

**Salam Sa Bangsamoro:
An Exploration of Violence Mitigation Strategies against Salafi-Jihadist
Groups in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in the
Philippines**

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Abbreviations

AGILA Haven	Anak na may Ginintuang Layunin upang Hintuan Ang Violent Extremism Ngayon
ARMM	Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao
BIFF	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters
BRAVE	Broad Reform Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE) Program
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
E-CLIP	Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program
JTF	Joint Task Force
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
NICA	National Intelligence Coordinating Agency
OPAPRU	Office of the Presidential Advisor in Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity
PAMANA	PAyapa at MASaganang PamayaNAn Program
PAVE for Peace	Program Against Violent Extremism (PAVE) for Peace
Project TuGoN	Project Tulong ng Gobyernong Nagmamalasakit
TFBL	Task Force Balik Loob

Maps



Figure 1. A Map Showing the Provinces in the Bangsamoro Region (TUBS, 2021b)¹²³

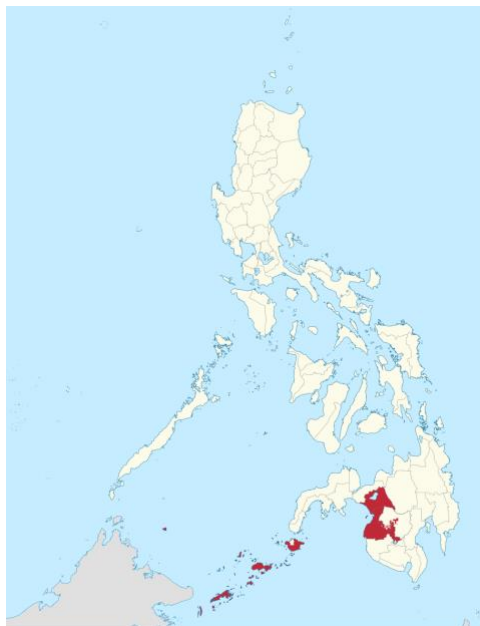


Figure 2. A Map Showing the Location of the Bangsamoro Region in the Philippines (TUBS, 2021a)

¹ This map includes Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi

² For the purposes of this paper, Maguindanao del Norte and Maguindanao Del Sur will be broadly referred to as Maguindanao thereafter. Since their separation was so recent, no evidential differences exist between the two provinces.

³ There are also 63 barangays in North Cotabato that are part of the BARMM region. However, since this paper focuses on cross-provincial comparison, it will not discuss these 63 barangays.

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In the most intensive moments in this competitive institution, it is difficult always to understand the magnitude of the normal.

Fifteen years ago, I was in our childhood home's garage, looking at the gardens of Yale University through my small television screen. I was endlessly intrigued by the lives of those who study at this institution, believing that this fantasy was so distant and unreachable. I was a 7-year-old girl who went to a small elementary school in the Philippines and dreamed as far as the university 20 minutes away from my home. I can only look at the last 15 years with pure astonishment and extreme gratitude for my parents and my ancestors who came before them; I can only stand at cross campus, the halls of Sterling Memorial Library, and Rosenkranz Hall because of them.

To *Papa*, the architect of this dream. You opened the doors of the world for me. You dreamed of realities that I could not have even conceived of. You believed from the beginning that I could be the first in the family to attend college at an Ivy League institution— let alone Yale University. When you came to Manila from a little town in Visayas, you promised your Daddy and Mommy that you would not return until you were sure you made them proud. In every foreign place, New Haven, Jerusalem, Madrid, amidst every uncertainty and discomfort, language barrier, and hidden illness, I forge on with the silent promise that I make to you and Mama that I will not come back to Manila until I am sure I have made you proud.

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To my incredible advisors David Simon and Maria J. Hierro, it has been an absolute dream to work with you. Your expertise, your care, your insight throughout these two years have sustained and educated me in meaningful ways that I will carry with me outside the walls of Rosenkranz Hall.

This project would not have been possible without my interviewees, who so courageously shared their insights with me. Their hopes for the Philippines inspires me amidst the oscillating atmospheres uncertainty and achievement that has characterized the Bangsamoro peace project.

Sa Pilipinas kong mahal, saan mang sulok ng mundo ako mapapad, ikaw ang laman ng aking puso. Sa mga hirap at ginhawa, pinipili kitang mahal in araw-araw at binibigay ko ang buong sarili ko sa serbisyo sa'yo. Ang lahat ng paghihirap ko at ang lahat ng pagwawagi ko ay para sa iyo. Ang aking munting hangarin ang kapayapaan at kaunlaran mo sa loob ng aking buhay.

Abstract

Since the 9/11 attacks, the global political arena has fixated on eliminating Salafi-Jihadist groups. Though much international attention focuses on the military failures in the Middle East, the Philippines presents compelling success stories on the elimination of Salafi-Jihadist influence in the country. However, even in the Philippines, different geographical areas diverge in their success in eradicating the Salafi-Jihadist threat. Drawing from over two years of primary source data collection and 4.5 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this study explores the factors that lead to the success or failure of violence mitigation strategies against Salafi-Jihadist groups in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in the Philippines. The study finds that the duration of program implementation, intra-provincial political disputes, strength of political will in program implementation, national-regional power allocations, and illicit activity significantly affect the success of such programs in the BARMM region.

Key Words: violence mitigation, counterterrorism, Philippines, Bangsamoro, Salafi-Jihadism, peacebuilding

Foreword: An 8-Year-Project

No topic has occupied my academic consciousness like the question of *Salam sa Bangsamoro*. In "Peacebuilding in the Muslim World," S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana defines *salam* or the Islamic concept of peace "as a process in which human beings strive to establish foundations for interacting with each other—and with nature—in harmony and to institute just social, economic, and political structures where they can flourish and fulfill their potential" (Orellana, 2015).

The pursuit of my entire personal efforts towards the realization of *salam* in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao and the broader Mindanao island in the Philippines has defined my academic work in the last eight years. A *salam* not defined by the pure elimination of fundamentalist leaders but the pursuit of a comprehensive peace characterized by just and resilient infrastructures.

This thesis has been an official two-year process, but it should be viewed as a culmination of an 8-year effort. I have taken a peacebuilding class every semester at Yale, continually studying *salam* in the Bangsamoro in all its dimensions. My Yale Law School Multidisciplinary Academic Program Human Rights Capstone focused on creating socio-economic development initiatives for Internally Displaced Peoples in Marawi City. My International Baccalaureate Global Politics research investigated the interactions of government units and civil society organizations in humanitarian efforts during the Marawi Siege.

Each of these experiences have shaped this academic project. Though this project may seem culminative in nature, I look forward to the lifetime project of continual pursuit in the hopes that the Philippines can finally realize enduring and resilient *salam*.

“We have fought, sacrificed, and struggled for a government that would be reflective of our system of life and a governance that is suitable and acceptable to the Bangsamoro. Now, we must make that government work — one that is promoted, responsive, and protective of the general welfare of the Bangsamoro, indigenous peoples, and settler communities.”

*— Al Haj Murad Ebrahim
Interim Chief Minister of the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority*

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I. Introduction: Over-militarization of Violence Mitigation

The attacks against the citizens of the United States on September 11, 2001, ushered in an era of profound interest in Salafi-Jihadism in political science and international relations. For much of the early 2000s, the emergence of Salafi-Jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State was the prominent geopolitical security conundrum in the global political arena.⁴⁵ The sheer terror evoked by Salafi-Jihadist groups because of their activities (i.e., kidnappings, beheadings, and bombings) propelled them to the center of the political zeitgeist for much of the 21st century. The destructive and graphic nature of these activities urged policymakers and researchers worldwide to expeditiously find these groups' motivations and create strategies for their pacification. The expeditiousness of this research resulted in a lack of historicization in the study of Salafi-Jihadist groups; researchers and policymakers viewed their attacks as isolated events instead of analyzing historical factors that might have influenced the groups' motivations.

Since Al Qaeda and the Islamic State emerged from the Middle East, political science researchers have focused their efforts on the region, particularly Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria (Davis et al., 2017). The lack of historicization and an outsized focus on the Middle East created an overmilitarized approach against Salafi-Jihadi groups in the early 2000s (Milburn, 2021). The political unrest in Iraq and the chaotic troop withdrawal in Afghanistan have

⁴ Al Qaeda is abbreviated to A.Q., and Islamic State is abbreviated to I.S.

⁵ Though both groups are Salafi-Jihadist, A.Q. and I.S. have different objectives. A.Q. targets the “far-enemy,” the United States, while I.S. focuses on the establishment of an Islamic caliphate around the world.

shown that despite significant investment in militarized strategies and focused efforts on the Middle East, these approaches remain unsuccessful.

In pursuit of true Salafi-Jihadism, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State exported their efforts to the Philippines, where a secessionist movement has propagated for decades due to persisting structural violence against the Moro people. Christian colonial actors and national governments systematically disenfranchised the Moro people through the denial of economic opportunities and the forced settler colonization of Christian populations in Mindanao, particularly in the Bangsamoro area. Multiple flashpoints, especially the Jabidah Massacre, encouraged Moro politicians and intellectuals to lead secessionist efforts. These efforts eventually turned into armed violent struggles. These secessionist movements splintered into factions with varying ideological motivations. Al-Qaeda targeted the most fundamentalist movements to wage jihad against the United States and its allies; Islamic State sought to use these groups to establish an Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia.⁶

In the last five years, the influence of Salafi-Jihadist groups has significantly declined. The membership of the most prominent Salafi-Jihadist group in the Philippines, the Abu Sayyaf Group, has dropped from over 2000 to 5 (National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, *ASG Manpower & Firearms* 2024). Despite causing the latest explosion of violence in the Philippines during the 2017 Marawi Siege, the Maute group now only has 24 members (National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, *DI-MAUTE Manpower & Firearms* 2024). The Former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Cirilito Sobejana, mentioned that similar to the Middle East, the Philippines also pursued an overmilitarized approach against Salafi-Jihadist groups in the 1990s to early 2000s (Suansing, *General Cirilito*

⁶ See Section 3 for a full explanation of the historical context.

Sobejana 2022).⁷ The recurring failure of pure manhunt and beheading tactics to eliminate these groups compelled the government to reassess its violence mitigation strategy (Abuza, 2018). After implementing a more socio-economic development approach to violence mitigation, Salafi-Jihadist group membership declined (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022).

An overall decrease in Salafi-Jihadist influence is evident in the Philippines, but in the provinces within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), the peace outcomes differ. The Sulu and Tawi-Tawi provinces have no members from Salafi-Jihadist groups, while the two Maguindanao provinces have 122 members (National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, *BIFF Manpower & Firearms* 2024). No research has investigated the particular non-militarized violence mitigation strategies in these provinces and why these similar strategies lead to different peace outcomes.

This paper addresses these gaps in the literature by investigating the diverging peace outcomes within the provinces in the BARMM region of the Philippines. Specifically, the paper seeks to address the following question: "What factors affect the success of violence mitigation strategies in areas infiltrated by Salafi-Jihadist groups in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao?" The paper carefully analyzes development-oriented violence mitigation strategies across provinces to address this question. From this analysis, the paper finds that the duration of strategy implementation, intra-provincial political disputes, strength of political will in program implementation, national-regional power struggles, and illicit drug activity have all influenced peace outcomes against Salafi-Jihadist groups in the BARMM region.

⁷ Interview Cirilito Sobejana, December 11, 2022. Each citation from any interviews will henceforth be notated in the same template (Suansing, *Interview Name Year*) in accordance with APA standards.

Aside from addressing the literature gaps investigated by the research question, the paper introduces original qualitative research from the upper echelons of the Philippine armed forces, a critical actor for violence mitigation against Salafi-Jihadist groups in the Philippines.⁸ The paper is also the first to codify and research the provincial violence mitigation strategies (i.e. PAVE for Peace, BRAVE, and AGILA Haven) as well as E-CLIP and Project TUGON.

The senior essay proceeds as follows: the paper first analyzes Political Science literature that addresses the question: “What factors influence the success of violence mitigation strategies?” The paper then delves into the specific context of the Philippines to preface the cross-provincial comparison and analysis sections. After contextualizing the issue, the paper conducts a cross-provincial comparison of violence mitigation strategies and peace outcomes. The paper highlights key findings from the comparative study in the analysis section and explains their policy implications. The paper then concludes by grounding the findings in the broader Bangsamoro peace project.

II. Grappling with Contentions: Research Question and Key Terms

Definition

Research on Salafi-Jihadist groups requires precise language because many of the terms in this sub-field of political science are widely debated. In the Philippines, Salafi-Jihadist separatist groups have been ill-defined as jihadi terrorist groups solely because their religion drives their

⁸ Unlike other case study locations where government officials or civil society organizations lead peacebuilding efforts, military officials spearhead national violence mitigation programs in the Philippines (ie. E-CLIP), even if they have socioeconomic development focus. The information gap left by the military perspective is significant in comprehensively understanding violence mitigation in the Philippines. See Section 6 for why this research is original and difficult to obtain.

separatist aspirations. The complexity of the Philippine situation cannot be understated because "counterterrorism" and "peacebuilding" are used interchangeably to describe violence mitigation strategies. This paper introduces new terms that more precisely describe strategies against Salafi-Jihadist groups in the Philippines.

