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Radicalization as a Pathway to Asymmetric Warfare: A Historical Study of the Abu Sayyaf Group in Southern Philippines

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Abstract

The relationship between radicalization and asymmetric warfare remains insufficiently explained in historically grounded analyses of non-state armed groups. This study examines radicalization as a pathway to asymmetric warfare through a historical analysis of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Southern Philippines. Employing a qualitative literature-based approach, the study draws on academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, and official documents addressing the Moro conflict, ASG's historical development, radicalization, terrorism, and asymmetric warfare. The data were examined through qualitative content analysis and historical process tracing, with Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism serving as the primary analytical framework. The findings demonstrate that ASG's development was embedded in a protracted historical context characterized by colonial legacies, political marginalization, socioeconomic disparities, land disputes, and perceived injustice. These conditions facilitated the emergence of radical narratives that were subsequently reinforced by Salafi-jihadist ideology, organizational recruitment, military training, and transnational connections. Radicalization also

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coincided with organizational and strategic transformation, as reflected in the increasing use of kidnapping, hostage-taking, bombing, ship hijacking, and criminal financing. Amid substantial military and organizational asymmetries between ASG and the Philippine state, these unconventional forms of violence provided the group with alternative means of confrontation. The study concludes that radicalization does not automatically produce asymmetric warfare; rather, it constitutes a pathway through which grievances are ideologically reframed, violence is legitimized, organizational capacity is developed, and unconventional strategies become viable for a weaker non-state actor. These findings contribute a historically grounded explanation of how radicalization processes can enable non-state armed groups to adopt asymmetric modes of warfare.

Keywords: Abu Sayyaf Group; Radicalization; Asymmetric Warfare; Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism; Southern Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism has become one of the major challenges in contemporary security studies, particularly following the transformation of the international security environment after the Cold War. The end of the Cold War was accompanied by a shift in the character of security threats, from predominantly inter-state conflicts toward non-traditional threats involving non-state actors, including terrorist organizations (Filler, 2002). The development of information technology, globalization, and increased global mobility has further facilitated the dissemination of radical ideologies and the formation of transnational networks that enable extremist organizations to expand their influence beyond local conflicts (Ugarte, 2008). In Southeast Asia, these dynamics are particularly significant because the region's geographical characteristics, strategic maritime routes, and ethnic and religious diversity provide opportunities for militant organizations to establish operational networks and mobilize support (Gerdes et al., 2014).

One organization that illustrates the intersection between radicalization, terrorism, and asymmetric conflict is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which has historically operated primarily in Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi in the Southern Philippines (Schuck, 2021). Unlike earlier Moro separatist movements that primarily emphasized political autonomy and independence, ASG developed a strategy that increasingly relied on violent and coercive activities, including kidnapping, hostage-taking, bombings, and ship hijacking (Singh &

Singh, 2019). These tactics reflect the characteristics of a weaker non-state actor confronting a state possessing substantially greater military and institutional capabilities. Rather than engaging the Philippine government through conventional military confrontation, ASG has relied on mobility, surprise, coercion, psychological effects, and attacks that exploit vulnerabilities within the state's security environment (Ramakrishna, 2018). This pattern illustrates the strategic logic of asymmetric warfare, in which actors with unequal capabilities employ unconventional methods to compensate for their material disadvantages (Jones, 2018).

However, the emergence of ASG cannot be understood solely through the framework of religious extremism or contemporary terrorism. Its development was rooted in a much longer history of political marginalization and conflict involving the Moro Muslim community in the Southern Philippines (Maxwell, 2025). Resistance against political integration and the expansion of external authority can be traced to the colonial period, beginning with Spanish rule in the sixteenth century (Droogan et al., 2018). Following the Spanish-American War in 1898, American colonial administration continued to exercise political and territorial control over the Sulu Archipelago and Mindanao. After Philippine independence in 1946, unresolved political and socioeconomic tensions persisted, while government policies involving migration, political centralization, and land redistribution contributed to the marginalization experienced by parts of the Moro community (Indrawan & Supriyadi, 2025).

These historical grievances contributed to the emergence of organized resistance movements. In the early 1970s, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), under Nur Misuari, emerged with the objective of pursuing Bangsamoro independence. Subsequent differences in political orientation and strategic approaches contributed to the emergence of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which placed greater emphasis on Islamic identity within its political struggle. Against this broader background of prolonged conflict and political grievances, Abdulrajak Janjalani founded the Abu Sayyaf Group in the early 1990s. Janjalani's experience in the Afghan war exposed him to Salafi-jihadist ideas, which subsequently became incorporated into ASG's ideological orientation alongside elements of Moro nationalism (Shabirah et al., 2024). The emergence of ASG therefore represented not merely a continuation of local separatist resistance, but a transformation in the ideological justification and repertoire of violence employed by a non-state actor (Sahrasad et al., 2018).

