sup> Hwang, 24.

<sup>141</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, "Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines," 2020.

<sup>142</sup> Devin Lurie, "ISIS in the Philippines: A Cause for Concern," American Security Project, June 4, 2020, <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/isis-in-the-philippines-a-cause-for-concern/>.

<sup>143</sup> Lurie.

bombing at an army camp in Sulu (September 8, 2019).<sup>144</sup> The emergence of the ISIS-inspired Maute group made suicide bombings a more common tactics of terror attack in the country.<sup>145</sup>

## **B. PATTERNS AND TRENDS**

Dating back to the early 1970s, the Moro movement in Mindanao is one of the “world’s longest-running insurgencies.”<sup>146</sup> The conflict has claimed the lives of more than 120,000 and displaced more than two million people.<sup>147</sup> Violence and terrorism persist as the different Islamist groups have evolved over time. These groups continue to demonstrate their adaptability and resiliency in the changing political and security landscape in the country. The ability of these groups to adapt can be seen in their respective ideologies, strategies, and tactics, and the support system that they developed in response in pursuit of their political and religious goals.

In terms of ideologies, each Islamist group differs from the others depending on its motivations and the period when the group was created. The creation of the nationalist-driven MNLF came after the alleged abuse of Muslims during the Marcos regime, especially after the alleged *Jabidah* massacre<sup>148</sup> that became the focal point for Moro separatists. On the other hand, the MILF and the ASG, both splinter groups of the MNLF, espouse Islamic principles and teachings like *shariah* rather than the secular orientation of the MNLF. Likewise, the BIFF and the Maute group, both splinter groups of the MILF, seek to create an Islamic state in the southern Philippines. The differences in their leadership and motivations

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<sup>144</sup> “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Philippines,” United States Department of State, June 24, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/philippines/>.

<sup>145</sup> Lurie, “ISIS in the Philippines.”

<sup>146</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 106.

<sup>147</sup> Quimpo, “Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace,” 65.

<sup>148</sup> The Jabidah Massacre, otherwise known as the Corregidor Massacre, allegedly caused the killing of 28 young Moro recruits on the island of Corregidor in March 1968. They were being trained by the military for the invasion of Sabah, Malaysia, during the Marcos administration to strengthen its territorial claim. This incident triggered the creation of separatist groups like the MNLF and other Islamist groups.



have led to the creation of smaller splinter groups that have become a pattern in Muslim insurgency (see Figure 4).

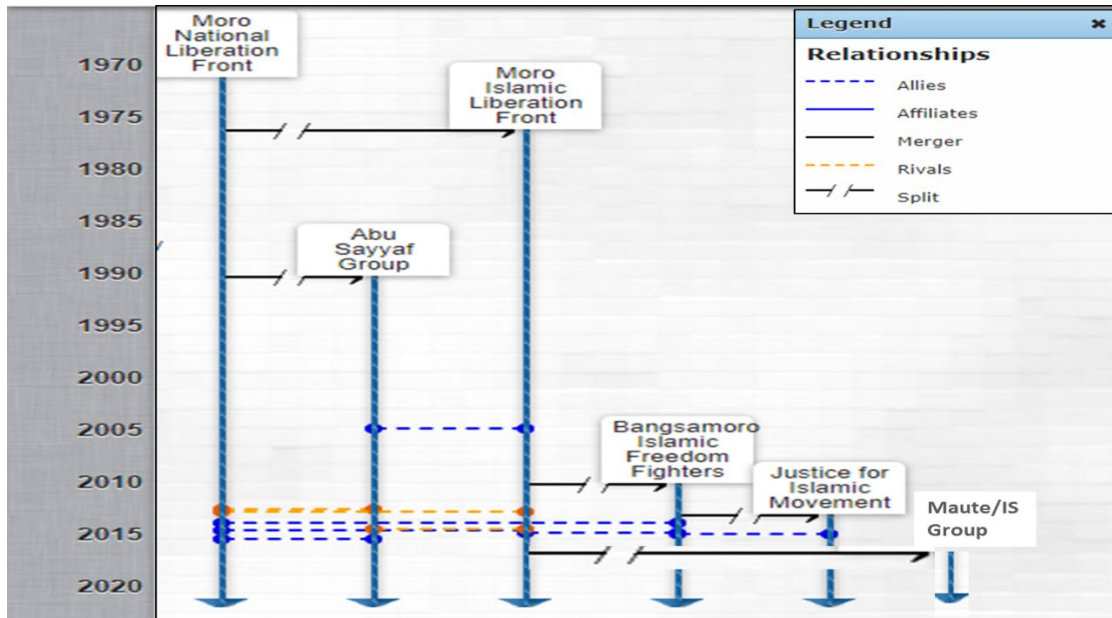


Figure 4. Different Islamist Splinter Groups in Mindanao<sup>149</sup>

Aside from differences in ideologies, the creation of new factions can also be attributed to the education and experiences of the leaders as well as the factionalization of ethnic groups. All the Moro separatist leaders except for Misuari had education and interactions in other parts of the Muslim world. Hashim Salamat attended a bachelor’s degree program in Cairo, Egypt; Kato studied in Saudi Arabia where he was exposed to Wahhabism; Janjalani fought during the Afghan war alongside other mujahidin; and the Maute brothers studied abroad in the Middle East. Their experiences and education in Islamic countries certainly influenced and may have radicalized them, enabling them to form their own groups. Moreover, the leaders’ ethnic identities also contributed to the formation of different splinter groups. Misuari, a Tausug from Sulu, drew his main forces from Sulu; Salamat from Maguindanao was supported by Maranaos and Maguindanaons; Kato from North Cotabato

<sup>149</sup> Adapted from: “Philippines: Mapping Militant Organizations,” Stanford University CISAC, 2013, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/maps/view/philippines>.

mainly operated in Central Mindanao; Janjalani, a Yakan, has drawn main members from Basilan and Sulu; and the Maute brothers had their group in Marawi City and Butig, Lanao del Sur, where they came from. The factionalization of ethnic groups has been a determinant for the creation of different insurgent groups and the locations where they generally operate (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Muslim Ethnic Groups in Mindanao<sup>150</sup>

In pursuit of their respective goals, the different Islamist groups have developed their own strategies and tactics in response to the government. After long years of armed confrontations with the Philippine security forces, the MNLF and the MILF have opted to enter peace negotiations with the government through different legal frameworks. Negotiations have covered the groups' different social issues and grievances such as: "ancestral domain, displaced and landless Bangsamoro, destruction of property, war victims,

<sup>150</sup> Source: "Philippines: Update on Complex Militant Attack in Marawi City, Mindanao."

human rights issues, social and cultural corruption, economic, and widespread poverty.”<sup>151</sup> Meanwhile, the BIFF, ASG, and the Maute/ISIS group have continued conducting terror attacks rather than negotiation in pursuit of their goals. The BIFF has continued to attack military targets and the Christian community, in particular, to undermine the peace negotiations between the government and the MILF.<sup>152</sup> The ASG, in addition to bombings and other terror activities, has resorted to kidnap for ransom and extortion to support its operations. Moreover, aside from the bloody Marawi Siege, the Maute/IS group has supported suicide bombings in collaboration with foreign fighters, inflicting more casualties in the province of Sulu.