The research question, "What factors affect the success of violence mitigation strategies in areas infiltrated by Salafi-Jihadist groups in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao?" presents four terms to be defined: "factors," "success," "violence mitigation strategies," and "Salafi-Jihadist."

Table 4 in pp. 44 demonstrates that though the provincial strategies have the same program specifics, the programs all yield different peace outcomes. There must be other factors unrelated to the program specifics that lead to these different outcomes. "Factors" is purposely broad to precisely include political and societal variables that are unrelated to program features but affect the strategies' outcome. The question does not mention "evaluate" because this paper is not policy-focused and does not serve as a program evaluation or audit. The paper focuses on the political dynamics that have contributed to the success and failure of the provincial strategies.

The research only focuses on socio-economic development strategies and does not consider militarized approaches. As mentioned in the introduction, Sobejana states that violence mitigation strategies only succeeded after shifting to a development focus. Thus, "violence mitigation strategies" is an all-encompassing term for the provincial programs that focus on delivering socio-economic services for combatants and afflicted communities to prevent conflict recurrence. "Violence mitigation strategies" also serve as an all-encompassing term for the program ecosystem that comprises the development programs against conflict recurrence in the province. The

flowchart in Figure 9 in pp. 42 explains the components of a "violence mitigation strategy" for each province.

The term "success" is a broad term for positive peace outcomes in the paper. "Success" is measured in this study as the reduction of group influence measured by the number of their existing group members per province.

The question also isolates "Salafi-Jihadist" groups as the subject of the study to eliminate the consideration of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Moro National Liberation Front. The study only focuses on Salafi-jihadist groups defined as comprising:

“Jihad (struggle, sacred warfare), takfir (the ability or willingness to declare apparent Muslims to be non-Muslims), al-wala’ wa-l-bara’ (loyalty and disassociation on the basis of Islam), tawhid (the declaration of the oneness of God), and hakimiyya (the necessity to implement God’s rule) (Maher, 2016).”

This paper refers to Salafi-Jihadist groups as those who use warfare to execute a fundamentalist interpretation of the Qu'ran and establish an Islamic state. The groups in the BARMM region that have explicitly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State are considered: the Abu Sayyaf Group, Daulah Islamiyah or the Maute Group, and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters. Though the BIFF has some factions that have not pledged allegiance to the I.S., there is no isolated data on each faction, so the entire group is analyzed in the study.

III. Current Theories on Successful Violence Mitigation

After rationalizing the research question, this literature review addresses its broad variation: "What factors influence the success of development-violence mitigation strategies?" Success is defined here as halting the mobilization of armed groups to fight and individually preventing former fighters from taking up arms once again, which is measured

in this paper by group membership. This first section of the literature review focuses on possible program features in violence mitigation strategies that might be successful.

Economic Empowerment

What is the role of pure economic incentives in the success of violence mitigation strategies? The literature diverges in its findings. Tangible material benefits ensure strong demobilization, mainly when programs offer cash incentives. Still, lump sums are ineffective, so smaller quantities of money throughout a time period are preferable (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007). Programs should provide land because they determine whether demobilized insurgents turn to criminal behavior (Collier, 1994). These interventions allow ex-combatants to see individual economic development and be satisfied with the program's results (Phayal et al., 2015).

However, economic incentives can also be ineffective because evidence has suggested that some insurgents may squander money on alcohol or prostitution (Bertrand & Pauwels, 2000). Previous research has found no correlation between cash handouts and subsequent employment (Knight & Özerdem, 2004; Berdal, 1996). However, ongoing or future financial incentives can lead to returns to peaceful work (Blattman & Annan, 2016). Cash payouts do not lead to sustainable reintegration or long-term development (Lundin et al., 2000).

Other economic interventions, like economic training, are further rebuked because economic training may also be ineffective; evidence suggests that raising the skill levels of ex-combatants with the perspective that they can be self-employed may ineffectively use scarce resources. Ex-combatants may not find fulfillment in their employment even after job training because the job market may not be receptive (Ball, 1997). Evidence also suggests

that training programs have led to few subsequent employment opportunities and almost no development of small and medium-sized businesses (Heinemann-Grüder et al., 2003).

Transitional Justice and Security Mechanisms

Literature also discusses the importance of transitional justice and security as program features in violence mitigation strategies. The timing in which combatants must decommission their weapons can be essential to building trust, which consequently leads to demobilization success because theory suggests that insurgent weapons must be decommissioned early in the process, preferably in the demobilization phase, to solidify security guarantees. Opposing literature suggests that ex-combatants feel more vulnerable and insecure in this scenario, which leads to renewed fighting (Walter, 1999).

Success in transitional justice also guarantees the progression of demobilization efforts because transitional justice norms can transform the legal and political climate in which peace negotiations happen. However, a clear separation of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs (DDR) and transitional justice initiatives can transform perceptions of war allegiances (Ceballos & Martin, 2001).

A security apparatus is essential for ensuring the success of demobilization because it creates a climate that lowers the fears of the host communities and former combatants (Theidon, 2007). Demobilization creates a vacuum in which other crimes may pervade. Furthermore, challenges can persist in ensuring the securitization of demobilization because animosity may persist between separatists and former army members (Grossman et al., 2015).

Comprehensive Socio-Economic Development

Community socio-economic development emerged as a key strategy that ensures the success of violence mitigation. The peace process must be tailored to address the characteristics of the socio-political, economic, and physical environment to be successful (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007). If broader socio-economic development does not occur, ex-combatants are re-integrated back into poverty, which should not be considered a success and could be partially to blame for conflict reignition (Knight & Özerdem, 2004). While poverty and inequality may not be the primary cause of conflict in all cases, the lack of socio-economic development in a community can hinder the implementation of violence mitigation strategies (Berdal, 1996). Macroeconomic decline in conflict-afflicted areas is associated with a higher incidence of conflict recurrence (Kavanagh, 2011). Thus, reintegration works better if it is part of an effort to economically revitalize the entire society (Ball, 1997). Economic incentives are only present as a factor in higher-income countries if there are no economic prospects for an individual and they are highly educated (Ahmad, 2021).

The literature overwhelmingly emphasizes the need for a comprehensive socio-economic development approach to ensure successful violence mitigation. Given that the literature has a consensus on the need for comprehensive socio-economic development strategies, this paper has only selected programs emphasizing comprehensive socio-economic development in conflict areas to ensure successful violence mitigation.

This paper takes the consensus further by exploring what factors led to the success or failure of these comprehensive socio-economic developments beyond their strategic features. A comprehensive case study method elucidates why, even if some provinces may have the

same comprehensive socio-economic development strategies, they have differing peace outcomes. The next section explores these possible exogenous factors.

*Exogenous Program Factors: Peace Spoilers*⁹

Other literature focuses on the exogenous factors that can influence these violence mitigation strategies, particularly the presence of different peace spoilers. Peace processes can easily "fall prey to disruption from below" by discontented elites, which can lead to, in worst cases, war recurrence or "postaccord violence" (Sisk, 2010). Demobilized soldiers are also prominent peace disruptors in the case of El Salvador, especially when there are delays in or a complete denial of the reintegration process (Poulligny, 2006). These demobilized soldiers or other militia groups can turn to illicit activity to prolong their armed efforts.

Literature also explored how political dynamics (i.e., top down or bottom up) can influence violence mitigation strategies. An approach contends that the key objective for violence mitigation strategies should be the legitimization of authority in which the overarching challenge is to construct a sustainable democratic state that can function without international involvement (Reilly, 2003). On the other hand, another approach suggest that violence mitigation strategies may instead need to focus on more than just the establishment of a state and the reconciliation of leaders of armed groups. There should be a greater focus on including grassroots actors to create sustainable peace (Autesserre, 2022).

Inspired by this breadth of literature, this senior essay's research also explores how exogenous factors can contribute to the success or failure of development-oriented violence mitigation strategies.

⁹ Exogenous is not defined as exogenous variable in political science but rather factors outside of specific features in violence mitigation strategies.

Theories on Broad Peacebuilding in the Philippines

As previously mentioned, no research on the Philippines has conducted a cross-provincial comparison of violence mitigation strategies; an exploration of existing literature is necessary, however, to highlight the gaps in the literature.

Though research has been conducted on peace-building programs in the Philippines, they have only focused on the PAyapa at MAsaganang PamayaNAn or PAMANA program. The PAMANA program is a national program under the Office of Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity outside the scope of this study. No research has focused on the programs discussed in this paper: E-CLIP, Project Tugon, PAVE for Peace, BRAVE, and Agila Haven. Literature has also investigated the role of international non-governmental organizations in the peace-building sector (Salam et al., 2023); however, research has yet to investigate the role of local government and provincial programs in peace-building efforts.

This paper also takes a different approach to research in peace and conflict studies in the Philippines. This paper's approach focuses on understanding what new theories can emerge from ethnographic fieldwork in the Philippines. Current papers focus on applying prevalent structural theories and frameworks in peace and conflict studies to the Philippines case study. The Peace Triangle has been used to analyze how effective autonomy is as a framework solution and how it impacts the prospects of peace in the country (Söderberg Kovacs et al., 2021). Ethnic and religious theories have also been used as theoretical frameworks to understand the Philippine peace-building case study (Maboloc, 2024b; Biwang, 2023). This study offers an alternative “ground-up” approach to existing studies.

This paper is also an exploratory political science investigation instead of a policy-driven paper. Most of the literature in the field is policy-driven journal articles or reports geared towards policymakers. An ethical development framework integrates solutions for historical injustices and culture (Maboloc, 2024a). The International Crisis Group frequently publishes reports and policy briefers on the enduring issues that plague the peace process in the Philippines; most recently, the think tank has published indictments of the BARMM government's implementation of the peace process (*Southern Philippines: Making peace stick in the bangsamoro* 2023), enduring Islamist militancy (*Addressing Islamist militancy in the southern philippines* 2022), and fostering inclusivity in the peace process (*Southern Philippines: Fostering an inclusive bangsamoro* 2022). These reports have a different objective of summarizing persisting issues in the Bangsamoro peace process; though these reports briefly discuss provincial violence mitigation strategies, this study offers a close cross-provincial analysis of these violence mitigation strategies and political dynamics in each province.

The literature review has influenced this paper by narrowing the scope of study to development-oriented violence mitigation strategies and exogenous factors that influence the success of these strategies. This paper's research is valuable because it is the first to explore what new theories can emerge from ethnographic fieldwork in the Philippines. The paper is also an exploratory political science investigation, which contrasts from the prevalent policy-driven papers in the post-BARMM era. This paper's comprehensive case study method elucidates why, even if some provinces may have the exact same comprehensive socio-economic development strategies, they have differing peace outcomes.

IV. Historical Context

The context that underpins the conflict in the Philippines contains a multiplicity of complicated ethnic and religious dimensions. The Moro conflict is mainly in the Bangsamoro region, which means "nation of the Moro." The term "Moro" comes from an exonym that the Spanish conquistadors used to describe the Muslims in the Bangsamoro region (Kamlan, 2012). Moro is similar to the Latin word "Mauru" that the Spanish used to describe Muslim armies after the Umayyad Caliphate conquered much of the Iberian Peninsula. Separatist groups later co-opted this term to distinguish a specific ethnolinguistic Muslim majority group (Larousse, 2001). The Bangsamoro people consist of several ethnic groups: Badjao, Iranun, Jama Mapun, Kalagan, Kalibugan, Maguindanao, Maranaw, Palawanon, Molbog, Sama, Sangil, Tausūg, and Yakan. The Bangsamoro people are geographically spread across several provinces in the Philippines. However, the Bangsamoro region only encapsulates six provinces: Basilan, Maguindanao Del Norte, Maguindanao Del Sur, Lanao Del Sur, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. This section serves to provide the historicization that underpins the rise of Islamic separatism in the Philippines and, consequently, Salafi-Jihadism. Table 1 serves as a key reference point for the major history events in the Moro Conflict.

Table 1. Moro Conflict Timeline of Events

13th Century	Arrival of Makhdum Karim to the Philippines
1457	Sultanate of Sulu was founded. ¹⁰
17th Century	Arrival of the Spanish to Philippines and consequent Spanish-Moro Conflict
1899-1913	Moro Rebellion against the United States of America
1968	Jabidah Massacre Bangsamoro Liberation Organization was founded.
1974	Palimbang Massacre
1976	Tripoli Agreement
1987	Jeddah Accord
1989	Plebiscite for the establishment of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao
1996	MNLF-Philippine Government Peace Agreement
2001	Plebiscite to include Marawi City and Basilan (excluding the City of Isabela) to ARMM
2013	Zamboanga Siege
2014	Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro signed.
2018	Bangsamoro Organic Law passed. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao is established.
2021	BARMM elections postponed to 2025.