This transformation became increasingly visible as ASG adopted more radical forms of violence and developed organizational strategies designed to survive sustained pressure from the Philippine state. The group's activities expanded beyond political resistance toward kidnapping for ransom, arms smuggling, human trafficking, ship hijacking, and other criminal activities that provided financial resources for organizational survival (Primayanti et al., 2020). At the same time, relationships with transnational terrorist networks, particularly Al-Qaeda, provided access to training, financial resources, and broader jihadist narratives (Maulidita et al., 2023). The emergence of ISIS subsequently created another ideological and organizational pathway, with several ASG factions declaring allegiance to the organization. These developments demonstrate that the evolution of ASG involved an interaction between ideological radicalization, organizational adaptation, transnational networks, and the need to overcome material and military disadvantages (Firmansyah & Wibowo, 2024).

The relationship between radicalization and the development of asymmetric strategies is therefore important to examine. Radicalization does not necessarily lead automatically to terrorism or asymmetric warfare (AsSakir, 2017). Rather, it can provide an ideological and social process through which grievances are transformed into narratives that legitimize violence, strengthen collective identity, and reduce moral constraints against attacking perceived enemies (Raisha et al., 2024). When combined with organizational pressures, resource limitations, military asymmetry, and opportunities provided by local and transnational networks, radicalization can facilitate the adoption of unconventional strategies by non-state actors (Lestari, 2017). In this context, asymmetric warfare should not be understood merely as the use of unconventional weapons or guerrilla tactics, but as a strategic response to an imbalance in capabilities between a non-state organization and a significantly stronger state actor.

Despite extensive scholarship on the Abu Sayyaf Group, previous studies have largely focused on its ideological origins, terrorist activities, criminal networks, transnational connections, and relationship with broader jihadist movements. Less attention has been devoted to examining the historical process through which radicalization contributed to the transformation of ASG's patterns of violence and its adoption of asymmetric strategies. This gap is particularly important because the trajectory of ASG demonstrates that ideological transformation cannot be separated from organizational adaptation and strategic responses to state power. Examining these dimensions together can provide a more comprehensive

understanding of how a relatively weak non-state actor develops alternative methods of confrontation when conventional military engagement is not viable.

Therefore, this study examines radicalization as a historical pathway toward asymmetric warfare through the case of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines. By tracing the development of ASG from its emergence within the broader Moro conflict, through its ideological transformation and organizational fragmentation, to its adoption of terrorism, kidnapping, and other unconventional forms of violence, this study seeks to explain how radicalization interacted with historical grievances, organizational dynamics, and power asymmetry. The study argues that radicalization should be understood not as an isolated cause of terrorism, but as part of a broader process through which grievances are ideologically reframed, violence is legitimized, and asymmetric strategies become increasingly acceptable and strategically useful for a weaker non-state actor.

Conceptual Framework

Radicalization

Radicalization is a concept used to explain the process of change in the perspectives of individuals or groups that leads to the use of violence as an instrument to achieve ideological, political, and religious goals (Ramakrishna, 2018). In security studies, radicalization can be understood as a gradual process influenced by the interaction of psychological, political, social, economic, and environmental factors (Maxwell, 2025). Therefore, radicalization is not solely the result of religious doctrine but rather an accumulation of various conditions that drive an individual or group to legitimize acts of violence.

Radicalization is also the result of the interaction between perceptions of injustice, discrimination, group identity, and the formation of narratives that justify the use of violence. The process of radicalization itself generally begins when an individual or group perceives a condition as a form of injustice (Rahmadhani et al., 2025). That perception then develops into a belief that the perceived injustice is caused by certain parties, leading those parties to be perceived as immoral, and the use of violence against them is considered a morally justified action (Agastia & Perwita, 2017). In addition to being influenced by individual or group perceptions, radicalization also develops through structural factors such as political marginalization, identity conflicts, and economic disparities, so that communities

experiencing prolonged conflict are likely to pass on narratives of injustice, thereby strengthening group solidarity networks and sustained radicalization (Perwita et al., 2022). This shows that radicalization cannot be separated from the historical and social aspects of society.

Terrorism

In general, terrorism is a form of violence deliberately directed at non-combatant targets (civilians) with the aim of creating fear that can influence political policies and/or societal behavior (Jones, 2018). Terrorism itself has four main characteristics. The first is that terrorist actions are carried out with ideological, political, or religious motives. The second is that terrorists use violence as a means of communication to convey messages to a wider society. The third is that the targets of terrorist attacks are often chosen to create a significant psychological impact through the instillation of fear. And the last is that terrorist acts are generally carried out by non-state actors who have a certain organizational structure, so terrorism can also be understood as criminality and a political strategy to achieve specific goals through the use of violence (Shabirah et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, the development of modern terrorism has gone through four main waves: the anarchist wave, the anti-colonial wave, the new left wave, and the religious wave (Rapoport, 2013). In its development, studies related to terrorism also show a shift in the character of modern terrorist organizations. Terrorist organizations or groups no longer rely solely on ideological support, but also build funding sources through criminal activities such as robbery, smuggling, human trafficking, and kidnapping. This phenomenon can be understood as a crime-terror nexus, which is a reciprocal relationship between terrorist organizations and transnational organized crime (Saragih et al., 2016). Thus, terrorism today cannot be understood as a crime solely based on religious or political motivations. On the contrary, terrorism has evolved into a multidimensional threat influenced by social, identity, economic factors, and organizational interests in maintaining existence and achieving their goals.