In addition to local support, the different Islamist groups have external support coming from other Islamic countries and organizations in the Middle East. The MNLF has had the backing of the OIC and Libya in pursuing the peace process with the government. The MILF and the ASG, with its link to Al-Qaeda, have received financial support through various front Islamic organizations in the Philippines like the IRRO. This funding has facilitated training and terrorist operations such as bombings in different parts of the country.<sup>153</sup> Similarly, the BIFF and the Maute/IS group, aside from their local area support, have received support from the ISIS to finance their operations. This support enabled the Maute/IS group and factions of BIFF and ASG to conduct training and then launch the 2017 Marawi siege.

The creation of smaller factions has become a trend where they splinter frequently in pursuit of goals that will benefit certain leaders and ethnic groups. Factionalization among different Muslim ethnic groups shows their distinct cultural differences and disunity despite all of them being Muslims, which further hinders autonomy in Mindanao. This can be demonstrated when the MILF (composed mainly of members the Maguindanao ethnic group) broke away from the MNLF, who are mostly Tausug from Sulu.<sup>154</sup> Recently, ISIS-aligned ASG, the Maute group, and BIFF have also emerged as extremist groups, each having

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<sup>151</sup> Rasul, “Radicalization of Muslims in Mindanao,” 28.

<sup>152</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, “Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines,” 2020.

<sup>153</sup> Banlaoi, *Philippine Security in the Age of Terror*, 2009, 54.

<sup>154</sup> May, “History, Demography and Factionalism: Obstacles to Conflict Resolution through Autonomy in the Southern Philippines,” 281.

different goals that may sabotage and spoil the peace process. Furthermore, factionalization was seen during the plebiscites when not all Muslim communities were in favor of the autonomous region. For example, during the last 2019 BARMM plebiscite, the province of Sulu and other Muslim *barangays* voted against the new autonomous region.

### C. CONCLUSION

Although the different Islamist groups vary in their ideologies, motivations, and strategies, they share certain overarching political goals, except for the MNLF and MILF: to “expel the Christian majority from Mindanao and establish an autonomous Islamic state for Filipino Muslims.”<sup>155</sup> Though the groups splinter frequently, they occasionally converge in tactical alliance, especially against a common enemy (like the government), or if it concerns the Islamic faith.<sup>156</sup> The recent terrorist attacks—such as the 2017 Marawi Siege—clearly demonstrate the possibility that the various ethnic groups, despite their differences, can join forces against a common enemy. Notably, the Maute-ISIS-ASG coalition has transcended clans and ethnic factions bringing together Tausug, Maranao, and Maguindanao to fight government forces.<sup>157</sup> Furthermore, the recent suicide bombings demonstrate coordination among small autonomous groups and cells making bombing less predictable, more lethal, and more frequent, enabling the terrorist groups to inflict maximum casualties.<sup>158</sup> Islamist groups have evolved from insurgent groups to extremist groups engaging in violent tactics like suicide bombing that present new challenges to the Philippine government.<sup>159</sup> The evolution and adaptability of these groups have been proven through time; they were able to survive despite the government’s actions, requiring deep analysis of the government’s counterterrorism approaches and responses.

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<sup>155</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, “Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines,” 2020.

<sup>156</sup> Rhoades and Helmus.

<sup>157</sup> Hwang, “Relatives, Redemption, and Rice,” 24–26.

<sup>158</sup> Temby, “Cells, Factions and Suicide Operatives,” 115.

<sup>159</sup> Temby, 114.

## **IV. PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO TERRORISM**

The Philippines has been fighting the Moro insurgency for more than five decades, yet recent terrorist incidents and armed conflicts in Mindanao have shown that peace and stability are still out of reach. The 2017 Marawi Siege and the recent series of suicide bombings in the Sulu province are indicators that the government's strategy and approaches may have made political progress with the BARMM, but are not sufficient against the evolving terrorist threat in the Philippines. Despite the numerous and varied counterterrorism (CT) efforts of the government, different Islamist groups continue to emerge and conduct terrorist activities. Moreover, existing terrorist groups continue to evolve and form splinter groups that add challenges to the CT efforts. Although the government has been continuously implementing different CT strategies, they have fallen short in addressing the problem, requiring a closer examination of the effectiveness of these strategies in addressing the persistent and evolving challenge of terrorism. The various Philippine government responses include military and policing approaches, countering violent extremism (CVE) programs, improvement of pertinent laws and policies on terrorism, and security cooperation with other countries.

### **A. MILITARY APPROACH**

The counterterrorism strategies of the Philippines against terrorism and extremism have been characterized mainly by strong military responses.<sup>160</sup> These responses can be traced from the colonial period up to the different administrations of the Republic of the Philippines. In the process of colonizing Mindanao, the Spaniards with the support of Christian Filipino converts were resisted by the Muslims.<sup>161</sup> Likewise during the American occupation (1899–1946), just as with the Spaniards, the United States met with armed resistance from the Muslims, making the conflicts more extreme as the Muslims refused to be conquered. Since independence in 1946, due to political and economic deprivation, as

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<sup>160</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, "Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines."

<sup>161</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, "A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines," 106.

well as the marginalization and abuse of Muslims, violent confrontation and conflict between the Muslim population and the government has continued.

Different administrations of the Philippines generally have different military approaches and strategies when dealing with the many Islamist groups, demonstrating non-continuity of counterterrorism efforts. On September 21, 1972, for example, President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law to address the spread of communism and insurgency in the country.<sup>162</sup> In response to military rule, Muslims waged an armed struggle and demanded the Marcos administration to recognize a separate independent state of Mindanao.<sup>163</sup> From 1972 to 1976, casualties both from the military and the civilian side reached 120,000 and resulted in about one million internally displaced individuals.<sup>164</sup> Due to the recognition of the MNLF and diplomatic pressures from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Marcos was forced to open negotiations between the group and the government.<sup>165</sup> Although the peace talks with the MNLF continued under President Corazon Aquino, her administration faced the new secessionist MILF group in Central Mindanao. Trends of lethal incidents from the Philippine Army records, which track incidents that resulted in at least one death either from the government or enemy in the Philippines, have highlighted that during the Ramos Administration (1992–1998) terrorist and lethal incidents ebbed (see Figure 6). The low number of recorded lethal incidents, particularly in 1994–1998, can be attributed to the signing of the Final Peace Agreement between the MNLF and the Philippine government in 1996.