Development of a Moro Identity through Oppression: Islam in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Bangsamoro



Figure 3. A Map Demonstrating the Scope of the Bangsamoro Region in Contrast to the Geographical Spread of the Bangsamoro People (File:ARMM.Png, 2007)

Though most of the Moro people are Muslim, not all Moro people are Muslim; this is a nuance often missed in public policy circles. One historical thread has bonded the plight of the Moro people, however: oppression from colonial and national governments.

The conversion of the Bangsamoro people to Islam first occurred with the arrival of Makhdum Karim in Tawi-Tawi around the 13th century. Islam also spread through the trade between Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia with the southern part of the Philippines. This introduction established the Sultanates in the Philippines (Abinales, 2017). The first semblance of conflict in the southern Philippines occurred when Spanish conquistadors attempted to convert the Moro to Christianity. As part of the Spanish Inquisition, they required colonial populations to convert to Roman Catholicism, or they would have to face the death penalty. The Spanish conducted raids to enforce this requirement; however, they were met by strong resistance from the Moro population. The Spanish-Moro conflict ensued for over two decades. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the Moros allowed the Spanish to build forts. However, the Spanish did not strongly impose their religion and culture on these sultanates (Larned, 1928). Though the sultanates eventually lost some territory, they retained some sense of independence.

After the Spanish-American War, the Spanish ceded the Philippines to the Americans and, consequently, the Bangsamoro region. The Americans initially negotiated the Kiram-Bates Treaty with the Sultanate of Sulu, the last remaining Sultanate (Banlaoi, 2005). This treaty guaranteed the Sulu Sultanate's internal governance and affairs autonomy. Once the Americans conquered the northern part of the Philippines, however, the treaty was effectively repealed, and they invaded the Moro region. After the region was conquered, Major General Leonard Wood assumed his position as the governor of Moro Province and commander of the Department of Mindanao-Jolo. Wood

made significant changes to the region by demoting the sultanate to a purely religious office and reforming the legal code. The legal code reformation served to stratify the religious divisions because Moro laws and customs would apply to Moros and non-Christians while Philippine laws apply to Christians. Land ownership was also introduced, which changed Moro society from formerly tribal to a more individualistic society (Hurley, 1985). During their occupation, the American government also pursued a Homestead Program. There were several facets of the program, including a policy of migration to resettle Christian Filipinos to Muslim-majority areas in order to have a Christian majority across the Philippines. This resettlement diminished the Moro population in the area. Americans also relied on Christian Filipino settlers to take control of newly built roads and disrupt traditional Moro power structures. After the transition to independence, the succeeding Philippine administrations would continue this policy. The Philippine government also opted to provide the most lucrative corporate agricultural opportunities and development investments to the Christian population, which led to the Muslim population falling into poverty and ranking among the poorest in their own country (Fulton, 2016)—decades of regional neglect through religious erasure and the misallocation of resources led to increasing aggravation among the Moro community.

The Moro strife culminated in the "Jabidah Massacre." This episode of violence occurred during the administration of former President Ferdinand Marcos as he attempted to destabilize and conquer Sabah, a Muslim-majority Island in Malaysia geographically proximate to the Moro regions and formerly a part of the Sulu Sultanate. At least 11 Moros were recruited in order to execute this destabilizing mission. The trainees eventually rejected the mission and were killed in the mountain regions of the Philippines by the country's armed forces (Uy, 2018). The incident

awakened Muslim intellectuals and politicians around the country and evoked conversations on separatism and secession.

Reclaiming Agency: Moro Secessionism and the History of the Peacebuilding Process

After the Jabidah Massacre, a pursuit to reclaim agency has characterized the Moro plight. Lanao del Sur congressman Haroun al-Rashid Lucman called for then-President Ferdinand Marcos to be impeached by Congress. The effort gained little Congressional support, so Lucman created the Bangsamoro Liberation Organization (BMLO), a secessionist organization (Fallon, 1989). Nur Misuari, then a professor at the University of the Philippines, formed the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which called for establishing a Moro republic through armed resistance (Yegar, 2002). These two organizations eventually merged under the MNLF name (Tan & Ferrer, 2008).

The insurgency settled in Jolo, Sulu, where extensive damage eventually occurred. The military adopted a scorched earth tactic in which they destroyed everything that the insurgents could utilize to win the war, including water, food, and shelter. The military razed much of Jolo (Moro National Liberation Front, 2013). On September 24, 1974, the Philippine army killed at least 1,000 Moro civilians who were praying in a mosque during the Palimbang Massacre (MindaNews, 2014). After the destruction and massacres, the government and the MNLF signed the Tripoli Agreement (Tan & Ferrer, 2008).

The Tripoli Agreement was signed on December 23, 1976, in Tripoli, Libya, by Carmelo Z. Barbero, representing the Philippine government, and Nur Misuari. Aside from a ceasefire, the agreement defined the administrative divisions for autonomous Muslims in Mindanao. The

agreement also established an autonomous government, a Sharia judicial system, and a special regional security force. The autonomous region would also have its own Islamic bank and economic system. There was disagreement between then-President Marcos and Misuari regarding the provinces that would be included in the autonomous region. They disagreed on whether the region should be unified or thirteen autonomous provinces. This led to the collapse of the peace dialogues and the resumption of hostilities between the MNLF and the Philippine army (Unson, 2019). The Tripoli Agreement also led to the splintering of the MNLF because Misuari did not consult the chief commander, Salamat Hashim. Salamat and 57 other MNLF ground commanders formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (Mayuga, 2019).

The succeeding presidential administration under Corazon Aquino signed the 1987 Jeddah Accord in Saudi Arabia with the MNLF. Misuari and the MNLF asserted that all thirteen provinces with Muslim populations be included in the autonomous region. However, eight were majority-Christian provinces. Hence, the government only included four provinces in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao: Lanao Del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. Republic Act No. 6734 (the Organic Act) established the ARMM region (Howe, 2014). In 1989, a plebiscite was held to ratify the ARMM region charter. Zacaria Candao, a counsel of the MNLF, was elected the first regional governor. The MNLF and the Philippine government signed a final peace deal in 1996. Another plebiscite was held in 2001, including the city of Marawi and the province of Basilan in the region.

An Autonomous Compromise: The Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao and the Zamboanga Siege

The central principle of the ARMM region was to "remain an integral and inseparable part of the national territory of the Republic." The President of the Philippines still exercised general supervision over the regional governor. However, the regional government had the power to create its source of revenues, levy taxes, and apply Sharia law to its constituents. It had no judiciary, military, police, or foreign relations apparatus.

The Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao was headed by a Regional Governor and a Regional Vice Governor, whom local executives directly elected. There was also a Regional Assembly that would create regional ordinances elected by direct vote. Regional officials had a fixed term of 3 years, which Congress could extend. At the same time, these provinces would also have representation in the National Congress. The regional governor was the chief executive and had a cabinet of at most ten members. The governor could appoint cabinet members, and the regional legislative assembly would have control over confirming these candidates.

The ARMM had a unicameral Regional Legislative Assembly. It was composed of three members for every congressional district. At the time of ARMM's abolition, there were six from Lanao del Sur, including Marawi City, six from Maguindanao, six from Sulu, three from Basilan, and three from Tawi-Tawi. The regional legislative assembly had the power to create legislation, especially on matters of Sharia law (*ARMM History and Organization 2008*).

Since the MNLF opposed establishing the ARMM region because it only included the four provinces, the MNLF continued the armed struggle. The MNLF moved from demands of complete

independence to autonomy in the 1980s. Tensions mounted between the MNLF and the Philippine government due to disputes about mineral wealth sharing in Mindanao. In 2013, the MNLF attacked Zamboanga City and declared independence for the Bangsamoro Republik. During their standoff with the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the Philippine army accused the group of using civilians as human shields; this led the Philippine government to label them as terrorists. Though the MNLF has met with former Philippine presidents regarding peace talks, official peace deals have yet to be brokered with Misuari. The Office of the Presidential Advisor in Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity (OPAPRU) formed the Government of the Philippines and Moro National Liberation Front (GPH-MNLF) Peace Coordinating Committee to resolve conflicts within Mindanao with the help of the MNLF. The committee also helps the Philippine government coordinate with the MNLF (*MNLF in Sulu welcomes GPH-MNLF Peace Developments 2020*).

Splinters in Autonomy: The Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Peace Process

Throughout their history, Moro people developed more disagreements between secession and autonomy. Even groups who agreed on autonomy remained divided on their vision for an autonomous government. A pivotal event was the MILF's splintering from the MNLF.

Peace talks were also concurrently held with the MILF, Salamat's splintered group. The MNLF and MILF were rivals because of the internal politics. The MILF was in even stronger opposition to the ARMM region project and did not want to accept semi-autonomy. The MILF continued their insurgency operations because of their fierce opposition to the project. A general cessation of hostilities was signed in July 1997 but was eventually abolished in 2000 by the Philippine Army. In response, the MILF declared a jihad against the government and its citizens. Under President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, the government and the MILF resumed peace talks

(Huang, 2002). The MILF put forth "the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD)," which sought to expand the territorial reach of the ARMM region. The MILF also had additional demands, such as establishing a police force, controlling natural resources, and gaining control of the region. The Supreme Court struck down the MOA-AD because they determined that "the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process [the former name of OPAPRU] committed grave abuse of discretion when he failed to carry out the pertinent consultation process (*SC Declares MOA-AD Unconstitutional* 2008)." Mohagher Iqbal, the MILF peace panel chair, said that the MILF modified their demands to pursue a substate, like a United States state, instead of complete independence from the Philippines. In a similar vein, the MILF would not exercise its power over national defense, foreign affairs, currency and coinage, and postal services. The Moro state would also not have armed forces and would instead have troops for internal security.

The final fleshed-out peace agreement, the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), was signed on March 27, 2014. In contrast to the ARMM region, the new semi-autonomous region would have a fair share of revenues from extracting its plentiful resources, budgetary autonomy, police, and Sharia law only for Muslims. In exchange, the MILF would cease all of its hostilities. The MILF would also stop armed movements against the government, and the government would retain control over its national security and foreign policy. The agreement paved the way for the creation of a new Bangsamoro state. The MILF would also agree to turn over their firearms, mediated by a third party, and the complete deactivation of the rebel forces (Sabillo, 2014).

V. Current Political and Armed Violence Context

After providing apt historicization for the rise of Islamic separatism, this section now explains the specifics of the BARMM government and the political context that underpins it. This section also introduces the Salafi-Jihadist groups in the Philippines. These groups are notably distinguishable from the MNLF and the MILF because they yearn to secede from the Philippines to create a fundamentalist Islamic state. This section also introduces the development-violence mitigation strategy ecosystem that addresses these separatist groups' rise.

Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao and its Current State

Under President Aquino's successor, Rodrigo Duterte, the "Bangsamoro Organic Law" was passed in 2018. A two-part plebiscite to ratify the Bangsamoro Organic Law was held in January and February 2019 with the ARMM constituents and the areas that petitioned to join the region (Casauay, 2015).

The first articles of the agreement define the Bangsamoro identity and delineate the territorial jurisdiction of the region, including the land and water boundaries. Article IV discusses the general principles of the new region, including territorial integrity, self-governance, a democratic political system, and the promotion of unity. Article V defines the regional government's powers, while Article VI pertains to the regional government's relations with the national government and its agencies. For example, the regional government established the "Philippines Congress-Bangsamoro Parliament Forum" to encourage collaboration between the national Congress and the regional parliament. Sections 9 and 10 of Article VI define the composition of the government. The regional governor is called the Chief Minister, and they have

a Council of Leaders that advises them on governance matters. This Council of Leaders comprises members of the Philippine Congress who represent the region, provincial governors, representatives of traditional leaders and non-Moro indigenous communities, and representatives from other sectors. The regional government also has the authority to regulate the affairs of the local provinces. The members of the parliament elect the chief minister, appoint heads of ministries, and issue executive orders. The region also has an independent justice system in which Sharia law is only applicable to Muslims, and tribal laws apply to indigenous peoples. The region has its own body of police officers but not its army. Article XII discusses fiscal autonomy, a point of contention and grievance for the Bangsamoro people. The government has complete autonomy over sharing natural resources except in some cooperation zones.

Article XVI explains the concept of the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority (BTA). The authority is the interim government of the region during the transition period. The BTA will create offices and organize the bureaucracy during this transition period. At the moment, Ebrahim Murad, the former head of the MILF, is the Chief Minister of BARMM. On October 28, 2021, Duterte signed Republic Act No. 11593 to postpone the elections from 2022 to 2025. Table 2 summarizes comparison points between ARMM and BARMM.