The Staircase to Terrorism

The staircase to terrorism theory is an analytical framework that explains how individuals or groups can gradually move from a state of dissatisfaction within their social environment to involvement in terrorist actions (Octavian et al., 2020). Unlike approaches

that emphasize only the religious or psychological factors of individuals or groups, the staircase to terrorism emphasizes that radicalization is a social process influenced by experiences of injustice, political marginalization, and changes in group identity (Moghaddam, 2005). The process of radicalization itself is likened to someone climbing a multi-tiered staircase to the top of a building, where the higher one climbs the staircase, the less likely they are to return to their original condition (Scheffran, 2023). At each level, an individual or group is faced with choices influenced by personal or collective experiences, social environment, and the narratives that develop in their surroundings. Not everyone on the ground floor will reach the top of the stairs, but those who continue to move to the next levels will have a greater chance of accepting that the use of violence is considered a legitimate action.

The staircase to terrorism has six levels, namely ground floor, first floor, second floor, third floor, fourth floor, and fifth floor (Maxwell, 2025). At the ground floor level, both individuals and groups perceive social, political, or economic injustices. At this level, they feel treated unfairly, experience continuous discrimination, and lose access to resources (Maxwell, 2025). On the first floor, an individual or group begins to seek the causes of the injustice they are experiencing, and when political mechanisms are deemed to have failed to provide solutions and accommodate their interests, frustration develops into anger toward the institution/party deemed responsible (Maxwell, 2025).

Then on the second floor, both individuals and groups begin to identify the party that should be blamed (displacement of aggression). The process is marked by the emergence of "us versus them" narratives, which create a clear division between the victim group and other groups as oppressors, thereby strengthening the collective identity based on shared experiences of perceived injustice and suffering (Maxwell, 2025). The narrative becomes an important foundation for extremist organizations in gaining legitimacy and recruiting new members later on. Next, the third floor is the phase when individuals or groups begin to accept an ideology that justifies the use of violence. At this stage, the organization provides a framework of thought or doctrine that explains that violence is a legitimate option to combat injustice and hegemony (Maxwell, 2025).

On the fourth floor, both individuals and groups begin to actively join the organization and undergo a process of indoctrination. Loyalty to the organization is built through the formation of a collective identity, restriction of external information, and military

training, making it increasingly difficult for members of the organization to accept views that contradict the organization's beliefs (brainwash) (Maxwell, 2025). Finally, the fifth floor is the level where individuals or groups have fully accepted the use of violence as an instrument of their resistance. At this stage, terrorist actions such as kidnapping, hostage-taking, murder, and bombing are no longer considered moral violations. Rather, it is seen as a form of devotion to the organization's goals and interests, so the process of dehumanization toward the opponent makes the victims affected by the terror attacks no longer perceived as individuals with the right to live, but as representations of the enemy that must be fought against for the organization's survival (Maxwell, 2025).

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative research method using a literature study approach with a historical analysis framework. A qualitative approach was selected because this study aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the historical emergence and radicalization process of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Southern Philippines, as well as the transformation of its patterns of violence toward asymmetric strategies. Qualitative research enables researchers to interpret social phenomena through descriptive and contextual data and to identify the relationships among historical, political, ideological, social, and economic factors that shape a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

The data were obtained from secondary sources consisting of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research institution reports, and official documents relevant to the history of ASG, the Moro conflict, radicalization, terrorism, and asymmetric warfare. The literature was selected based on its relevance to the research topic and its ability to provide historical and conceptual information concerning the development of ASG. The use of multiple sources allows the researcher to compare information from different perspectives and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the historical development of the group (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The overall research process is illustrated in Figure 1.

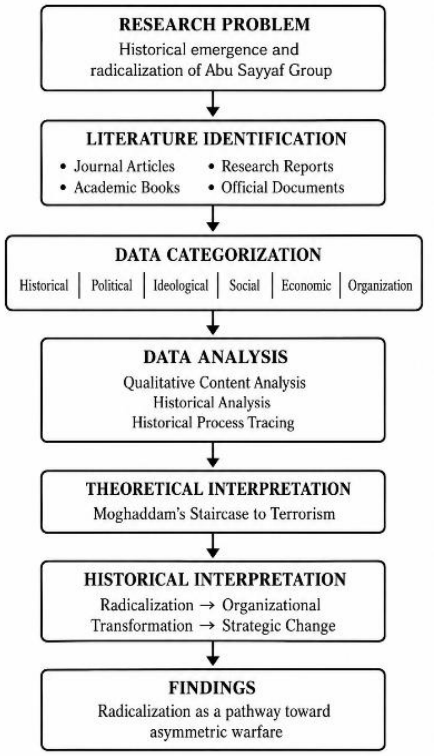


Figure 1. Research Method Flow

Source: Authors' analysis

Following the research flow, the collected literature was first categorized according to the major dimensions relevant to the development of ASG, namely historical grievances, political marginalization, ideological transformation, social conditions, economic factors, organizational development, and patterns of violence. This categorization was intended to prevent the analysis from treating radicalization as an isolated religious or ideological phenomenon. Instead, radicalization was examined as a process that developed within a broader historical and sociopolitical context.