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<sup>162</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, 108.

<sup>163</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, 108.

<sup>164</sup> Bacani, “The Mindanao Peace Talks: Another Opportunity to Resolve the Moro Conflict in the Philippines.”

<sup>165</sup> Bacani.

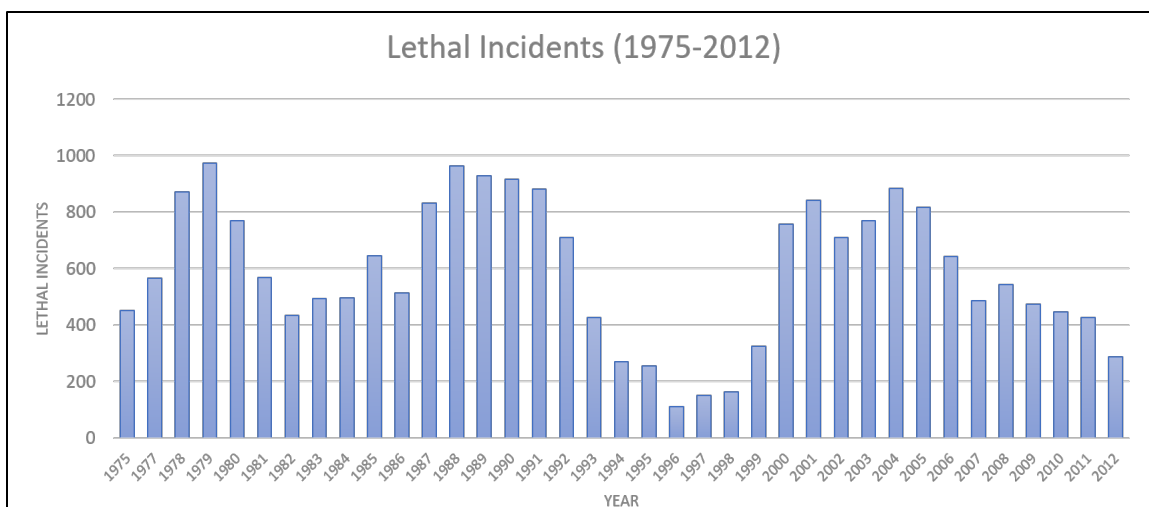


Figure 6. Trend in the Lethal Incidents from 1975–2012<sup>166</sup>

Nevertheless, due to continued attacks by the MILF and other extremist groups like the ASG, President Joseph Estrada declared a “Total War Policy” in 2000 against the Islamist groups, which resulted in the suspension of the peace talks and massive armed confrontations.<sup>167</sup> After President Estrada was ousted in 2001, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo declared a “unilateral ceasefire and initiated exploratory talks” with the MILF that resulted in the signing of the 2001 Tripoli Peace Agreement, signaling peace negotiations with the MILF.<sup>168</sup> With the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States and the stalemate in peace negotiations with the MILF, however, the Arroyo administration increased counterterrorism operations against different groups.<sup>169</sup> From 2000 to 2008, a resurgence in lethal incidents was largely brought about by an increase in both CT operations and terrorist activities (see Figure 7).

<sup>166</sup> Adapted from: Philippine Army, “Counterinsurgency by the Numbers” (Fort Bonifacio, Taguig City: Philippine Army, 2013), 12.

<sup>167</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 110.

<sup>168</sup> Bacani, “The Mindanao Peace Talks: Another Opportunity to Resolve the Moro Conflict in the Philippines.”

<sup>169</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 110.

The heavy-handed military approaches by these two administrations clearly did not prevent terrorists from conducting their operations; hence, new extremist groups have continued to emerge and terrorist attacks have persisted not only during the Aquino (2010–2016) administration but into the Duterte (2016–present) administration. Data from the START Global Terrorism Database indicates that terrorist attacks continue despite strong military approaches by the government (see Figure 7).

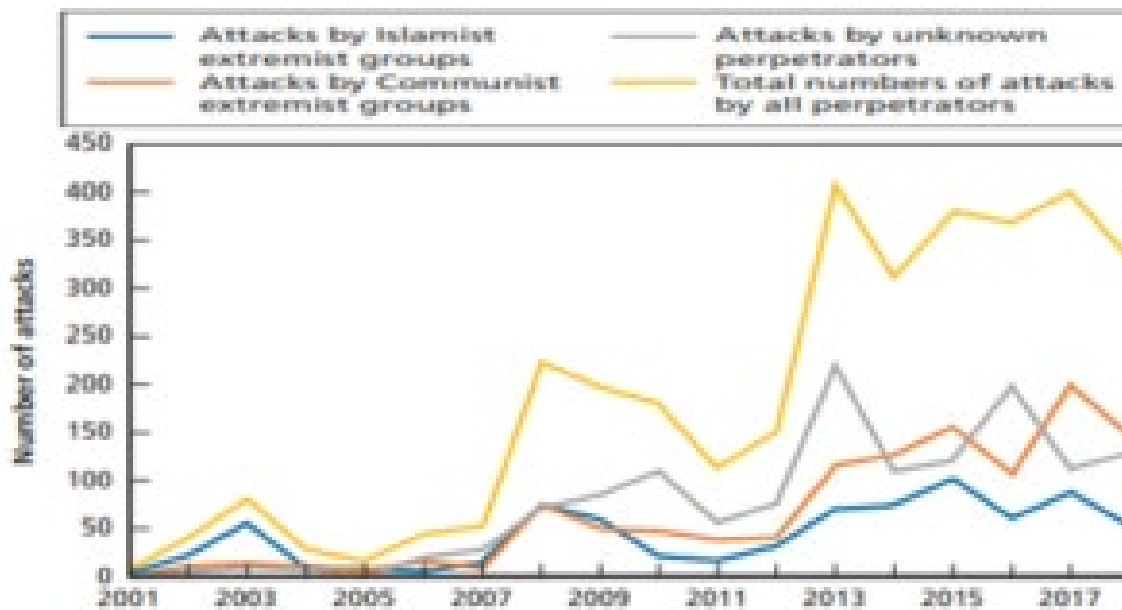


Figure 7. Terrorist Attacks in the Philippines by Perpetrator, 2001–2017<sup>170</sup>

The policy of unrelenting military operations against extremist groups continued during the Aquino administration. In 2013, the Misuari Breakaway Group (MBG) or the MNLF Rouge elements assaulted Zamboanga City for the reason that they were not consulted in the ongoing peace process, voiding their 1996 FPA with the government.<sup>171</sup> Meanwhile, the CT operations also continued against different groups targeting high value

<sup>170</sup> Adapted from Rhoades and Helmus, “Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines.”