Table 2. A Comparison Between ARMM and BARMM (Casauay, 2015)

	ARMM	BARMM
Creation	Established by the Republic Act 9054. MNLF did not participate in crafting the law	The Bangsamoro Transition Commission, led by MILF Chief Negotiator Mohagher Iqbal, drafted the law, which was reviewed by former President Duterte and then submitted to the Philippine Congress
Form of Government	<p>Direct election of regional governor</p> <p>Direct election of district Regional Legislative Assembly</p> <p>Executive council and cabinet</p>	<p>Parliamentary regional government</p> <p>Votes for parliamentary members that vote for the Chief Minister. Parliament is composed of: 40% district seats 50% sectoral representatives 10% reserved seats (2 seats for non-Moro indigenous communities and one seat for women)</p> <p>Council of leaders</p>
National-Regional Relationship	<p>Both are under the general supervision of the President of the Philippines, but the Bangsamoro Basic Law introduces the concept of real autonomy, suggesting a symmetrical relationship.</p> <p>The devolution of power is as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 9 reserved powers for the central government ● 57 exclusive powers for the Bangsamoro ● 14 concurrent powers 	
Fiscal Autonomy	Required to defend their budget to the Congress. Presidents can suspend, reduce, or cancel their funding	Block Grant- 4% of the 60% of the total revenue collections goes to the government. 40% goes to the local government units in BARMM
Wealth	70% of total national taxes from	75% of total national taxes from the

Sharing	the minerals will go to ARMM Strategic and non-strategic classifications for minerals	minerals will go to BARMM Metallic and non-metallic classifications for minerals
Bangsamoro Identity	<i>“Bangsa Moro people. These are citizens who are believers in Islam and who have retained some or all of their own social, economic, cultural, and political institutions”</i>	<i>“those who at the time of conquest and colonization were considered natives or original inhabitants of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago and its adjacent islands including Palawan, and their descendants, whether of mixed or of full blood, shall have the right to identify themselves as Bangsamoro by ascription or self-ascription. Spouses and their descendants are classified as Bangsamoro.”</i>
Justice system	Shariah courts	Shariah courts, high court, and tribal justice system
Creation	Established by the Republic Act 9054. MNLF did not participate in its crafting the law	The Bangsamoro Transition Commission, led by MILF Chief Negotiator Mohagher Iqbal, drafted the law, which was reviewed by former President Duterte and then submitted to the Philippine Congress
Regional Police and Armed Forces	Same powers but in BARMM, the chief minister can select the head of the police and its deputies The two provinces do not have an autonomous army but have a regional command under the Armed Forces of the Philippines	
Women’s Rights	No provisions	Parliamentary seat for women. 5% of the total budget is allocated for gender-responsive programs
Transition period	No transition period. MNLF signed a peace pact and immediately asked to govern	Elections will be held in 2025.

Salafi-Jihadist Groups in the Philippines

Abu Sayyaf (Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi)

The Abu Sayyaf Group, otherwise known as the Islamic State-East Asia Province, is a militant group that follows the Wahabi doctrine of Sunni Islam. It has been most prominent in the Sulu and Basilan islands, where it has been operating for more than five decades. The name of the group comes from أبو, which means father, and سنياف, which means of the swordsmith. From January 2002 to February 2015, the group was the target of the American military's "Operation Enduring Freedom," which was part of the broader Global War on Terror effort in Southeast Asia (Brookes, 2014). Through peace talks with the Philippine government, the MNLF became the de facto governing force of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in majority Muslim areas in Mindanao in 1996 (*ABU SAYYAF GROUP (ASG) 2006*). The ASG was primarily founded as a reaction to the peace talks between the MNLF and the Philippine government. The ASG perceived these talks as the MNLF's infidelity to the values of Islam.

The ASG emerged under the leadership of Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani. Janjalani studied Islamic theology in Libya, Syria, and Saudi Arabia in the 1980s and eventually went to fight against the Soviet Union in the Soviet-Afghan war. During this time, he allegedly met with Osama Bin Laden, who gave him 6 million dollars to establish a more fundamentalist Islamic group than the MNLF (Abuza, 2003). Janjalani returned to Basilan in 1991, gathering more radical members from the MNLF to form Abu Sayyaf. By 1995, the group's operations scaled to large bombings and attacks on another part of Mindanao, Zamboanga Del Sur (*Asia-Pacific / who are the Abu Sayyaf? 2000*). In 1998, Janjalani was killed in a gunfight with the Philippine National Police in Basilan. The death of Janjalani marked a shift in the group's operations to kidnapping, robberies, and murders. At this time, the group also expanded its operations, specifically its illicit activity to

Malaysia and Indonesia (Feinberg, 2002). The ASG is notorious for its terrorist attacks, including bombings and beheadings. During the early 2000s, the group would often abduct foreigners for ransom in surrounding Indonesia and Malaysia. The group is also responsible for kidnapping and murdering Christian clerics and workers (Hemmer, 2003). The group operates typically in Western Mindanao (i.e., Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi Tawi) because of its significance to Janjalani's life, remoteness, and proximity to Malaysia and Indonesia. The group trains with Jemaah Islamiyah militants, a prominent Salafi-Jihadist group in Indonesia.

In 2014, Abu Sayyaf Leader Isnilon Hapilon swore allegiance or *bay'ah* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State (FlorCruz, 2014). The group's primary foreign donor was previously Al-Qaeda, a competitor of the Islamic State. In May 2017, the group joined the Salafi-Jihadist group in Lanao Del Sur, the Maute Group, in an attempt to seize control of Marawi City and use the area to establish an Islamic State in Mindanao (*Terrorists Isnilon Hapilon and Omar Maute killed in Marawi battle* 2017). Hapilon was killed during the siege. In August 2020, Nur Misuari, the chairman of the MNLF, surrendered Abu Sayyaf sub-commander Anduljihad "Idang" Susukan to the Philippine National Police (Mangosing, 2020). By 2022, Abu Sayyaf, as the Islamic State East Province, absorbed surrounding pro-IS groups in Indonesia and Thailand. The group claimed its first attack in Pattani, Thailand, on April 15, 2022 (Zenn, 2022).

In 2023, the Philippine government declared Sulu province free of Abu Sayyaf militants (Chen & Stambaugh, 2023). On March 22, 2024, the Philippine government announced that the Abu Sayyaf had been "fully dismantled" (Mendoza, 2024),

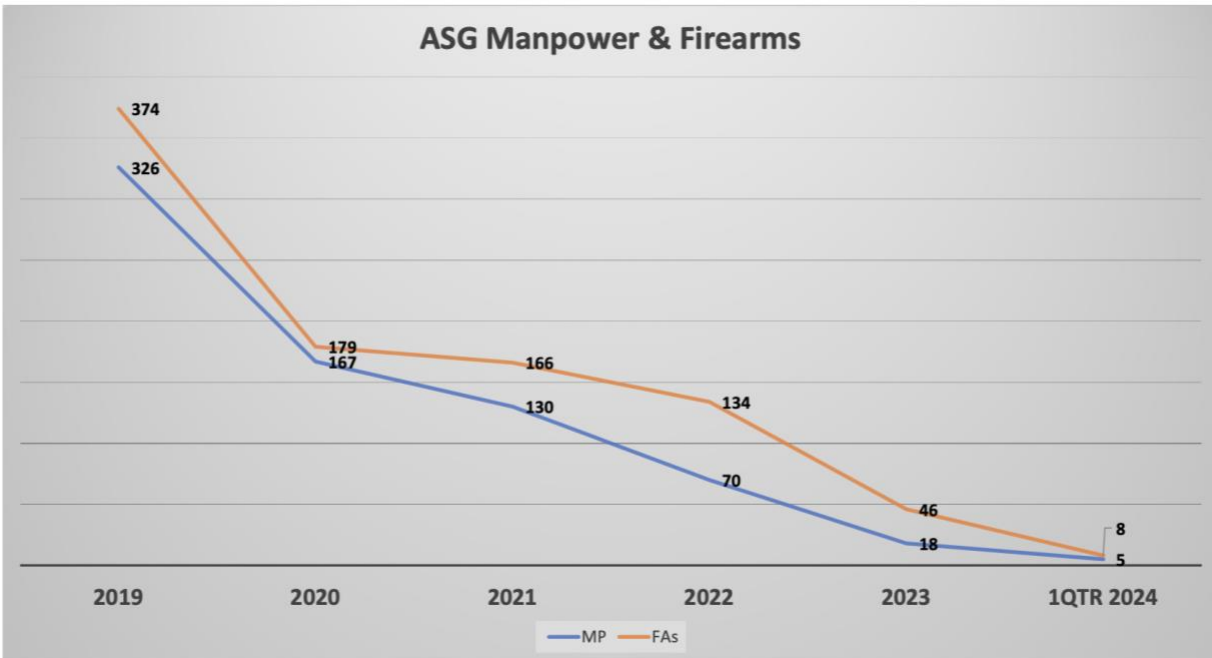


Figure 4. A Graph Demonstrating the Manpower and Possessed Firearms of the Abu Sayyaf Group from 2019 to 2024 (National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, ASG Manpower & Firearms 2024)

According to analysis from the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, the group's total collapse was brought about by the neutralization of sub-leaders and critical personalities. Barangays, which initially hosted these individuals, were cleared, and their pipeline of resources and support was cut off and interrupted.¹¹ The remaining group members in Basilan are dispersed in the *Bayali* and *Indama* areas. They now only conduct extortionist activities for survival. In the prior years before the graph demonstration, the Abu Sayyaf reached over 1,250 members in 2000. Now, the group only has five remaining members as shown in figure 4. Their weapons also significantly decreased from 374 units in 2019 to only 8 in 2024.

¹¹ Barangays are the smallest unit of government in the Philippines.

The Maute Group (Lanao Del Sur)

The Maute group, the Islamic State of Lanao, or *Dawlah Islamiyah*, is the most prominent in Lanao del Sur. Maute has been conducting a protection racket in the remote settlements of Butig, Lanao del Sur (Unson, 2016).¹²

Dawlah Islamiya was founded by the Maute brothers, Abdullah and Omar. The Maute family was well-connected in Lanao Del Sur in terms of wealth and political connections. Ominta Romato Maute, also known as Farhana Maute, has a construction business and owns property all over Mindanao and Manila (Gopalakrishnan & Mogato, 2017). She is also related to politicians in Butig, Lanao del Sur. In the Maute group, she was the financier and provided logistical support for recruiting fighters. Butig, in turn, became the headquarters of the Maute Group; the area is also a stronghold of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and is connected by blood and marriage. The Maute Group members were formerly part of the MILF as well (Zambrano, 2016).

The first firefight involving the Maute Group occurred in 2013 when the group attacked a government checkpoint in Madalum, Lanao del Sur. The group had over 100 members and possessed equipment through foreign terrorist connections (Ansis, 2016). In 2015, the group gained prominence after they pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in April 2015. However, there have been no indications that the Islamic State has acknowledged the group's membership (Headstart: Maute Group not accredited by Terror Group ISIS, says analyst 2017). After the group pledged, members were regularly seen waving the

¹² A protection racket is defined as an organized crime scheme that is perpetrated by an organized crime group that is usually protected from legal persecution from another entity or individual. The organized crime group may engage in robbery, violence, arson, vandalism, and ransacking. The protection is guaranteed because the group pay such entities during regular intervals.

representative Islamic State flag. However, mayor Ibrahim Macadato of Butig town stated that the group is not affiliated with IS and is only made up of armed citizens (Dicali, 2016). The group is one of the first in the country to employ social media and messaging applications like Telegram to recruit younger members (Hwang, 2019). The group attracted students and teachers from the prominent Mindanao State University-Marawi. Maute's second most well-known attack was the 2016 Davao City bombing. Three men, TJ Tagadaya Macabalang, Wendel Apostol Facturan, and Musali Mustapha, were arrested in the bombing. Maute attacked the Roxas Night Market, killing at least 14 people and causing 70 injuries. The death toll included a pregnant woman (Tan, 2016).

Maute is most known for initiating a siege in the Islamic City of Marawi on May 23, 2017. During the siege, the group declared an Islamic State and took hold of the Marawi territory, intending to expand outside of the city. During the siege, the group attacked Camp Ranao and occupied several important buildings in the city, such as Mindanao State University, Marawi City Hall, a hospital, and the city jail. The group also set fire to Ninoy Aquino School, Saint Mary's Cathedral, and Dansalan College, which was operated by the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (Timeline: Maute Attack in Marawi City 2017). The government forces successfully defeated the group after nine months. There was a collaboration between the Abu Sayyaf and Maute groups during the siege, which led to the death of the Abu Sayyaf leader, Isnilon Hapilon and the Maute brothers. On October 23, 2017, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana declared that the five-month battle was over (Philippines declares end of Marawi Siege as 40 suspected gunmen found dead 2017). After the siege, the group conducted more attacks, including three gunfights in 2019 (Tan, 2016).