The categorized information was subsequently analyzed using qualitative content analysis, historical analysis, and historical process tracing (Aprila et al., 2023, 2026; Aprila & Dwiharyadi, 2026). Qualitative content analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns within the selected literature, while historical analysis was employed to reconstruct the development of ASG across different periods. Historical process tracing was then used to examine the sequence and relationship between historical grievances, radicalization, ideological legitimation of violence, organizational transformation, and changes in the group's strategies of violence.

The Staircase to Terrorism proposed by Maxwell (2025) was used as the primary analytical framework for interpreting the radicalization process. The framework enables the

study to examine how perceptions of injustice and marginalization can develop into the acceptance and legitimization of violence. In the context of ASG, the framework is used to connect the historical conditions of the Moro conflict with the ideological transformation and increasing acceptance of violent action described in the literature. This is consistent with the conceptual framework in which radicalization is understood as a gradual process influenced by injustice, political marginalization, identity, and narratives that legitimize violence.

The final stage of analysis focuses on the transformation of ASG's patterns of violence and organizational strategies. Particular attention is given to activities such as kidnapping, hostage-taking, bombings, ship hijacking, criminal financing, and transnational terrorist linkages. These developments are interpreted in relation to the unequal capabilities between ASG and the Philippine state. Thus, asymmetric warfare is positioned in this study as the strategic dimension of the analysis, while radicalization provides the ideological and social process through which the use of violence becomes increasingly legitimized. This analytical sequence allows the study to move beyond simply describing ASG's history and instead explain the historical relationship between radicalization, organizational transformation, and the adoption of asymmetric strategies.

This approach is expected to provide a systematic explanation of how ASG evolved from a movement emerging within the broader Moro conflict into a non-state actor employing unconventional forms of violence to confront a militarily superior state. The analysis therefore connects the historical context, radicalization process, organizational adaptation, and strategic behavior of ASG within a single analytical framework.

RESULTS

Historical Roots of the Conflict in Southern Philippines

The literature reviewed in this study indicates that the emergence of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) was preceded by a prolonged history of political, social, and territorial conflict in the Southern Philippines. The historical development of the region cannot be separated from the existence of Islamic political institutions, particularly the Sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao, which had developed before the arrival of European colonial powers. The spread of Islam from approximately the fourteenth century contributed to the formation of

a distinct religious, social, and political identity among the Moro population (Singh & Singh, 2019).

The historical trajectory of the Southern Philippines changed substantially following Spanish colonial expansion in the sixteenth century. Muslim communities in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago resisted Spanish attempts to expand political authority and Catholic influence. The prolonged confrontation between Spanish authorities and the Islamic sultanates subsequently developed into the Moro Wars (Ramakrishna, 2018). The literature identifies this period as an important historical context in the development of collective memories concerning territorial sovereignty, religious identity, and resistance among the Moro population.

Following the Spanish-American War in 1898, the Southern Philippines came under American colonial administration. Although American colonial governance emphasized administration, infrastructure, education, and bureaucracy, it also introduced new systems of land ownership and political administration that altered existing customary arrangements. Changes in land administration contributed to disputes concerning communal land ownership and became part of the broader agrarian problems that continued after Philippine independence (Lestari, 2017).

After independence in 1946, political and socioeconomic tensions in the Southern Philippines remained unresolved. The government's transmigration policies contributed to demographic changes in Mindanao, while competition over land, economic resources, and political representation became increasingly significant. The literature also identifies disparities in infrastructure, education, and public services between different areas as factors contributing to perceptions of marginalization among Moro communities (Droogan et al., 2018).

The Jabidah Incident in 1968 subsequently became an important symbol of perceived injustice. Although historical accounts continue to debate several aspects of the incident, its political consequences contributed to increasing distrust toward the Philippine government and became associated with the subsequent mobilization of Bangsamoro nationalist movements (Raisha et al., 2024). The formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and later the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) reflected the institutionalization of organized resistance within this broader historical context (Hu, 2023).