<sup>171</sup> Quimpo, “Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace,” 74.



targets in different parts of Mindanao during the Aquino administration. In early January 2015, the approved Oplan Exodus targeting Malaysian explosives expert Zulkifli Bin Hir, alias Marwan, and Filipino bomb maker Ahmad Batabol Usman, resulted in the deaths of 44 PNP-SAF troopers.<sup>172</sup> The incident, often called the Mamasapano incident, has triggered strong anti-Muslim messages that have affected the ongoing peace process with the MILF.<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, the Mamasapano tragedy also raised doubts about the capabilities of security forces for future CT operations, which were again put to the test during the Marawi Siege in 2017 during the Duterte administration. The five-month-long crisis exposed the need for the military and the government to assess their readiness and strategies. Although the five-month heavy military approach was considered a tactical victory, others focused on the resulting wide destruction of infrastructure and the numerous deaths and the displacement of innocent civilians. The aftermath of the siege brought negative sentiments directed especially at the rehabilitation effort, which played into the militant narratives for recruiting future members and actions of extremist groups.<sup>174</sup> This was followed by suicide bombing attacks in Mindanao perpetrated by ASG and other IS affiliated groups a few months after the Marawi crisis.

## **B. COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM PROGRAMS**

The Philippine government has also continued to advocate different CVE programs aside from military approaches that aim to address the common drivers of terrorism. These programs, run by government agencies and NGOs, are focused on bringing basic government social services to vulnerable communities, thus addressing the grievances and causes of conflict being exploited by terrorist groups. The Philippine government's CVE strategy is part of an all-of-government approach in which government agencies and stakeholders plan and execute various CVE programs.

The most significant CVE program is the peace process between the government and the secessionist groups to end the conflict. This initiative started with the MNLF and

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<sup>172</sup> Quimpo, 74–75.

<sup>173</sup> Quimpo, 75.

<sup>174</sup> Temby, "Cells, Factions and Suicide Operatives," 117–19.

followed with the MILF. The peace talks with the MNLF that culminated in the signing of the FPA resulted in the creation of the ARMM and ended the conflict with the MNLF.<sup>175</sup> Likewise, in 2014, the government and the MILF signed the CAB, detailing the roadmap for peace deals with the MILF.<sup>176</sup> Importantly, the peace negotiations are the avenue through which the government can address some of the core grievances of the MILF and MNLF. Specifically, the peace talks with the two biggest groups resulted in the creation of an autonomous region for Muslim leaders to govern in coordination with the national government. In order to address and sustain the gains with these groups, the government launched capacity-building and development initiatives like the *Payapa at Masaganang Pamayanan* or the PAMANA program. The Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) runs the said program with the objectives to “reduce push factors for radicalization by improving governance on the national and local levels reducing poverty and improving delivery of basic social services and empowering communities to mediate conflicts and broker peace by strengthening social cohesion.”<sup>177</sup> PAMANA has launched programs that provide protection for those ex-fighters who returned to the fold of the law.<sup>178</sup>

Other significant CVEs include various social and educational initiatives with the goal to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the Moros and the whole community, including the Christian Filipinos. The purpose of these activities is to bring education and cooperation among Christians and Muslims about CVE programs.<sup>179</sup> These activities are usually done with the help of interfaith religious organizations like the Bishop-Ulama Conference and different NGOs.<sup>180</sup> Likewise, other programs are continuously being conducted and facilitated by the AFP to increase interactions among different sectors of the society. This

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<sup>175</sup> Husein, Narciso, and Risakotta, “A Historical Narrative and Critical Analysis of the Roots and Causes of Conflict in the Southern Philippines,” 108.

<sup>176</sup> Quimpo, “Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace,” 74.

<sup>177</sup> “About the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP),” Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://peace.gov.ph/opapp/>.

<sup>178</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, “Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines,” 2020.

<sup>179</sup> Rhoades and Helmus.

<sup>180</sup> Rhoades and Helmus.

highlights the role of the AFP as “an active partner of the LGUs, government line agencies, and other stakeholders in different peace initiatives, socio-economic programs, civic works, engineering projects, and other development-related activities.”<sup>181</sup> The Civil Military Operations (CMO) units of the Armed Forces of the Philippines runs various initiatives dedicated to stakeholder engagement, community awareness on CVE, and deradicalization efforts supporting the AFP campaign plan—Development Support and Security Plan “*Kapayapaan*.”<sup>182</sup> Nonetheless, despite the massive effort, time, and cost, CVE efforts have failed to eliminate terrorism in Mindanao.

The CVE programs, implemented by different government agencies and private and social organizations, lack synchronization and unification of efforts in addressing terrorism and extremism, especially in the Muslim communities. According to RAND, CVE is weakened as “poor coordination, lack of information sharing, and unclear division of responsibilities lead to duplicative or conflicting efforts when multiple agencies are engaged in counterterrorism and CVE efforts, as they are in the Philippines.”<sup>183</sup> Local government units and private institutions have their own programs in parallel to those of the AFP and PNP, creating redundancy of efforts and resources. Moreover, there are reports of corruption, where municipal and town officials use CVE funds for non-CVE related activities.<sup>184</sup> Moreover, the Philippine government CVE programs may have different messaging and interpretation of Muslim ideologies, intensifying tensions between Muslim and Christian communities.<sup>185</sup> Likewise, a 2013 perception survey conducted by the Asia Foundation showed that “trust level in the AFP is much lower in the ARMM provinces like Lanao del Sur with only 34% of respondents trust the military as compared

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<sup>181</sup> *Development Support and Security Plan-Kapayapaan 2017–2022* (Manila, Philippines: Department of National Defense, 2017), <https://www.afp.mil.ph/images/AFP-Development-Support-and--Security-Plan-Kapayapaan-2017-2022.pdf>.

<sup>182</sup> *Development Support and Security Plan-Kapayapaan 2017–2022*.”

<sup>183</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, “Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines.”

<sup>184</sup> Rhoades and Helmus.