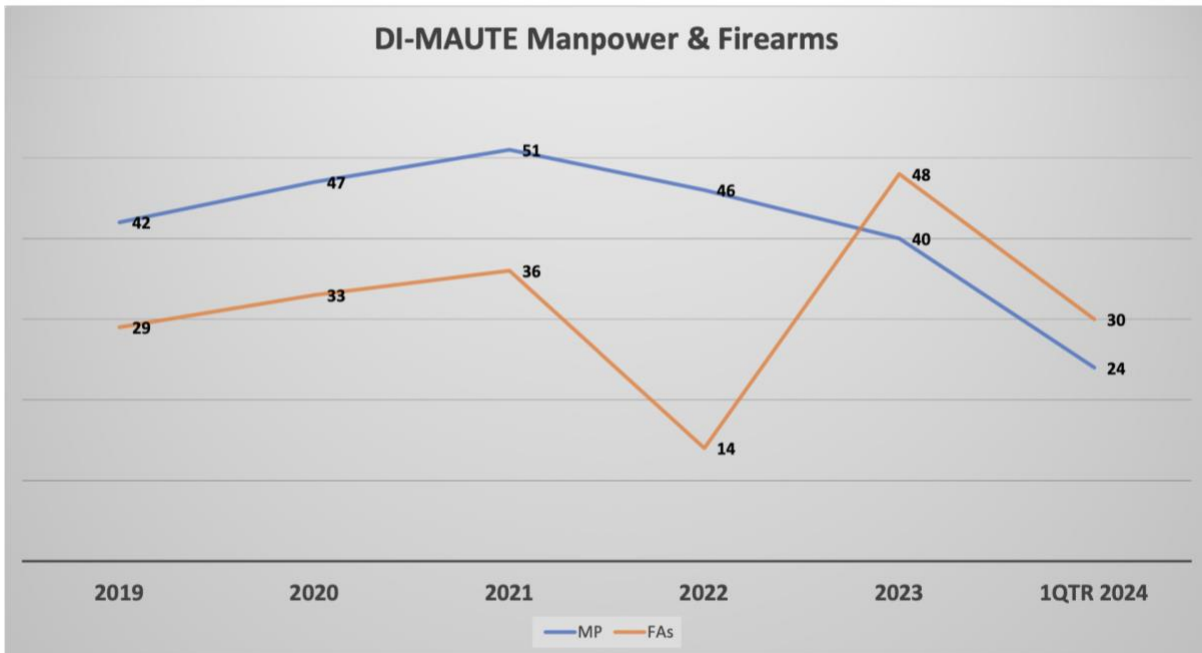


Figure 5. A Graph Demonstrating the Manpower and Possessed Firearms of the Maute Group from 2019 to 2024 (National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, DI-MAUTE Manpower & Firearms 2024)

Intelligence from NICA states that the group is on the brink of collapse after the Philippine army conducted several exceptional intelligence and military operations that targeted the group's leadership. The efforts from the Philippine government led to the neutralization of key personalities and members, a decrease in the number of violence-initiated and non-violent activities of the group, and a continuous decline in manpower and disarray in leadership. The group is not projecting an evasive stance due to focused and intense military operations against them. There is an evident decline in their manpower from 100 in 2016 to 24 in 2024 (Ho, 2017). The group has increased their firearms from 29 in 2019 to 30 in 2024, but they have experienced an overall decline from their peak firearm count of 48 in 2023.

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (Maguindanao)

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters mainly function in the Maguindanao province. It broke away from the MILF after the MILF endorsed an autonomy approach instead of complete independence. After the Philippine Supreme Court nullified the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain, which sought to expand the ARMM region's territorial reach, Ameril Umbra Kato formed the group. There have been disputes over the size of group membership in 2010 because Kato claimed that the group had 5,000 fighters when the government said he only had 300 (*Is Biff the MILF's 'BFF'?* 2015). The BIFF also rejected the 2012 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro, the preliminary peace agreement signed between the Philippine government and the MILF. It continued its fight against both groups (*Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (Biff/ISEA)* 2023).

In line with the signing of the final annexes of the Framework Agreement in January 2014, the Armed Forces of the Philippines also launched Operation Darkhorse against the BIFF. The army seized control of the BIFF's main camp in Shariff Saydona Mustapha, Maguindanao (*Enduring pain after Muslim rebel attack Zamboanga City* 2014). The BIFF also had a momentary allegiance to the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), as confirmed by commander Habib Mujahab Hashim (Medina, 2014). The BIFF and MILF were also involved in the infamous 2015 Mamasapano Clash, which led to the deaths of 44 members of the Philippines National Police (Hegina, 2015). After founder Ameril Umbra Kato's death, BIFF's former vice-chairman for political affairs, Ismael Abubakar, became the group's leader. Under Abubakar, the group adopted a more radical stance and declared allegiance to the Islamic State in August 2015 (Weiss, 2015). The radicalization of the group led to its fragmentation. Ustadz Karialan and his followers formed a separate faction that did

not subscribe to the IS ideology. The faction stated that "we are not to be swayed by the ISIS ideology because we adhere to the cause of the Moro struggle and teachings of the Koran." Further disagreements within Abubakar's faction, with some followers stating that he was not radical enough, led to the formation of the "Jamaatul al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar" faction under Esmael Abdulmalik alias Abu Toraife (Sarmiento, 2020). The faction is alternatively known as the Toraife group.

The Philippine military claimed that the BIFF was heavily involved in the Battle of Marawi in Lanao Del Sur, providing not only about 40 fighters but also critical logistical support (Weiss, 2017). The group's fragmentation may have led to conflicting claims of whether they were involved in the battle. BARMM Chief Minister, then the Moro Islamic Liberation Front leader, Ebrahim Murad, claimed that the BIFF was not involved in the Battle of Marawi (*BIFF Fighting Alongside Maute Abus in Marawi Military* 2017). In July 2017, nine members of the Toraife group were killed in a gunfight with the Philippine army. Between 50 and 200 BIFF militants clashed with Philippine government forces in May 2021 in Datu Paglas, Maguindanao. The Karialan faction carried out the attack; experts surmised that the attack was to demonstrate the group's combat capabilities.

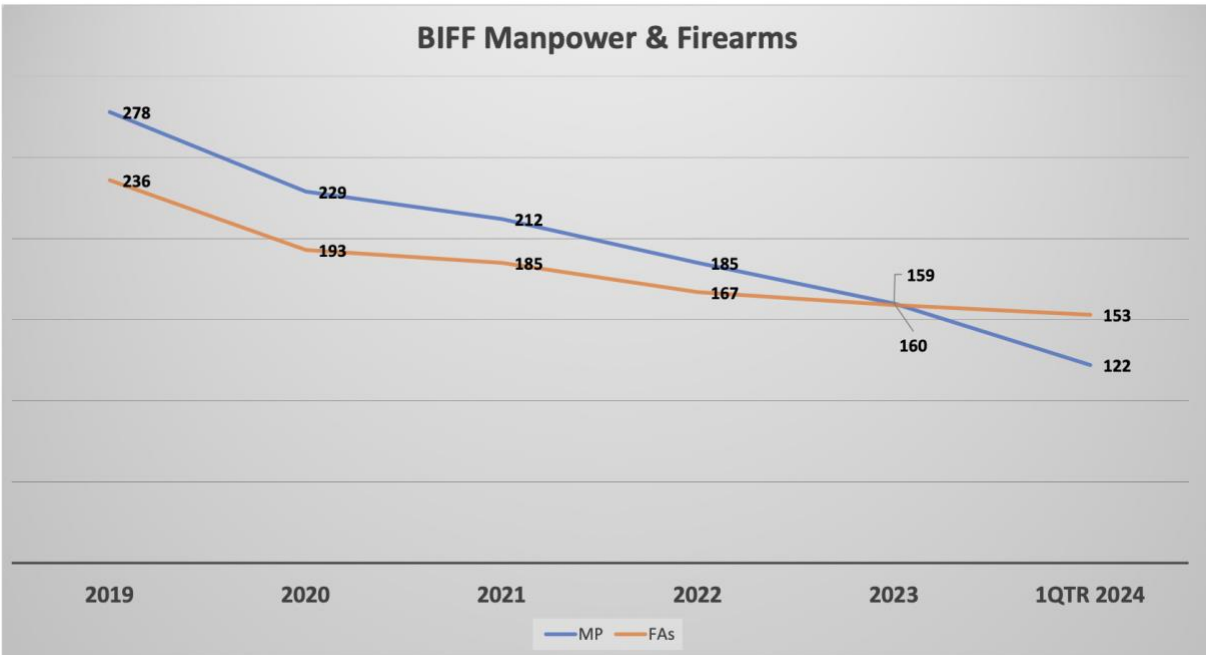


Figure 6. A Graph Demonstrating the Manpower and Possessed Firearms of the BIFF from 2019 to 2024 (National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, *BIFF Manpower & Firearms* 2024)

According to NICA intelligence, the group continues to suffer significant losses due to neutralizing its Field Commanders, surrendering members, and watchlisting inactive members. Out of the groups mentioned above, the BIFF remains the most resilient due to the presence of financial and logistical supporters possibly associated with their close familial ties to the MILF and MNLF. The group continues to execute harassment attacks, roadside bombings, and liquidation that target both government troops and civilians. The group still saw a considerable drop in its membership from 278 in 2019 to 122 in 2024 as shown in Figure 6. Their firearms saw less of a drop, with 236 in 2019 and 153 in 2024. Table 3 summarizes the key features of separatist groups discussed in the context section.

Table 3. Separatist Groups in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao

Group	Activity	Areas of Operation in BARMM	Aspiration
Moro National Liberation Front (Predecessor: Bangsamoro Liberation Organization)	March 18, 1968 – September 2, 1996 (as a secessionist group) September 2, 1996 – present (as a political organization)	All of BARMM	Initially a secessionist organization and eventually opted for regional autonomy
Moro Islamic Liberation Front	1977 – March 27, 2014	All of BARMM	Sought an autonomous region of the Moro people
Abu Sayyaf	1989-present	Sulu, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi	Establish an Islamic State in Mindanao
Maute Group	2013 to 2019	Lanao Del Sur	Establish an Islamic State in Mindanao
Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters	2008–present	Maguindanao	Establish an Islamic State in Mindanao

Violence Mitigation Strategy Ecosystem

This section explains the Development-Oriented Violence Mitigation Strategy Ecosystem, the programs composing the ecosystem, and how the programs interact.

Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP)

The E-CLIP program is a basic need approach to administer assistance to Former Rebels (FRs) from Former Violent Extremists (FVEs) Groups in accordance with Administrative Order No. 25. E-CLIP functions under Task Force Balik Loob (TFBL). TFBL aims to centralize all government efforts to integrate Former Rebels and Former Violent Extremists to maximize their socioeconomic and political impact by ensuring effective and efficient implementation.

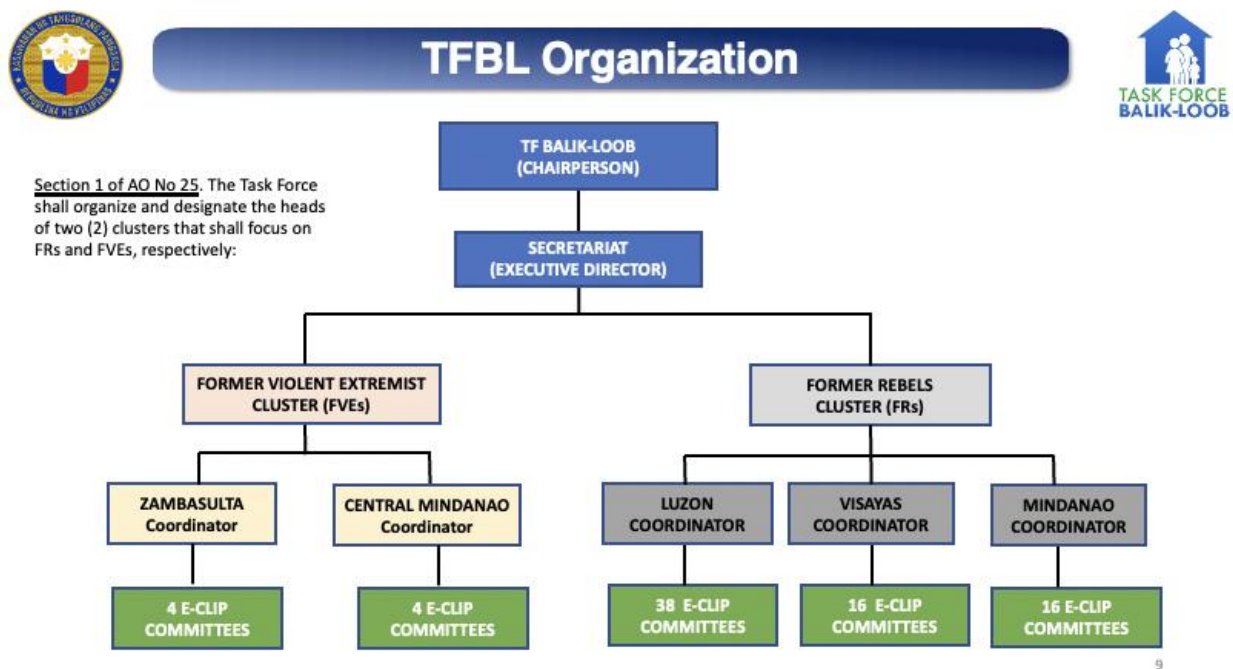
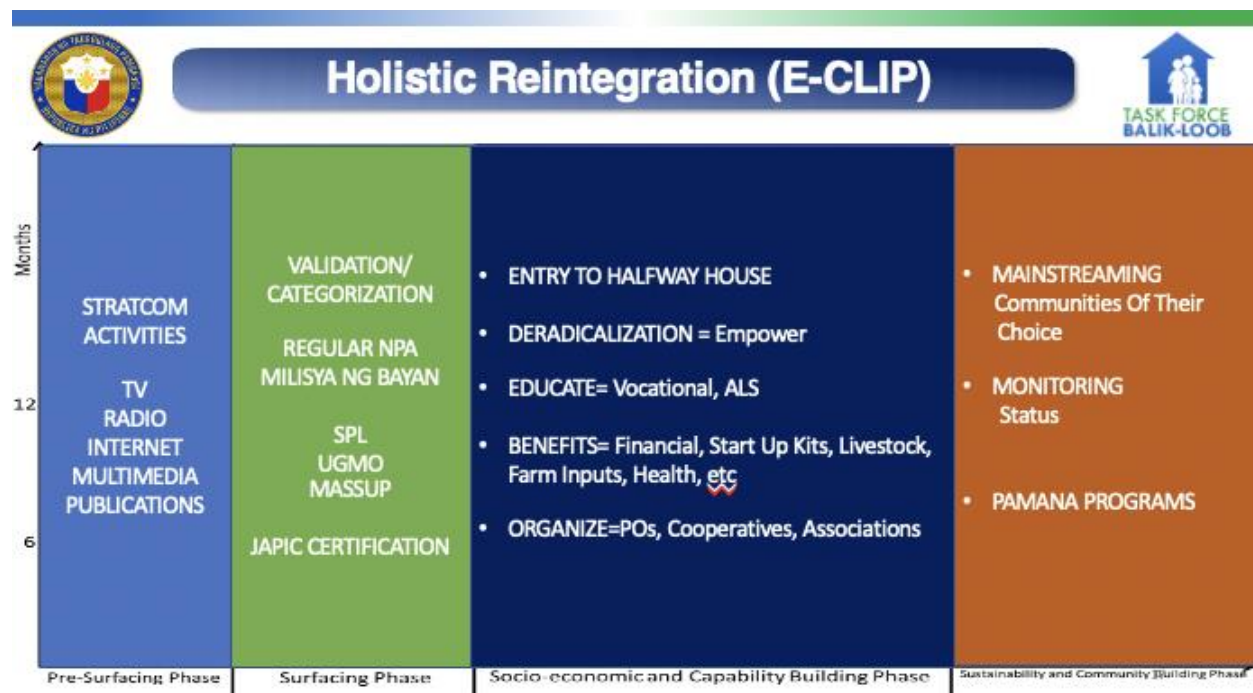