The main historical factors identified from the reviewed literature are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Historical Development of Conflict in Southern Philippines

Period	Major Historical Development	Main Conditions Identified	Consequences for Moro Community
Pre-colonial period	Development of the Sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao	Islamic political and social institutions	Formation of distinct Moro identity
16th–19th century	Spanish colonial expansion and Moro Wars	Colonial domination and religious confrontation	Development of resistance and collective memory
1898–1946	American colonial administration	Political integration and changes in land administration	Disruption of customary land systems
1946–1960s	Philippine national integration policies	Transmigration, land competition, and political marginalization	Demographic and socioeconomic transformation
1968	Jabidah Incident	Perceived state violence and political injustice	Increasing distrust toward the government
1970s–1980s	Emergence of MNLF and MILF	Organized Bangsamoro resistance	Institutionalization of armed political struggle
Early 1990s	Emergence of ASG	Ideological and strategic differentiation from previous movements	Development of a more radical form of armed struggle

The historical sequence presented in Table 1 demonstrates that the emergence of ASG occurred within an already established conflict environment rather than emerging as an isolated phenomenon. The literature shows a gradual accumulation of political grievances, changes in territorial and demographic conditions, and the development of collective Moro identity. The formation of MNLF and MILF subsequently provided an organizational context for armed resistance, while the emergence of ASG represented a further development in the character of the conflict. These findings establish the historical background necessary for examining the subsequent ideological and organizational transformation of ASG.

Establishment and Early Development of the Abu Sayyaf Group

The reviewed literature shows that ASG emerged in the early 1990s amid the continuing Bangsamoro conflict and the development of competing approaches within Moro resistance movements. Before ASG was established, the MNLF had become a major organization representing the Bangsamoro struggle, while the MILF emerged from internal

disagreements within the MNLF regarding political orientation and the organization's approach toward negotiations with the Philippine government (Abuza, 2003; Abuza, 2006).

The emergence of Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani was central to the formation of ASG. Janjalani had received Islamic education in several countries in the Middle East and subsequently participated in the Afghan War against the Soviet Union. His experience in Afghanistan exposed him to Salafi-jihadist ideas, military training, and transnational networks associated with the broader jihadist movement (Filler, 2002).

Upon returning to the Southern Philippines, Janjalani criticized the strategies of the MNLF and MILF, particularly their willingness to engage in political negotiations. His perspective increasingly framed the conflict in Southern Philippines as part of a broader jihadist struggle rather than solely as a local political struggle for autonomy or independence (Abuza, 2005). Janjalani subsequently established Al-Harakatul Al-Islamiyyah, more commonly known as the Abu Sayyaf Group (Temaja et al., 2023).

The literature therefore identifies a significant change in the orientation of the struggle following the emergence of ASG. Whereas MNLF and MILF were primarily associated with political objectives concerning Bangsamoro independence or autonomy, ASG incorporated a stronger Salafi-jihadist orientation and emphasized armed struggle. This ideological differentiation subsequently influenced the group's organizational development and patterns of violence.

Evolution of Radicalization within the Abu Sayyaf Group

The literature indicates that the radicalization of ASG developed through the interaction of historical grievances, political marginalization, ideological influence, organizational processes, and transnational connections. The process was not limited to the adoption of religious ideas but involved a broader transformation in how the group interpreted the conflict and justified the use of violence.

At the initial stage, historical grievances associated with colonialism, political marginalization, social discrimination, land disputes, and socioeconomic disparities provided the broader context in which perceptions of injustice developed. The literature indicates that these grievances contributed to distrust toward the Philippine government and strengthened narratives concerning the failure of political mechanisms to address the interests of the Moro community.

The subsequent development of ASG introduced a more radical interpretation of these grievances. Janjalani's experience in Afghanistan and exposure to Salafi-jihadist ideology contributed to the framing of the local conflict within a broader transnational jihadist narrative. The group increasingly differentiated itself from organizations such as the MNLF and MILF, which continued to engage in political and negotiated approaches to the conflict (Chao, 2023).

The radicalization process was subsequently accompanied by organizational development. The literature identifies recruitment, military training, indoctrination, local kinship networks, and geographical conditions in Basilan and the Sulu Archipelago as important elements in the group's organizational development (Maxwell, 2025). At the same time, relationships with international terrorist networks, particularly Al-Qaeda, provided additional ideological, financial, and operational connections. Later, several ASG factions also pledged allegiance to ISIS, demonstrating the continuing influence of transnational jihadist networks on portions of the organization. The progression of radicalization identified in the literature is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Evolution of Radicalization within the Abu Sayyaf Group

Stage	Main Characteristics	Evidence Identified in Literature
Historical grievances	Perceptions of political and socioeconomic injustice	Colonial legacy, marginalization, land disputes, and demographic changes
Political frustration	Increasing distrust toward the Philippine government	Perceived failure of political mechanisms and negotiations
Ideological transformation	Adoption of Salafi-jihadist interpretations	Janjalani's experience in Afghanistan and exposure to transnational jihadist networks
Organizational consolidation	Recruitment, training, indoctrination, and group loyalty	Local networks, kinship ties, and military training
Legitimation of violence	Violence increasingly incorporated into organizational strategy	Kidnapping, hostage-taking, bombing, and killing
Transnationalization	Expansion of external ideological and operational connections	Relationships with Al-Qaeda and later ISIS

Source: Authors' analysis.