<sup>185</sup> Joseph Franco, “Preventing Other ‘Marawis’ in the Southern Philippines,” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 5, no. 2 (May 2018): 367, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1002/app5.227>.

to 59.6% in the provinces outside the ARMM.”<sup>186</sup> This survey’s results indicated that government needs to evaluate the CVE programs and other CT strategies in addressing terrorism and violent extremism (see Figure 8).

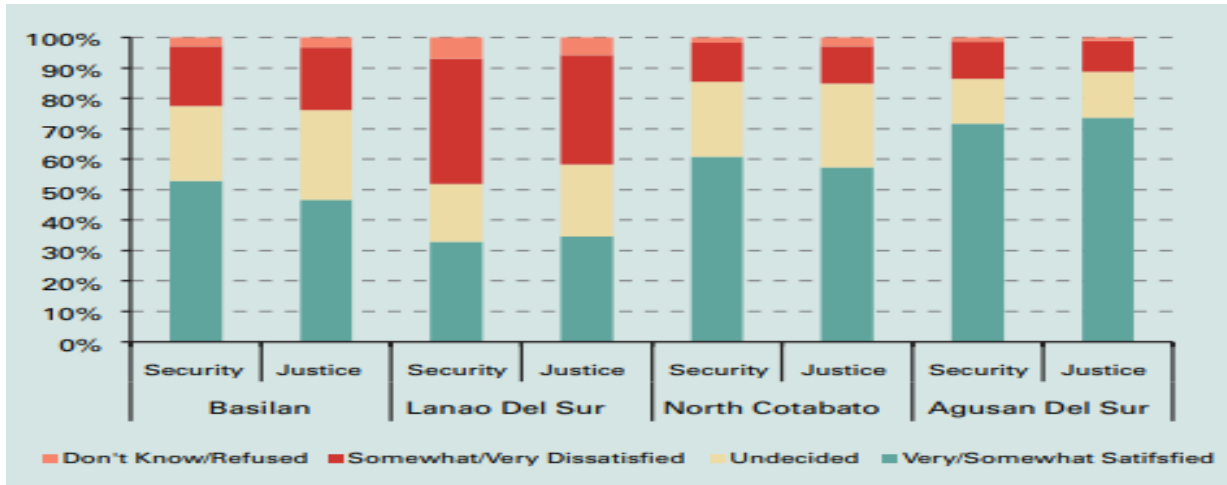


Figure 8. Satisfaction with National Government Provision of Security and Justice<sup>187</sup>

### C. COUNTERTERRORISM LAWS AND POLICIES

Aside from the military approaches and CVE efforts, the Philippine government formulated pertinent laws and actions to address the emerging threat of terrorism in the country. As Zachary Abuza mentions, “the impact of 9/11 on the Philippines and other Southeast Asian governments was enormous, forcing them to confront a radically changed security environment.”<sup>188</sup> The 9/11 incident prompted the Philippine government to come up with policies and agencies to address the new threat of terrorism. On September 24, 2001, the Inter-Agency Task Force against International Terrorism was created to

<sup>186</sup> Fermin Adriano and Thomas I. Parks, “The Contested Corners of Asia: The Case of Mindanao , Philippines” (San Francisco, CA: The Asia Foundation, 2013), <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/MindanaoCaseStudyFullReport.pdf>.

<sup>187</sup> Source: Adriano and Parks.

<sup>188</sup> Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), 2.

coordinate intelligence and CT operations targeting terrorist groups in the Philippines.<sup>189</sup> Likewise, on November 12, 2001, the Philippine Congress passed the Anti-Money Laundering Act to freeze the financial assets of terrorist organizations.<sup>190</sup> The government also drafted the National Plan to Address Terrorism and its Consequences, as part of the National Internal Security Plan (NISP) dated November 26, 2001, to proscribe and abhor violence and terrorism committed by any group in pursuit of any criminal or political goal.<sup>191</sup> The different policies and the increasing threat of terrorism subsequently led to laws that aim to prosecute terrorists and aid in CT operations.

The first law specifically addressing counterterrorism, which came six years after 9/11, is the Republic Act 9372, also known as the Human Security Act (HSA) of 2007, and is titled “An Act to Secure the State and Protect Our People from Terrorism.” The HSA “criminalizes and defines terrorism and other relevant terms, stipulates regulations for surveillance, and includes provisions for countering terrorist efforts.”<sup>192</sup> However, the effectiveness and the implementation of the law were questioned by various sectors. Senator Panfilo Lacson described the HSA of 2007 as a “dead letter law” that was rarely used.<sup>193</sup> In fact, despite the many terrorism incidents, only one person was convicted under the law. The law is problematic in its enforceability and includes many restrictions on law enforcement. For one, an acquittal of the accused will entitle him to damages in the amount of P 500,000 for every day that he has been detained, chargeable against the agency that sanctioned the filing of the case, a provision that inhibits filing new cases.<sup>194</sup> The law was not used to charge a terrorist until a judicial court convicted a Maute group member in

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<sup>189</sup> Rommel Banlaoi, *Counter Terrorism Measures in Southeast Asia: How Effective Are They?* (Philippines: Yuchengco Center, Dela Salle University, 2009), 78.

<sup>190</sup> “Anti-Money Laundering Act of 2001,” Pub. L. No. Republic Act No. 9160 (2002), <http://www.amlc.gov.ph/laws/money-laundering/2015-10-16-02-50-56/republic-act-9160>.

<sup>191</sup> Office of the President, “Philippine National Internal Security Plan,” *Official Gazette*, June 19, 2001), <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2001/06/19/executive-order-no-21-s-2001/>.

<sup>192</sup> “Human Security Act of 2007,” Pub. L. No. Republic Act 9372 (2007), [https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2007/ra\\_9372\\_2007.html](https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2007/ra_9372_2007.html).

<sup>193</sup> Marita Moaje, “Lacson, Esperon Cite Weaknesses of Human Security Act,” *Philippine News Agency* (June 2020): 1, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1106241>.

<sup>194</sup> Human Security Act of 2007.

November 2018.<sup>195</sup> Despite some perceived deficiencies of the law, it helped to form the Anti-Terrorism Council to ensure that the HSA is properly implemented.<sup>196</sup> Generally, the HSA has not been widely utilized as an instrument for the government and especially for law enforcement agencies to prosecute terrorists. As a result, the Duterte administration came up with its own law.