Figure 7. The Organization Chart of Task Force Balik Loob and E-CLIP (Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP), 2023).

Figure 7 shows the organization of the TFBL hierarchy and how E-CLIP committees are created and managed. The TFBL overlooks the execution of the E-CLIP program. The E-CLIP committees function under the TFBL umbrella. The figure shows that the FVEs, encompassing

the groups in this study, have two coordinators: the ZAMBASULTA Coordination and the Central Mindanao Coordinator. Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi are included in ZAMBASULTA, while Lanao Del Sur and Maguindanao are included in Central Mindanao. Both designations have 4 E-CLIP committees each. These E-CLIP committees comprise two chairpersons: a Provincial Governor or Highly Urbanized City Mayor,¹³ and an Armed Forces of the Philippines Brigade Commander. Members include a Philippine National Police Provincial Director, a Local Social Welfare and Development Officer (LSWDO), a Department of Interior and Local Government Provincial or HUC Officer, a representative from a Civil Society Organization, and other representatives as may be deemed necessary by the E-CLIP Committee.



¹³ According to the Local Government Code of 1991 or Republic Act No. 7160, highly urbanized cities (HUC) have the following criteria: Cities with a minimum population of two hundred thousand (200,000) inhabitants, as certified by the Philippine Statistics Authority, and with the latest annual income of at least fifty million pesos (₱50,000,000 or USD 1,000,000) based on 1991 constant prices, as certified by the city treasurer. There are currently 33 highly urbanized cities in the Philippines, 16 of which are located in Metro Manila.

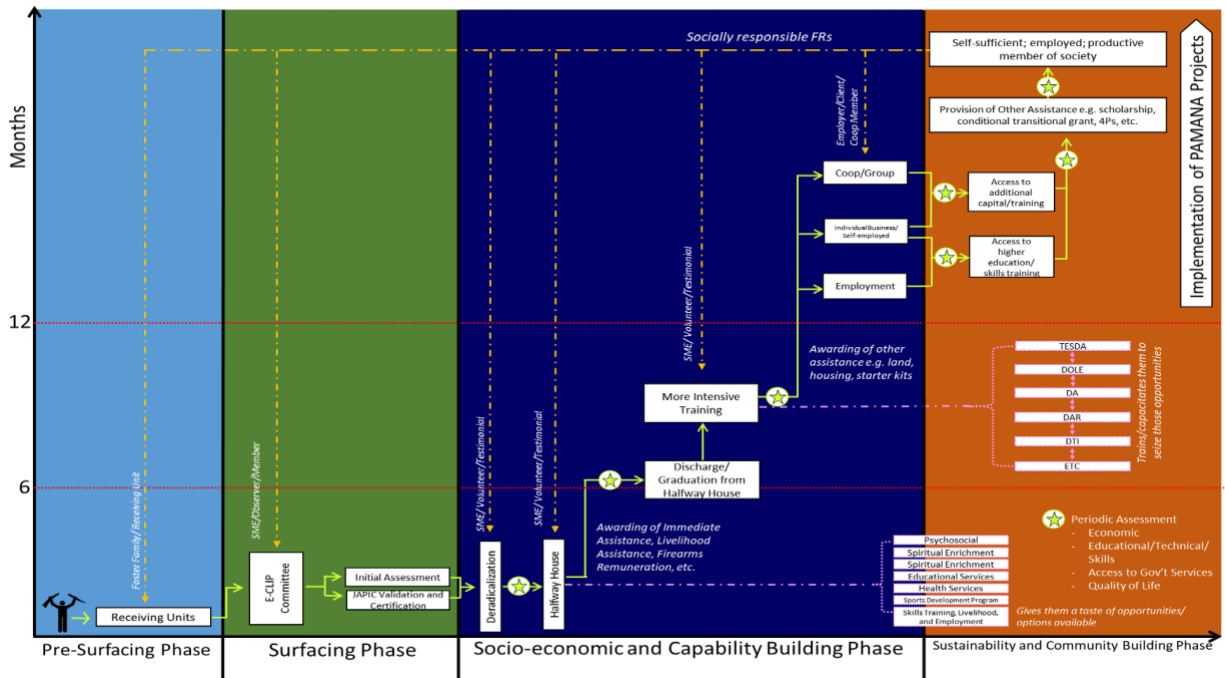


Figure 8. Stages of E-CLIP Holistic Reintegration and Implementation Units (Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP), 2023)

The E-CLIP program has four stages of holistic integration: the pre-surfacing phase, the surfacing phase, the socioeconomic and capability-building phase, and the sustainability and community-building phase, as shown in Figure 8. In the pre-surfacing phase, the receiving military units conduct strategic communication activities by encouraging surrenderees through TV, Radio, Internet, and Multimedia Publications. The E-CLIP committee then processes the documents of surrenderees during the surfacing phase and certifies that surrenderees were former rebels. During the socioeconomic and capacity-building phase, the former rebels enter a halfway house, where they go through deradicalization training. They also learn the alternative learning system curriculum from the Department of Education and vocational training. In this phase, the combatants also receive financial benefits, entrepreneurship start-up kits, livestock, farm inputs, or health benefits. While in the halfway house, they also have psychosocial therapy,

spiritual enrichment programs, health services, and sports development programs. Finally, the Sustainability and Community Building Phase sees a reintegration of combatants into the communities of their choice. The combatants have access to higher education opportunities, more vocational training, and additional capital if necessary. [7]

E-CLIP works with the PAyapa at MASaganang PamayaNAn (PAMANA) program, a national program under the Office of the Presidential Advisor on Peace, Unity, and Reconciliation. The program broadly promotes the economic development of conflict-afflicted provinces to prevent conflict recurrence (Haim et al., 2019). In ARMM, the predecessor of BARMM, the MNLF, and the Philippine Government built infrastructure (i.e., local roads, water systems, and community infrastructure) in the communities through PAMANA. The program also increased capacity building for local government units on alternative dispute resolution (ADR) for Katarungang Pambarangay (Barangay Justice System). Lastly, the program was geared towards providing health insurance and study grants to MNLF members and families.

The E-CLIP program has been very successful. 3,034 individuals from the ASG, MAUTE-IS, and BIFF have surrendered under the program, and 6,635 firearms have been surrendered throughout the country (*Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (E-CLIP)*, 2023).

Project Tulong ng Gobyernong Nagmamalasakit (Project TuGoN)

The BARMM Region Ministry of the Interior and Local Government implements project Tulong ng Gobyernong Nagmamalasakit (Project TuGoN). Project TuGoN aims to help former combatants through the E-CLIP program. The benefits of the program include immediate cash assistance, food relief assistance, reformation, and reintegration assistance (i.e., counseling

services and psychosocial therapy through the BARMM Ministry of Social Service Development), capacity building and skills assistance through training from the Ministry of Basic, Higher, and Technical Education, livelihood assistance to support entrepreneurship development training, and housing assistance of around 650,000 pesos per beneficiary (Abas, 2023). The program has assisted 202 BIFF members from Maguindanao, 56 members of the Maute Group in Lanao Del Sur, 35 members of the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan, and 54 members of Abu Sayyaf in Sulu. The program has totaled 347 beneficiaries.

Joint Task Force

The Joint Task Force is a comprehensive force that makes operational decisions on how the government should address "security threats" in the region (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana*, 2022). There are joint task forces in all provinces in the BARMM region. In Basilan and Sulu, the JTF initiated provincial programs for socioeconomic development, such as PAVE and BRAVE. The Joint Task Force is comprised of the military commander of the area (Western Mindanao Command or WestMinCom for Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi and Central Mindanao Command or CenMinCom for Lanao Del Sur and Maguindanao) as well as the provincial leaders. Now, the JTF is in charge of enduring security threats on a military front and endorsing E-CLIP surrenderees (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023).

Provincial Development Programs (PAVE, BRAVE, and Agila Haven)

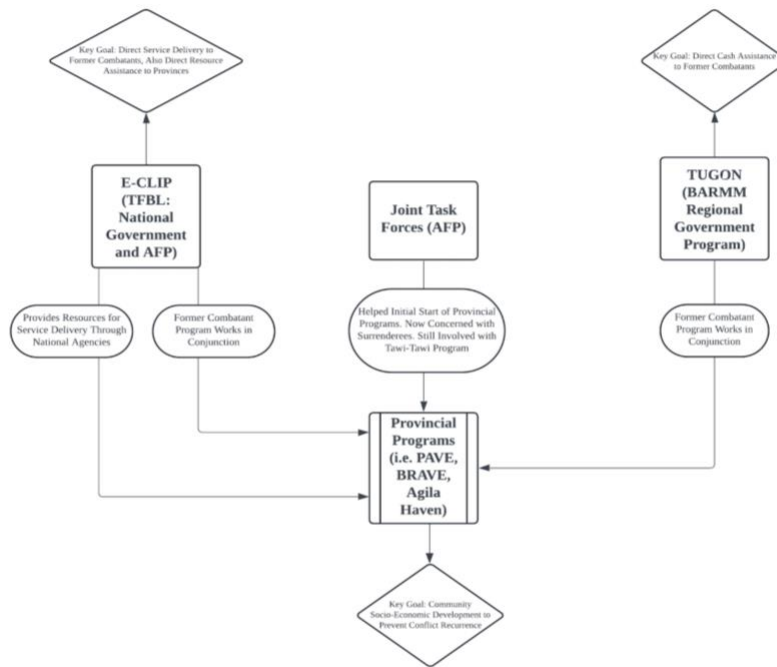
The PAVE for Peace was launched by then Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) governor Mujiv Hataman on April 17, 2018, alongside then WestMinCom Commander General Cirilito Sobejana (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022). The PAVE for Peace

program takes a holistic approach to peacebuilding. Before E-CLIP and TUGON were launched, PAVE was the first program to introduce a holistic approach to peacebuilding by investing in the socioeconomic development of former combatants. Prior to PAVE, the government took a purely militaristic approach to establishing peace in the region; PAVE was an experimental pilot program from Basilan to prevent conflict recurrence. E-CLIP and TUGON are both based on the template of the PAVE program. PAVE has expanded to be a Community Support Program supporting broad socioeconomic development to discourage conflict.

BRAVE mimics the template created by PAVE but executed in Sulu. Sobejana, also an implementer of the BRAVE program, describes it as "the interplay of good governance, law enforcement, and community participation." The program, like PAVE, focuses on three objectives: "eliminating the drivers of violent extremism; comprehensive mainstreaming of former rebels; and sustaining peace and development in the country and in the province, as a whole" (*Westmincom proposes reform program vs. violent extremism 2019*)

Anak na may Ginintuang Layunin upang Hintuan Ang Violent Extremism Ngayon or "AGILA Haven" has a similar template to PAVE as well. AGILA Haven helps combatants by providing them with resources like tractors for farming or rolling stores. Maguindanao del Sur Provincial Administrator Cyrus Torreña stated, "we are not the ones dictating what they want, but rather they should identify what their needs are, and that is what our provincial government will provide" (Belgera, 2024). The program has 500 surrenderees so far. Maguindanao also focuses on broad community socioeconomic development to prevent conflict recurrence.