Table 2 shows that radicalization developed alongside organizational transformation. The process involved a movement from the interpretation of historical grievances toward increasingly radical ideological narratives and, subsequently, the institutionalization of those narratives within the organization. The literature also indicates that the development of ASG

cannot be separated from transnational jihadist networks, which contributed to the group's ideological orientation and organizational capabilities.

Transformation of Violence and Strategic Behavior

The reviewed literature further indicates that the development of ASG was accompanied by changes in its patterns of violence. The group increasingly relied on kidnapping, hostage-taking, bombings, killings, ship hijacking, and criminal activities to obtain financial resources. These activities distinguished ASG from earlier Moro organizations whose primary objectives and methods were more closely associated with political or territorial struggle.

The group's organizational fragmentation following sustained military pressure also contributed to changes in its sources of financing and operational behavior. Some factions became increasingly dependent on kidnapping for ransom, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and other criminal activities to sustain organizational operations (Maxwell, 2025). The interaction between ideological objectives and criminal sources of financing demonstrates the multidimensional character of ASG's organizational development.

The literature also identifies the geographical characteristics of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi as relevant to ASG's operational environment. The group's activities in these areas were facilitated by local networks, mobility, and difficult terrain, which created challenges for state security forces (Hu, 2023). In addition, transnational connections provided access to broader ideological and organizational resources.

Taken together, these findings indicate that ASG's development involved not only ideological radicalization but also organizational and strategic adaptation. The transformation of its patterns of violence provides the empirical basis for the subsequent discussion concerning how radicalization was associated with the adoption of asymmetric strategies against a substantially stronger state actor.

DISCUSSION

Radicalization through Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism

The findings indicate that the radicalization of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) developed through a gradual process rather than emerging solely from the adoption of religious ideology. The historical conditions identified in the results, including colonial

legacies, political marginalization, demographic changes, land disputes, socioeconomic disparities, and prolonged conflict, provided the broader environment in which perceptions of injustice developed. This finding is consistent with Maxwell (2025) Staircase to Terrorism, which conceptualizes radicalization as a progressive psychological and social process in which individuals or groups move from perceptions of injustice toward the acceptance and eventual implementation of violence.

The first level of Maxwell's framework, the ground floor, can be associated with the historical grievances experienced by the Moro community. The findings demonstrate that these grievances accumulated over a long period through colonial encounters, changes in land ownership, demographic transformation, political marginalization, and perceived socioeconomic inequality. These conditions do not automatically produce terrorism, but they can create a social environment in which perceptions of injustice become embedded in collective narratives. This interpretation is consistent with the conceptual framework of the study, which emphasizes that radicalization is shaped by interactions between political, social, economic, and environmental factors rather than by religious doctrine alone.

The transition to the first and second floors can be observed in the increasing frustration toward political institutions and the identification of the Philippine government as a primary source of perceived injustice. The Jabidah Incident and the subsequent development of Bangsamoro resistance movements contributed to narratives in which the state was increasingly perceived as unwilling or unable to address the interests of the Moro population. Within such a context, the emergence of an "us versus them" distinction became increasingly important. Maxwell (2025) argues that this displacement of aggression allows individuals or groups to identify an external actor as responsible for their grievances. In the case of ASG, this process was reinforced by narratives that framed the Philippine government as an oppressor and portrayed political negotiation as an inadequate or compromised approach to achieving the objectives of the struggle.

The third floor represents a critical transformation because grievances begin to acquire an ideological framework that legitimizes violence. The findings indicate that Abdurajak Janjalani's experience in Afghanistan and his exposure to Salafi-jihadist networks contributed to the transformation of the local Moro struggle into a broader ideological narrative. Rather than interpreting the conflict exclusively through the lens of political autonomy or Bangsamoro nationalism, ASG increasingly framed the struggle as part of a

broader jihadist confrontation. This ideological transformation provided a justification for violence and distinguished ASG from earlier organizations such as the MNLF and MILF, which maintained stronger orientations toward political and negotiated solutions.

The fourth floor can subsequently be associated with organizational consolidation through recruitment, military training, indoctrination, and the development of collective loyalty. The findings show that ASG utilized local kinship networks and geographical conditions in Basilan and the Sulu Archipelago to sustain its organizational presence. The development of organizational identity was important because radical ideas needed to be transformed from individual or ideological beliefs into collective organizational practices. At this stage, violence was not merely an abstract ideological possibility but became incorporated into the identity and operational structure of the organization.