Senate Bill No. 2204, or the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2019, was enacted to replace the HSA. The new bill arguably corrected deficiencies by penalizing (a) any person who will travel or attempt to travel for the purpose of planning, preparing, or committing acts of terrorism; (b) any person who organizes or facilitates the travel; and (c) any person residing abroad who comes for training, planning, preparing to participate in terrorism or providing support.<sup>197</sup> At present, several sectors have filed petitions against the implementation of the law since it is potentially open to abuse by security forces. The effectiveness of this new law against terrorism cannot be certain since it is not fully implemented, awaiting a final decision by the Supreme Court.

#### **D. SECURITY COOPERATION WITH OTHER COUNTRIES**

The 9/11 terror attacks and the Bali bombing<sup>198</sup> prompted the Philippines to lay out a comprehensive set of strategies for addressing terrorism that includes security cooperation with other countries. Given incidents in Indonesia and the Philippines, Southeast Asia has been regarded as the “second front in the war on terror.”<sup>199</sup> The 9/11 and other terrorist attacks changed the perception of leaders in the Philippines and other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries so that terrorism was more

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<sup>195</sup> International Crisis Group, “The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro.”

<sup>196</sup> Human Security Act of 2007.

<sup>197</sup> “Anti-Terrorism Act of 2019,” Pub. L. No. Republic Act No. 11479 (2020), <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2020/07/03/republic-act-no-11479/>.

<sup>198</sup> The Bali bombings occurred on October 12, 2002, in the tourist district of Kuta on the island of Bali where 202 people were killed and 209 injured, mostly Australians and other nationalities. The terrorist attack was perpetrated by an Al-Qaeda affiliated group, the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) of Indonesia.

<sup>199</sup> Noel Morada, “The ASEAN Regional Forum and Counter-Terrorism,” in *Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific: The ASEAN Regional Forum* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 150, <https://www.routledge.com/Cooperative-Security-in-the-Asia-Pacific-The-ASEAN-Regional-Forum/Haacke-Morada/p/book/9780415691499>.

than a local issue but an actual threat in need of a regional security focus.<sup>200</sup> These events, which include persisting terrorist incidents in the Philippines, especially in Mindanao, prompted the government to seek security cooperation with ASEAN countries and other external partners.

Recognizing that terrorism spans international boundaries, the Philippines has fostered security cooperation with its ASEAN neighbors. Though this cooperation has weaknesses, it helps address terrorism in the region. ASEAN's early response to terrorism lacked a coordinated response, which derives from differences in individual states' levels of threat, resources, security forces capabilities, and other factors that limit collaborations among members.<sup>201</sup> Despite these initial weaknesses, ASEAN security cooperation has gradually improved, moving towards bilateral and regional cooperation to address the challenge. Security cooperation established among ASEAN members includes "intelligence sharing, joint anti-terrorism exercises, and combined operations."<sup>202</sup> Joint patrols within the region have also occurred as a result of regional security cooperation. Joint sea patrols include the Trilateral Maritime Patrol by Indonesia, Philippines, and Malaysia, addressing the sea lanes between these countries, which usually serve as traditional routes of terrorists and other transnational crime groups.<sup>203</sup> This cooperation has led to numerous arrests of JI network leaders and members, thwarting future terror attacks in the region.<sup>204</sup> The Philippines, together with other ASEAN countries, has gradually broadened the capability and the capacity of government and security forces to counter terrorism.

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<sup>200</sup> Jonathan Chow, "ASEAN Counterterrorism Cooperation Since 9/11," *Asian Survey* 45, no. 2 (March 2005): 304–5, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2005.45.2.302>.

<sup>201</sup> Ralf Emmers, "Comprehensive Security and Resilience in Southeast Asia: ASEAN's Approach to Terrorism," *The Pacific Review* 22, no. 2 (June 2009): 174, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512740902815300>.

<sup>202</sup> Andrew Chau, "Security Community and Southeast Asia: Australia, the U.S., and ASEAN's Counter-Terror Strategy," *Asian Survey* 48, no. 4 (August 2008): 634, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2008.48.4.626>.

<sup>203</sup> See Seng Tan, "Sending in the Cavalry: The Growing Militarization of Counterterrorism in Southeast Asia," *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (November 2018): 142, <https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/docview/2156327026?accountid=12702>.

<sup>204</sup> Chau, "Security Community and Southeast Asia," 634–35.

Aside from ASEAN's regional response to terrorism, assistance from external partners has contributed to a more focused effort addressing the causes of terrorism in the region. Assistance and aid packages from the United States have enhanced counterterrorism capabilities of the Philippines.<sup>205</sup> In February 2002, the Philippines and the United States launched the Balikatan exercises where Filipino soldiers received training and equipment on special operations, night fighting capability, maritime operations and CMO, all of which enhanced its CT capabilities.<sup>206</sup> Through this mutual relationship, with U.S. assistance, the Philippines' CT efforts have made significant progress against several terrorist groups, especially the ASG.<sup>207</sup> Other countries, such as those in the European Union (EU), Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, and South Korea have also helped the Philippines and other ASEAN countries in CT efforts.<sup>208</sup> Multilateral cooperation encompasses "joint exercises, information sharing, and enhancing force capabilities" to include humanitarian operations.<sup>209</sup> Western states have proved crucial in providing security assistance in the field of intelligence, training, funding, and capability build-up to achieve counterterrorism objectives.<sup>210</sup> The security assistance and cooperation between the Philippines and other countries fluctuates, but has greatly contributed in developing CT capabilities and overcoming the challenges of terrorism.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

Despite the efforts of the Philippine government, the threat of terrorism remains. This can be attributed to a number of factors, including a lack of continuity and coordination among government and private institutions. Counterterrorism strategies of succeeding administrations lack continuity since every administration has its own approach

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<sup>205</sup> Chow, "ASEAN Counterterrorism Cooperation Since 9/11," 312.

<sup>206</sup> Banlaoi, "Counter Terrorism Measures in Southeast Asia: How Effective Are They?," 79.

<sup>207</sup> Banlaoi, 79.

<sup>208</sup> Emmers, "Comprehensive Security and Resilience in Southeast Asia: ASEAN's Approach to Terrorism," 169-73.

<sup>209</sup> Tan, "Sending in the Cavalry: The Growing Militarization of Counterterrorism in Southeast Asia," 141.