The Violence Mitigation Ecosystem



*Figure 9. A Flow Chart Demonstrating the Interactions Between the Programs in the Violence Mitigation Ecosystem*¹⁴

E-CLIP and TUGON are both programs directed toward assisting former combatants. As Figure 9 exhibits, E-CLIP and TUGON both support provincial programs. TUGON provides cash assistance to former combatants in the area, while E-CLIP provides more material assistance through national agencies. JTF first helped Basilan and Sulu start their programs; now, they are more concerned with surrenderees and enduring military security issues.

¹⁴ Maguindanao Del Sur Governor Mariam Mangudadatu claims that it has not received funding from the BARM government, but national officials dispute this claim.

VI. Methodology and Research Design

In this section, the paper explains why the author chose the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao as a case study location, explains how the research attempts to fill the gaps in the current literature, and delineates the specifications of the research method.

Case Selection

The paper chose the Philippines because there has been research on national violence mitigation strategies, but there has yet to be a particular focus on provincial violence mitigation strategies. Previous research has primarily focused on the national violence mitigation strategy, PAyapa at MAsaganang PamayaNAn or PAMANA, a program created by the Philippine government due to the peace negotiations in 2010 (Haim et al., 2019). This national program is unrelated to any of the programs in this study because it is too focused on infrastructural projects (i.e. roadwork) and works independently from provincial government efforts. Aside from the research mentioned earlier on PAMANA, there is limited research on the state of violence mitigation strategies in the Philippines.

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao is a particularly valuable location for this case study because the provinces of the region all have similar terrorist groups within its borders that have similar ideologies and separatist histories, as demonstrated in Table 4. The provinces in the region are all under one regional government and previously under the same defunct government in the last two decades. The provinces thus share similar histories. This case selection allows for controlling extraneous variables that could influence the outcome. On paper, the provinces also have access to the same resources on a national and regional level under the E-

CLIP and TUGON programs. The provinces also have implemented the same template and basic structure for their provincial violence mitigation strategies.

Table 4. Comparison of Each Province’s Salafi-Jihadist Groups, Program Resources, and Current Combatant Count in the Bangsamoro Autonomous of Muslim Mindanao (Suansing, General Noel Plaza 2023)

Province	Salafi-Jihadist Group	Provincial Program	Resources	Active Combatants
Basilan	Abu Sayyaf (declared allegiance of the Islamic State)	PAVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ECLIP ● TUGON ● Joint Task Force Basilan under Western Mindanao Command 	5
Sulu	Abu Sayyaf (declared allegiance of the Islamic State)	BRAVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ECLIP ● TUGON ● Joint Task Force Sulu under Western Mindanao Command 	0
Tawi-Tawi	Abu Sayyaf (declared allegiance of the Islamic State)	Development program under Joint Task Force Tawi-Tawi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ECLIP ● TUGON ● Joint Task Force Tawi-Tawi under Western Mindanao Command 	0
Lanao Del Sur	The Maute Group (declared allegiance of the Islamic State)	Unnamed development program in progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ECLIP ● TUGON ● Central Mindanao Command 	24
Maguindanao (Del Norte and Del Sur)	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (subgroups declared allegiance of the Islamic State)	Agila Haven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ECLIP ● TUGON ● Central Mindanao Command 	122

Table 5 also shows that all the provinces have similar economic resources through agriculture, aquaculture, and livestock. Lanao Del Sur has a more prominent informal economy because of the recent siege but relies on agriculture for 40 percent of its economy (*From Informality to Inclusion: Exploring the Informal Economy Landscape in Marawi City through a Systems Approach* 2024). The provinces have varying poverty incidences but are within the 13-percentage points range. The similarity in the provinces' economic profile and poverty incidence deems the comparative study viable.

Table 5. A Comparative Table on the Economic Resources and Poverty Incidence of the Provinces in the Bangsamoro Autonomous of Muslim Mindanao (Preliminary 2023 1st sem Poverty Statistics Tables 2023)

Province	Economic Resources	Poverty Incidence (Percent) ¹⁵
Basilan	Agriculture (coconuts, rice, corn, abaca, and coffee) and aquaculture (tuna, mackerel, and sardines)	10.16
Sulu	Agriculture (abaca, coconuts, Sulu coffee, oranges, and lanzones) and aquaculture (pearl farming)	13.29 ¹⁶
Tawi-Tawi	Agriculture (root crops) and aquaculture (grouper and seaweed)	4.57
Lanao Del Sur	Agriculture (lowland rice farming) and informal economy	0.00
Maguindanao (Del Norte and Del Sur)	Agriculture (corn and rice), livestock, and poultry	6.29

¹⁵ Based on the World Bank's poverty threshold of \$2.15 a day

¹⁶ The differences in poverty incidence can be attributed to asymmetrical resource allotment on a regional level, which will be explained in the analysis section.

The combination of this case study and this research question is also valuable because of its novelty. Current research does not explore the national and regional government dynamics and the politics of implementing these development programs. Current literature is also outdated because it does not consider the most recent political infighting in the BARMM regional government ahead of the 2025 Elections, which is discussed extensively in this paper. The research also fails to explore the recent political fighting in the Maguindanao province that has led to the separation of the province into two provinces and how that has affected the implementation of the violence mitigation strategies. Existing research is also primarily based on secondary sources. It has not obtained the insights of high-level military, and government officials as well as community leaders on the success or failure of current violence mitigation strategies. Now that the case has been justified, the next section focuses on the specifics of this paper's methodology.

Methodology

The research explores the question: "What factors affect the success of violence mitigation strategies in areas infiltrated by Salafi-Jihadist groups in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao?" The research question is analyzed using a comparative in-case study method. This method allows for controlling extraneous variables that could influence the outcome.

The result of this paper is a product of an almost 2-year endeavor collecting information through hours-long interviews with high-level military officials.¹⁷ To obtain the information necessary for this analysis, I conducted 4.5 months of research in Manila and ethnographic fieldwork in some provinces in Mindanao during the summer of 2023, December 2023, and

¹⁷ This research was approved by the Internal Review Board at Yale University (2000035144).

January 2024. I conducted interviews with high-level military, government, and non-government organization officials.¹⁸ Key interview highlights include:

1. Lieutenant General Cirilito Sobejana, the former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. He was the head of the Army, Navy, and Air Force in the Philippines. He and former ARMM Governor Mujiv Hataman and Basilan Governor Hadjiman Hataman Saliman started the first ever provincial human-centered-violence mitigation program, PAVE. He also worked as the head of the Western Mindanao Command that managed Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi
2. General Noel Plaza, National Intelligence Coordinating Agency Regional Director of BARMM- he is the head of intelligence for the Bangsamoro region.
3. Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista, Task Force Balik Loob Operation Officer- he is the head of all violence mitigation strategies operations in the Philippines.
4. General Domingo Gobway, former Brigadier Commander of Joint Task Force Basilan- he was the former head of the counterterrorism operations in Basilan under the Philippine army.
5. Niniay Mohammed, Local Youth Development Officer of Lanao Del Sur- she is one of the head officers on youth affairs and violence mitigation in Lanao Del Sur
6. Nurhati Tangging, Area Manager of Balay Mindanaw- she was the area manager of Balay Mindanaw, a key non-governmental organization in Basilan.

Obtaining information through this method was difficult because the Philippine government classified much of the information revealed in these interviews and data. Security

¹⁸ All interviewees are included in the appendices.

clearance was needed to be obtained on multiple levels to reveal certain information. For example, information about the manpower and firepower of the Salafi-Jihadist groups is classified under the Philippine government because knowledge of these Salafi-Jihadist groups can endanger military operations. There is also minimal research on the specific programs being investigated in the paper, and there is a complete lack of secondary sources on this topic. All the information in the cross-provincial analysis and discussion sections was obtained through interviews or data documents shared by military officials after extensive security clearance procedures. Other primary sources included government documents, archives, and press releases. Lieutenant General Sobejana explicitly stated that there is no mechanism for recording institutional memory on the violence mitigation strategies, the joint task forces, and the national and regional government programs explored in this paper (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022). Obtaining these interviews heavily depended on connections made with high-level government officials; to interview these officials, much consultation was needed from their departments on what information could be divulged from their side. The next section explores the findings that emerged from this methodology.

VII. Cross-Provincial Comparison of Violence Mitigation Strategies

In this section, this paper executes a cross-provincial comparison of violence mitigation strategies; this comparison elucidates why some provinces and strategies have been successful or have failed in eradicating the Salafi-Jihadist threat. Each section is split into four parts: provincial geography and historical context, history of Salafi-Jihadism, a description of their violence mitigation strategy, and factors for the success or failure of this strategy. This section is followed by an analysis of the broad factors that lead to the success or failure of violence mitigation strategies in the BARMM province of the Philippines.

A. Basilan



Figure 10. Map Showing Basilan's Location in the Context of the Philippines and Mindanao (File: Ph Locator Basilan.Svg, 2020)

Basilan is in the Sulu archipelago along with Sulu and Tawi-Tawi in the southernmost part of the Philippines as seen in figure 10. It is the largest province in the Sulu archipelago (Unson, 2016). The Yakan people were the first to arrive in Basilan around 300 BCE to 200 BCE. The Tausug and Samal people also settled in Basilan. The Basilan area was a significant part of the Sulu Sultanate and was particularly acclaimed for its skillful Tausug warriors. Basilan is even derived from *basih-lan*, which means "the iron way." Basilan was the site of several conflicts during the colonial period and gained official recognition as a province in 1973 (*Basilan*, 2022).

Basilan and the Abu Sayyaf Group

Basilan is one of the two most important provinces in ASG history. Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, the founder of the ASG, originated from Basilan; the province was the headquarters of the ASG operation during their period of growth. Radicalization was influential in the province for two reasons: poverty and political opportunity. Abdurajak Abubakar and Khadaffy Janjalani, the first two leaders of the group, lived in Isabela City, one of the poorest cities of the Philippines at the time, which made radicalization effective (Banlaoi, 2019). During the group's early establishment, the Philippine Government endowed the MNLF with the governance of ARMM. The radical members, who were unsatisfied with autonomy and yearned for secession, resumed the armed struggle through the ASG (*ABU SAYYAF GROUP (ASG) 2006*).

Though Basilan was the site of armed disputes, it is most notable because of the high number of high-profile kidnappings and bombings in the early 2000s. Warren Richard Rodwell, a former Australian Army soldier and university English teacher, was also kidnapped and brought to Basilan by the Abu Sayyaf in 2011 (Bashan, 2013). Chinese national Li Pei Zhei was also kidnapped in Zamboanga Sibugay, a nearby province, and brought to Basilan to be held there for two months (*CHINESE KIDNAP VICTIM FREED IN SIBUGAY 2014*). In 2016, sailors from the Vietnamese vessel MV Royale 16 were abducted near Basilan (Verheij, 2016). High profile attacks in the province marked the 2000s and early 2010s. Now, in the 2020s, the Basilan government has been able to eliminate any attacks and reduce the number of Abu-Sayyaf militants to 5 (National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, *ASG Manpower & Firearms 2024*). Its officials attribute their success to the PAVE for Peace program.

PAVE: A History

The Former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines Cirilito Sobejana attributed the recent success of Basilan in reducing ASG membership to political will and the early implementation of comprehensive violence mitigation strategies (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022).¹⁹

In 2017, the Provincial Government of Basilan launched the Program Against Violent Extremism for Peace (PAVE) program. After the frequent clashes between terrorism groups and the Philippine Army in the early 2000s, Sobejana stated that under his leadership, the military was forced to reevaluate its "counterterrorism" approach.²⁰ Prior to becoming the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Sobejana was the head of the Western Mindanao Command or WestMinCom (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022). WestMinCom is the army command that supervises Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi.

In the early 2000s, the Philippine "counterterrorism" approach was based on the United States' approach to the War on Terror in the Middle East. Since 2002, the United States has invested 3.9 billion dollars into Philippine "counterterrorism" efforts (Abuza, 2018). The manhunt for top officials and subsequent decapitation was the key strategy of the program. After the army neutralized these top officials, the Salafi-Jihadist organizations quickly regrouped. The group was still successful with recruitment because of rampant poverty in the Western Mindanao provinces. Then ARMM Governor Mujiv Hataman, a seasoned politician in

¹⁹ Interview Cirilito Sobejana, December 11, 2022. Each citation from this interview will henceforth be notated in the same template (Suansing, *Interview Name* Year) in accordance with APA standards.

²⁰ Terrorism is a heavily disputed term in political science, but for the sake of authenticity, this paper will use counterterrorism in quotes because this is the term used by Sobejana and Gobway during the interview. "Counterterrorism programs" described by Sobejana and Gobway is defined by this paper as violence mitigation strategy.