The fifth floor represents the stage at which violence becomes fully legitimized as an instrument for achieving organizational objectives. The findings identify kidnapping, hostage-taking, bombing, and killing as increasingly central elements of ASG's operational behavior. These actions indicate that the organization had moved beyond the ideological acceptance of violence toward its systematic application. The progression therefore demonstrates the usefulness of Moghaddam's framework in explaining the transformation from historical grievance to the legitimization of violence within ASG.However, the findings also indicate that Moghaddam's framework alone does not fully explain the subsequent development of ASG's strategic behavior. The Staircase to Terrorism primarily explains the process through which violence becomes psychologically and socially acceptable, whereas it does not directly explain why a radicalized non-state organization adopts particular forms of violence when confronting a militarily superior state. This limitation creates the analytical space for examining the relationship between radicalization and asymmetric warfare.

From Radicalization to Organizational Transformation

The findings demonstrate that radicalization within ASG was accompanied by a broader transformation of the organization's structure and operational capacity. Radicalization therefore should not be understood only as a change in ideological beliefs. In the case of ASG, ideological transformation was accompanied by changes in recruitment, training, organizational loyalty, financing, transnational relationships, and patterns of violence.

One important mechanism was the transformation of local grievances into an organizational ideology. The historical grievances experienced by the Moro community provided narratives that could be incorporated into ASG's mobilization strategy. Janjalani's transnational jihadist experience subsequently provided an ideological framework through which these local grievances could be reinterpreted. The combination of local grievances and transnational ideology allowed ASG to present its struggle as simultaneously rooted in the historical experience of the Moro community and connected to a broader global jihadist movement.

This transformation also differentiated ASG from previous Moro resistance organizations. The MNLF and MILF primarily pursued political objectives concerning Bangsamoro independence or autonomy and, despite their use of armed struggle, maintained greater engagement with political negotiation. ASG's emergence represented a more radical organizational orientation in which violence itself became a central instrument rather than merely a means of supporting political negotiations. The difference is therefore not simply ideological but also organizational and strategic.

The findings further indicate that organizational transformation was influenced by ASG's interaction with external networks. Relationships with Al-Qaeda provided ideological, financial, training, and operational connections, while the later affiliation of several factions with ISIS demonstrated the continuing importance of transnational jihadist networks. These relationships expanded the ideological and operational repertoire available to ASG. At the same time, organizational fragmentation and sustained pressure from the Philippine military encouraged some factions to rely increasingly on criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and ship hijacking as sources of organizational financing (Maxwell, 2025).

This development illustrates the importance of the crime-terror nexus identified in the conceptual framework. Ideological objectives and organizational survival became interconnected. Criminal activities were not necessarily separate from the group's ideological objectives because they could provide resources necessary to maintain personnel, logistics, weapons, and operational activities. Consequently, ASG's organizational transformation involved the simultaneous development of ideological commitment, coercive capacity, financial mechanisms, and transnational connections.

The relationship between radicalization and organizational transformation can therefore be understood as mutually reinforcing. Radicalization provided the ideological justification for violence, while organizational structures provided the mechanisms through which that violence could be implemented. Once violence became embedded within recruitment, training, financing, and organizational identity, the use of violence became increasingly institutionalized. This transformation created the foundation for ASG to develop strategic responses to the significant disparity in military capabilities between the group and the Philippine state.

Radicalization as a Pathway to Asymmetric Warfare

The central finding of this study is that radicalization can function as a pathway toward asymmetric warfare when ideological transformation is combined with organizational adaptation and conditions of power asymmetry. The findings do not suggest that radicalization automatically produces asymmetric warfare. Rather, radicalization creates an ideological environment in which violence can be legitimized, while organizational and strategic conditions determine how that violence is subsequently employed.

The Philippine state possesses substantially greater conventional military, institutional, and material capabilities than ASG. Under such conditions, direct conventional confrontation would impose significant disadvantages on a relatively small non-state organization. ASG's development of unconventional methods of violence can therefore be interpreted as a strategic adaptation to this imbalance. Instead of seeking to defeat the state through conventional military capabilities, the group developed methods that allowed it to exploit vulnerabilities and generate political and psychological effects disproportionate to its material capabilities.

Kidnapping and hostage-taking provide an important illustration of this strategic adaptation. These activities require considerably fewer material resources than conventional military operations while potentially generating substantial political, economic, and psychological pressure. Similarly, bombings allow a relatively weak organization to produce fear and attract public attention without possessing the military capabilities necessary for sustained territorial confrontation. Ship hijacking and attacks conducted within maritime environments also exploit the geographical characteristics of the Southern Philippines,

particularly the extensive island and coastal environment surrounding Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi.

The strategic value of these methods lies not simply in their physical effects but also in their ability to generate psychological and political consequences. Terrorist violence can communicate organizational strength even when the perpetrator possesses limited conventional capabilities. By creating uncertainty and fear, a non-state organization can challenge the state's ability to provide security and potentially attract public and international attention. This characteristic is consistent with the conceptualization of terrorism as violence designed to generate psychological effects beyond the immediate victims (AsSakir, 2017).