<sup>210</sup> Chau, "Security Community and Southeast Asia: Australia, the U.S., and ASEAN's Counter-Terror Strategy," 637-46.



to CT and its own priorities in addressing the various Islamist groups in the country. The Ramos administration, as compared to other administrations, significantly contributed to peace efforts with the MNLF and MILF, while the subsequent Estrada administration implemented a different approach, the all-out-war policy, which eroded the gains of the peace process; hence, it led to armed conflict and violence in Mindanao. Moreover, the increase in CT operations under the administrations of Arroyo through Duterte has led to “ups and downs” in countering terrorism since each administration differs in its CT policies and strategies. The intensive military operations have prompted criticisms about this approach against the Muslim communities and has added to the radicalization of vulnerable individuals.<sup>211</sup> Likewise, CVE programs lack interagency coordination, which is a hindrance in addressing the drivers of terrorism. In addition, the 2007 HSA was seen ineffective and the new 2019 Anti-Terrorism Bill has yet to be tested in aiding government’s efforts in prosecuting terrorists. At the same time, security cooperation with other countries has helped the overall CT efforts of the Philippines, but it has contributed only to limited success due to differences in the CT policies, experience, and resources among nations. These various government responses, although gaining positive results in neutralizing terrorist activities and mitigating the drivers of radicalization, need continuous assessment where the political and security landscapes in Mindanao continue to evolve. This entails sustainable and comprehensive strategies and actions that will complement ongoing government responses to comprehensively address terrorism and bring peace in Mindanao.

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<sup>211</sup> Rhoades and Helmus, “Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines.”

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## V. CONCLUSION

The persistence of terrorism and violence in Mindanao remains a critical security challenge of the Philippines. This is despite the government's efforts to counter and eradicate the danger, especially in the southern Philippines. The Philippine government has been fighting Muslim insurgencies and terrorism for more than five decades and still falls short in addressing the problem. These challenges have resulted in the loss of many lives and damage to many properties, which greatly affects the stability and security of the country. Therefore, this thesis explored why the violence persists despite government counterterrorism efforts. Understanding the root causes and drivers of terrorism in Mindanao may help the government develop novel, comprehensive, and sustainable strategies and actions. This thesis concludes with recommendations to complement ongoing government responses to terrorism and ultimately bring peace in Mindanao.

### A. FINDINGS

The persisting threat of terrorism and violence in Mindanao can be attributed to different factors. These factors developed over time and have contributed to the present security and political landscape, driving persistent terrorism. The following paragraphs summarize the different findings generated by this thesis.

#### 1. **Terrorism and Armed Conflicts in Mindanao Are Multifaceted and Deeply Rooted**

Understanding the history of Moros and their four centuries of struggle reveals how events have shaped their identity and how conflicts and violence have evolved over time. It was their struggle against successive foreign colonizers and later their perceived marginalization caused by Filipino Christians that made Muslims feel that their culture, values, tradition, and religion were being threatened. The rapid migrations of Christians from Luzon and the Visayas to the south also paved the way in creating gaps and tensions between Christians and Muslims. During the post-colonial period, Christians took control of the land, economy, and government in Mindanao, which economically and politically deprived the Muslims who were formerly the majority habitants and leaders in Mindanao.

In addition, widespread poverty and economic hardships, lack of education and opportunity, and other grievances have been ongoing themes in the narratives of the Moro cause. These grievances paved the way to the formation of various Islamist groups aiming for the establishment of an independent Islamic state led and governed by the Moro people.

## **2. Islamist Secessionist Groups Continue to Form Splinter Groups**

Factionalization among Islamist groups continues to occur due to differences in leadership, motivations, and ethnic populations among Muslim community in Mindanao. After the alleged *Jabidah* massacre, which became the focal point of Moro separatists, the rise of Islamist groups started with the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front. Not long after, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Abu Sayyaf Group split from the MNLF because of differences in leadership, motivations, and ideologies. This factionalization also gave way to the establishment of more radical groups like the BIFF and the Maute/Islamic State groups, which all splintered from the MILF. Factionalization among various Muslim ethnic groups and the “break-away” cycle show their distinct cultural differences, interests, and disunity despite all of them being Muslims fighting for the independence and separation of Mindanao. Factionalization further hinders peace negotiations and autonomy in Mindanao, thus hampering development and stability in the region.

## **3. Terrorist Groups Continue to Adapt to the Changing Political and Security Landscape**

Islamist groups continue to exhibit their adaptability and resilience despite the government’s continuous effort to address terrorism in the country. They have evolved from insurgent groups into extremist groups that engage in violent tactics such as kidnapping for ransom and bombings, giving additional challenges to the security forces. Although the MNLF and the MILF engaged with the government in peace negotiations and secured limited autonomy for Mindanao, sporadic attacks from other groups have continued to inflict casualties and damage properties, evading counterterrorism operations and legal prosecution. The 2007 Human Security Act was not effective in aiding CT approaches and prosecuting terrorists. Likewise, the new Anti-Terror Bill has yet to be

tested after legal battles in the Supreme Court. Moreover, the terrorists' resiliency can also be attributed to the education and experience of their leaders and members, as well as the financial, logistical, and training support they receive from other international terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

#### **4. The Emergence of the ISIS-affiliated Groups and the 2017 Marawi Siege Demonstrated New Ideologies, Tactics, and Challenges**

ISIS has greatly influenced and unified different Islamist groups in Mindanao. The 2017 Marawi Siege showed that despite factionalization, with ISIS ideology and influence, it is possible for different ethnic groups, with the aid of foreign terrorist fighters, to work together. This unification was exhibited during the Marawi Siege where different Islamist groups held the city for five months using IEDs, sniper fire, hostage taking, and urban fighting tactics, which were also new to most of the security forces. With its attack in the city, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) faced new challenges in fighting terrorists on urban terrain as compared to the usual jungle environment. Furthermore, ISIS influence also paved the way for the adoption of another new tactic: suicide bombs utilizing both Moro Muslims and foreign nationals to attack civilians and military targets. These new tactics and evolving ideologies have been more difficult for the security forces to detect, monitor, and address.

#### **5. The Government Response Falls Short in Addressing Terrorism in Mindanao**

The government has continued to address but has failed to resolve the persistence of terrorism despite numerous CT policies and efforts. One reason for the lack of success is that successive administrations of the Philippines have adopted divergent and sometime contradictory approaches to counterterrorism as well as different priorities in addressing Islamist groups in the country. Moreover, the various CT and CVE programs have also lacked synchronization and unification of effort among the security sector, non-government organizations (NGOs), and other government agencies in the implementation of these initiatives. The government response lacks inter-agency coordination. In addition, anti-terrorism policies and pertinent laws are not enough to prosecute terrorists due to

loopholes in the laws and policies. Furthermore, security cooperation with other countries has only contributed limited success due to differences in counterterrorism policies, resources, and experience. Although these government responses have gained positive results in neutralizing some terrorists and mitigating the drivers of radicalization, they need to be continuously assessed as conditions in the region continue to evolve.

## **B. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Despite the government's efforts to counter terrorism, it has failed to address specific challenges in the southern Philippines. The complex and multifaceted factors affecting Mindanao enable various terrorists and Islamist groups to continue to operate and conduct atrocities against government forces and civilian communities. Terror groups continue to evolve and become more brutal, resorting to tactics like suicide bombings, which are difficult to prevent. At the same time, the government response continues to focus on military actions rather than on non-military programs in addressing the problem. These ongoing responses have proved to be "insufficient to mitigate" the armed conflict and violence in Mindanao.<sup>212</sup> Although military actions are important to the CT strategy, military solutions alone will not address the root causes and grievances of Muslim insurgency and terrorism in Mindanao. A holistic and sustainable approach is needed to complement the ongoing government responses and comprehensively address terrorism to bring peace in Mindanao.

Therefore, this thesis offers three recommendations to address persistent terrorism and to eventually bring about development and peace in Mindanao.

### **1. Create a Multi-agency National Task Force to Synchronize and Supervise Government CT and Antiterrorism Efforts**

The Philippine government should create a multi-agency national task force that is solely dedicated to addressing terrorism in Mindanao. This task force must involve the various Islamist groups. This is to ensure that all counterterrorism efforts are synchronized and complement each other. This "super-body" government agency can be compared to

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<sup>212</sup> Rhoades and Helmus.

the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC)<sup>213</sup> whose goal is to end the threat of communism by utilizing the “whole-of-nation approach in attaining inclusive and sustainable peace.”<sup>214</sup> With its institutionalized and comprehensive approach, the NTF-ELCAC was able, between 2016 and 2019, to encourage thousands of fighters to surrender and cleared 822 *barangays* (districts) from New People’s Army influence. These areas will also benefit from the Barangay Development Programs.<sup>215</sup> Projects will include farm-to-market roads, electrification, classrooms, water systems, communal irrigations, housing, and other livelihood programs to address the root causes of the conflict.

In this way, a similar task force will enable the government to synchronize and implement a whole-of-nation approach in addressing the causes of terrorism and violence in Mindanao. The government will also be able to work in rebuilding Marawi and other war-torn areas in Mindanao, educating the youth on Islamic teaching focused on countering violent ideologies and extremism, and promoting dialogue and peace talks with different Islamist and terrorist groups. Furthermore, the government should promote good governance, equipping the local Muslim leaders with the necessary skills and tools to run their political affairs. Having a task force dedicated to addressing terrorism will enable the government to partner with the Moro people to holistically address the root causes of terrorism and the grievances of the Moro people.

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<sup>213</sup> The National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) is a national task force formed December 2018 through the Executive Order (EO) 70 signed by President Duterte. It aimed to holistically end armed conflicts and their causes, involving the CPP-NPA-NDF that have been hounding the country for 52 years.

<sup>214</sup> “About the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC),” National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.ntfelcac.org/>.

<sup>215</sup> “Government Says Ready to Roll Out ₱16.4-B Projects for NPA-Free Barangays,” CNN Philippines, March 6, 2021, <https://www.cnn.ph/news/2021/3/6/barangay-development-projects-NTF-ELCAC-NPA.html>.

## **2. Upgrade and Sustain CT Capabilities of the AFP and Other Security Forces**

Terrorist attacks like the 2013 Zamboanga Siege and the 2017 Marawi siege, where the actions and responses of the AFP ultimately defeated the enemy, offer lessons and opportunities for the government to improve its CT capabilities, especially in joint operations and urban fighting. This upgrade will entail organizational development, recruitment of personnel, sustained logistical support, enhanced equipment, dedicated lift assets, and realistic trainings. The new AFP Special Operations Command (AFPSOCOM), created to integrate and provide command and control among special units of the AFP, should actively promote jointness and inter-operability operations and trainings among special units and military assets of the Army, Navy and Air Force. These upgrades and sustainment should also include better intelligence fusion and better coordination among security forces, with the AFP as the lead unit in counterterrorism operations. Having improved coordination and distinction of roles and responsibilities among security forces will enhance the conduct of joint operations, especially in a dense urban environment where coordination is most needed. In addition, the AFP and other security forces like the Philippine National Police should be equipped with the proper knowledge and skills in implementing the different CVE programs to effectively address radicalization and other non-military issues in the region. These pro-active capabilities will enable prepare the security forces to be more capable in addressing the evolving security challenges in Mindanao.

## **3. Enhance Security Cooperation with Other Countries**

Despite the limitations and differences in implementing counterterrorism efforts, the Philippines should continue to pursue stronger security cooperation with other countries. The U.S. security assistance packages, especially during its global war on terror, have helped improve the AFP's counterterrorism capabilities. U.S. assistance resulted in the creation of CT units and capabilities that have contributed to numerous successes in countering terrorism. Likewise, the Trilateral Maritime Patrol by Indonesia, Philippines, and Malaysia, although limited, has also contributed to the CT efforts of the country.



While the U.S. government and others continue to support these programs, however, the disastrous effects of the Marawi siege, as well as suicide bombings, require enhanced security cooperation between the Philippines and to other countries. Such enhancements may include more advanced CT equipment and robust intelligence support package, information sharing, conduct of joint CT trainings, and strengthened border and maritime patrols with ASEAN nations. In addition, aside from military equipment and trainings, the U.S. government and other partner nations may consider non-military initiatives like supporting educational opportunities, livelihood projects, infrastructure projects, and other socioeconomic programs to affected areas in Mindanao. These efforts will greatly help to complement the government's effort to address the socioeconomic problems in the region.

### **C. CONCLUSION**

Addressing the persistent threat of terrorism and violence in Mindanao requires the full participation of all sectors of the community. This job is not for the military alone. It requires a whole-of-nation approach including, especially, the people of Mindanao. This effort entails comprehensive and sustainable approaches complementing the present counterterrorism efforts of the government. If not addressed, terrorism will continue to pose a critical challenge to the Philippine government that will threaten to destabilize the country. Terrorist groups will continue to employ extreme tactics like suicide bombings in pursuing their political goals. No amount of neutralization of terrorists will be effective if the government fails to address the root causes of this problem, especially the grievances of the Moro people. The Philippine government should continue to pursue comprehensive and sustainable approaches that will enable it to address the root causes of the problems, which are largely based on socioeconomic and political issues. A comprehensive and holistic approach acceptable to all will mitigate and address the threats of terrorism and can eventually bring stability, development, and most importantly peace in Mindanao.

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