The geographical environment also strengthened the strategic value of asymmetric methods. The findings indicate that ASG operated within areas characterized by extensive islands, difficult terrain, local networks, and maritime spaces. These conditions provided opportunities for mobility, concealment, and evasion from state security forces (Lestari, 2017). Consequently, geographical conditions interacted with organizational capabilities to make unconventional strategies more feasible than conventional military confrontation.

The development of criminal financing further strengthened this asymmetric capacity. Kidnapping for ransom, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and other illicit activities provided resources that could be used to sustain organizational operations despite limited conventional economic and military resources. The interaction between terrorism and criminal activity therefore contributed to the organizational resilience of ASG. This finding reinforces the concept of the crime-terror nexus, in which terrorist organizations may employ criminal activities to obtain the resources necessary to sustain ideological and operational objectives (Maxwell, 2025).

The relationship between radicalization and asymmetric warfare can therefore be understood through a sequential process. Historical grievances provided the initial context for perceptions of injustice; radicalization transformed these perceptions into ideological narratives that legitimized violence; organizational development transformed ideological commitment into operational capacity; and power asymmetry encouraged the organization to rely on unconventional methods of confrontation. The resulting strategy was not based on the expectation of defeating the Philippine state through conventional military superiority, but on exploiting vulnerabilities through mobility, surprise, coercion, psychological pressure, and attacks requiring relatively limited resources. This sequence can be summarized as:

Historical grievances → Radicalization → Legitimation of violence → Organizational transformation → Strategic adaptation → Asymmetric warfare

The significance of this finding is that it places radicalization within a broader strategic process. Radicalization should therefore not be treated solely as an ideological or psychological phenomenon. In the case of ASG, it also contributed to a transformation in the organization's understanding of how violence could be used against a materially superior opponent. The ideological legitimization of violence expanded the range of actions considered acceptable, while organizational adaptation and resource constraints shaped which forms of violence were strategically feasible.

Nevertheless, the case of ASG also demonstrates that radicalization alone cannot explain asymmetric warfare. The emergence of asymmetric strategies resulted from the interaction between ideology, organizational capacity, geographical conditions, resource constraints, transnational networks, and the military imbalance between ASG and the Philippine state. Radicalization can therefore be understood as a pathway rather than a deterministic cause. It provides the ideological conditions for the acceptance of violence, while the strategic environment determines how that violence is translated into operational behavior.

Overall, the findings support the argument that the transformation of ASG from a movement emerging within the Bangsamoro conflict into a terrorist organization employing unconventional strategies was a cumulative historical process. The Staircase to Terrorism helps explain the progression toward the legitimization of violence, while the analysis of organizational and strategic transformation explains how that legitimized violence was subsequently translated into asymmetric forms of confrontation. The combination of these perspectives provides a more comprehensive explanation of why ASG relied on unconventional strategies when confronting a significantly stronger state actor.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the emergence and development of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) cannot be separated from the long historical trajectory of conflict in the Southern Philippines. Historical grievances, political marginalization, socioeconomic disparities, and perceptions of injustice provided the broader context in which radicalization developed. Through Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism, the findings indicate that this process

progressed from perceptions of injustice and political frustration toward ideological transformation, organizational consolidation, and the legitimation of violence. Radicalization therefore functioned not as an isolated cause of terrorism, but as part of a broader process that contributed to the transformation of ASG's organizational identity and patterns of violence. Under conditions of significant power asymmetry with the Philippine state, this transformation subsequently facilitated the adoption of unconventional strategies, including kidnapping, hostage-taking, bombing, and other forms of coercive violence. Thus, radicalization can be understood as a pathway through which ideological transformation and organizational adaptation contributed to the emergence of asymmetric warfare.

This study has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on secondary sources obtained through a literature study, meaning that the analysis depends on the availability, quality, and interpretation of existing academic publications, institutional reports, books, and official documents. The study therefore does not incorporate primary data such as interviews with former ASG members, local communities, government officials, military personnel, or other actors directly involved in the conflict. Second, the historical nature of the study makes it difficult to establish direct causal relationships between radicalization and specific strategic decisions made by ASG. The findings should therefore be interpreted as an analytical reconstruction of historical processes rather than as evidence of a deterministic causal relationship. In addition, the fragmented nature of ASG and the differences among its factions may limit the generalization of the findings to the organization as a whole.

Future research should therefore complement the literature-based approach with primary qualitative data, particularly interviews with relevant stakeholders and experts on the Moro conflict and counterterrorism. Further studies could also conduct comparative analysis between ASG and other non-state armed organizations in Southeast Asia to examine whether similar pathways from radicalization to asymmetric warfare can be identified across different historical and political contexts. In addition, future research could examine how changes in counterterrorism policies, territorial control, transnational terrorist networks, and digital radicalization influence the strategic adaptation of non-state actors. Such research would strengthen understanding of the relationship between radicalization and asymmetric warfare while providing a broader basis for developing historically and contextually sensitive approaches to preventing violent extremism.

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