Basilan prior to the governor post, launched PAVE in partnership with Sobejana. (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022).²¹

PAVE economically empowered former combatants from the ASG by reintegrating former combatants into the economic sectors of Basilan through vocational training and cash incentives. The former ASG members from different towns in Basilan were reintegrated into mainstream communities, where they now work as farmers, fishermen, and entrepreneurs (*Basilan gov seeks sustained programs for rebel returnees* 2019). The program led to the successful surrender of over 214 members of the ASG (Suansing, *General Domingo Gobway* 2023). The streamlining of the program created and strengthened mechanisms designed to find work for former and potential future combatants of the ASG (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022).

This program, now under E-CLIP, allowed former ASG combatants to engage in farming, fishing, and entrepreneurship vocational training. Former combatants also enrolled in the Alternative Learning System program, where they completed their high school education within one to two years. The ALS program targets out-of-school youth, a demographic in which received combatants usually fall. In the program's first iteration, former combatants and families displaced by the conflict received housing. Former Brigadier Commander of Joint Task Force Basilan Domingo Gobway shared that, through the program, a former member of the ASG launched an entrepreneurship venture and found economic success. He then distributed over 500 kilograms of

²¹ PAVE was expanded into a broader version, BRAVE, that included programs for broader socio-economic development. However, for the purposes of this paper and creating a distinction between the Basilan program and the BRAVE program in Sulu, this paper will only refer to the Basilan program as PAVE and occasionally PAVE for Peace.

rice on his bicycle to former combatants and families affected by the conflict (Suansing, *General Domingo Gobway* 2023).

PAVE As a Success Story: Political Will and Early Implementation

PAVE was an uncertain experiment at the time of its conception and is now one of the great success stories of the Philippine peacebuilding process. PAVE possessed three remarkable traits that led to its success: political will, funding, and community support. Gobway said that the start of the ASG's fall in the province occurred after Basilan Governor Hadjiman "Jim" Hataman Saliman declared a figurative "all-out war" against the group. Saliman directed significant resources from a multitude of government agencies to guarantee the decline of the group in the province (Suansing, *General Domingo Gobway* 2023).

Sobejana added that during this time, ARMM Governor Mujiv Hataman had a unique vision for "counterterrorism" in Basilan and had the resources to implement his vision. Hataman placed comprehensive "counterterrorism" as the province's main priority and persisted in pioneering the first "counterterrorism" program of this nature in the Philippines.²² Task Force Balik Loob Operation Officer Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista said that Hataman's position as ARMM governor put him in a unique position to funnel significant funds to the "counterterrorism" programs of Basilan (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023). Throughout the program, Gobway said that 187 combatants received housing, 68 received vocational training, 121 received education through the Alternative Learning System of the Department of Education, 209 were livelihood program beneficiaries, 378 underwent psychosocial

²² Again, Sobejana and Gobway explicitly use counterterrorism. "Counterterrorism programs" described by Sobejana and Gobway is defined by this paper as violence mitigation strategy.

programming. Gobway particularly spoke highly of the exposure tour, where 102 former combatants could travel away from the province to more well-known cities to have a broader perspective of the opportunities around the Philippines (Suansing, *General Domingo Gobway* 2023). The combatants were then forwarded to the provincial government, which referred them to the provincial agencies or non-governmental organizations that could cater to their needs (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023).

The program also operated with the non-governmental organization Balay Mindanaw, which helps in the livelihood training sessions and conducts personality development activities for former combatants. Nurhati Tangging, the area manager for Balay Mindanaw in Basilan, said that the provincial government had close relationships with non-governmental organizations because the heads of these organizations would be part of their consultative bodies. Military commands and the surrounding communities deeply supported the program because of its contextualization and community basis (Suansing, *Nurhati Tangging* 2023).

PAVE thrived because of a unique governmental dedication to crafting a comprehensive violence mitigation program with the cooperation of the regional government, provincial government, and military forces. It was also supported by significant funding and community contextualization, which was rare for a development-oriented violence mitigation strategy in the Philippines (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022).

PAVE's Roadblocks

National and Regional Disputes

Though PAVE is the region's remarkable success story, its future is in peril. The national and regional government are in dispute about resource allocation to the program. After the transition from ARMM to BARMM occurred in 2018, Gobway said that the regional support for the PAVE program became limited. This limiting of support restricted interventions for the former combatants. During the ARMM years, Hataman directed most of the funding to Sulu, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi because of the governor's ties to the area, which caused tension between the provinces. The BARMM governor, Ebrahim Murad, directs most of its program focus to the Eastern side of BARMM (i.e., Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur). Sulu, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi have now felt neglected by the regional government (Suansing, *General Domingo Gobway 2023*).

The most significant loss of the PAVE program under the BARMM government was the inability to provide housing and the loss of the exposure tour. The main issue with the national-regional dispute is that the ASG members could not enroll because the regional government restricted enrollment to both E-CLIP and Project TUGON until last year. For a significant period, limited interventions were available to former ASG members. Gobway said that during his time, three combatants returned to the Abu Sayyaf, which he hypothesizes is due to their dissatisfaction with the government programs. Gobway hopes that government interventions will soon resume. He worries that the combatants, who had surrendered formally, will return to the groups because they are not satisfied with interventions. Currently, the PAVE program is supported by the Australian government through a grant (Suansing, *General Domingo Gobway 2023*).

TFBL Commander Bautista also mentioned that the provincial government has sought the national government's help through the E-CLIP program to continue the interventions that started at the provincial level. The national government has also created a violence mitigation strategy similar to PAVE on a national level called the Enhanced Comprehensive Local Integration Program (ECLIP) (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023).

In the program's first iteration, combatants would complain to the government that though they would have the skills to enter the job market successfully, there were not enough economic opportunities for young adults to thrive in Basilan. The circumstances would encourage young adults to take up arms to avoid poverty (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022). In response to these calls from former combatants to revitalize the broader community economy, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) local office in Basilan, through the ECLIP program, launched the "Tulong Panghanapbuhay Para sa Ating Displaced or Disadvantaged Workers" (TUPAD) program. TUPAD is a community-based package of assistance that provides emergency employment for "all displaced workers, underemployed, and seasonal workers" in conflict areas. This program benefits former combatants and non-combatants who are vulnerable to taking up arms in Basilan (Alipala, 2019). DOLE released 209,000 dollars, which benefitted 2,935 TUPAD workers. Each worker received "a salary of 100 dollars, personal protective equipment (PPE) in the form of sweatshirt and cap and enrollment to accident insurance coverage under the Group Personal Accident Insurance." The workers were also oriented on Occupational Safety and Health to ensure safety in their day-to-day tasks. The program coincided with PAVE's employment training, as the beneficiaries are tasked with activities related to farming and fishing. DOLE and the local government also provided beneficiaries with infrastructural access to the market and training relative to financial literacy. The farm's sales average 300 dollars a week and

has earned over 30,000 dollars a year from vegetable farming. Currently, the project employs 80 rebel returnees, who are directly involved in the project's operation, preventing them from returning to radical groups (*Republic of the Philippines Department of Labor and Employment Regional Office IX - zamboanga peninsula 2022*).

The reduction of violence has now created more opportunities for investment in Basilan. A transnational firm, the Davao-based Unifruitti Group, and its local partners established a 1,000-hectare Cavendish banana plantation in Lamitan City, capital of Basilan in 2020. According to officials of the Regional Board of Investments-Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, the investment employed no fewer than a thousand local laborers. The Unifruitti Group and its local counterparts put another plantation just as large in Basilan's Lantawan town, a former bastion of the Abu Sayyaf, in 2021 (Francisco, 2020). The provincial government also launched a first-ever P20 million ice plant project in Maluso, the fishing capital of Basilan, to boost the marketability, via proper refrigeration processes, of daily catch surplus from the territorial seas of the province to markets in the Zamboanga peninsula. Sobejana said that he is hopeful that the eradication of Abu Sayyaf's influence can reign in more investment and economic opportunities for Basilan, which, in turn, would eliminate the economic grievances that caused the acts of terrorism in the first place (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana 2022*).

Basilan's success in eradicating the influence of the Abu Sayyaf can be attributed to the combination of providing former combatants and at-risk, prospective combatants with the economic skills to thrive in the job market, obtaining community legitimacy, and bolstering the socio-economic opportunities for the community through investment.

B. Sulu



Figure 11. Map Showing Sulu's Location in the Context of the Philippines and Mindanao

(File:Ph Locator Sulu.Svg, 2020)

Sulu is also located in the Sulu archipelago and borders the Sulu Sea as seen in figure 11. Sunni Sufi Scholar Karim-ul Makhdum came to Sulu and introduced Islam to the Philippines. Sayyid Abubakar Abirin, born in Johore, now in Malaysia, came to Sulu and eventually established the Sultanate of Sulu (Saleeby, 2013). During the colonial period and early Philippine democracy, Sulu was the sight of clashes for Islamic autonomy. A notable clash was the Jaidah Massacre and the 1974 Battle of Jolo between the Philippine government and the MNLF (*ARMM gov: Martial law killings a 'painful part of our history as Moros'* 2018). Nur Missuari, the Commander of the MNLF, is from Sulu. The prominence of

Sulu in Islamic history and its proximate location made the province an attractive headquarters for the ASG.

Sulu and the Abu Sayyaf

The Abu Sayyaf had an especially strong hold of the Jolo, the capital of Sulu. It was the headquarters of the ASG for two decades. The ASG committed a series of kidnappings in the area in the 2000s. The Abu Sayyaf traveled to Malaysia and kidnapped 21 hostages from Germany, France, Finland, and South Africa; the ASG brought them back to Jolo and asked for 25 million dollars in ransom (Paddock, 2001). The ASG also kidnapped several journalists in Jolo. In 2009, Abu Sayyaf kidnapped International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegates in Patikul. Sulu was also the site of several gunfights between the government and the ASG, including the Battle in Patikul in 2006 (Alipala, 2009). In 2019, the ASG group took responsibility for the bombing of the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (*Jolo, stronghold of Islamist group Abu Sayyaf* 2009).

In 2022, the government declared that Sulu province was completely free of Abu Sayyaf militants (*Sulu now Abu Sayyaf-free, provincial peace and order council declares* 2023). Task Force Balik Loob Operation Officer Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista added that he was especially proud that tourists can now wander in Sulu, a scenario thought to be an impossibility in the 2000s when the Abu Sayyaf had a stronghold of the province and would target tourists (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023).

BRAVE: Early Implementation and National-Provincial Cooperation

Sulu's success in eradicating the influence of the Abu Sayyaf can be attributed to the relatively early implementation of the Broad Reforms in Addressing Violent Extremism (BRAVE) program and the political willingness to eradicate terrorism. Sulu's program to combat violent extremism is based on the PAVE program (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022).²³ When Sobejana oversaw "countering and preventing violent extremism" in both Basilan and Sulu, he derived his programs from Basilan as a template to apply to Sulu. Broad Reform Against Violent Extremism or BRAVE is now the program implemented in Sulu, which exactly replicates the framework created through the PAVE program but is contextualized based on Sulu. During its proposal in 2019, the program, an expanded version of PAVE in Basilan, entailed "eliminating the drivers of violent extremism; comprehensive mainstreaming of former rebels; and sustaining peace and development in the country and in the province, as a whole" (*Westmincom proposes reform program vs. violent extremism* 2019). Like Basilan, the most prominent economic avenues are fishing and farming, so similar programs on vocation and education plans were executed to economically "mainstream" the former and prospective combatants. Sobejana added that he had the full cooperation of the provincial government to implement BRAVE in the province, so he was able to implement the program immediately in partnership with then-Governor Abdusakur Tan II (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022).

Sulu is particularly successful because of the national-provincial government cooperation in the province. Task Force Balik Loob Operation Officer Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista stated that Sulu encouraged the first combatant to register for the E-CLIP program. To date, 160

²³ The Philippine government refers to the ideology of Salafi-Jihadist groups as violent extremism.

combatants have registered for the program in Sulu (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023). The province has many registered combatants because the local government cooperates with the national government. Bautista added, however, that though many combatants have surrendered, disputes persist between the national and regional governments. Only two combatants have been awarded the program's full benefits. As mentioned earlier in the Basilan section, Western Mindanao, including Sulu, is more closely affiliated with the national government. The benefits offered in E-CLIP, the national government program, are similar to those offered by the regional government in their Project TUGON program. In the Project TUGON program memorandum, if an ex-combatant claims the benefits of E-CLIP, they cannot claim the benefits of Project TUGON. The national government has pushed back on this clause and asserted that combatants should be able to claim the benefits of both programs. Bautista said the national government is trying to find a workable solution with the regional government to avoid program conflict (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023).

The TUPAD program, in alignment with BRAVE and under the E-CLIP program, was launched in 2022. The program has the same scope as in Basilan, where "economic community projects like repair, maintenance and or rehabilitation of farm-to-market roads, bridges, post-harvest facilities, public markets and common service facilities such as production and display centers, fish ports and Agro-forestry community projects, such as tree planting, seedling preparation, and reforestation" are encouraged. The Department of Labor and Employment has endowed 10.3 million pesos to Sulu, and over 2,000 individuals have benefited from the program (*Tupad program benefits Sulu Province* 2022).

Sulu's BRAVE program has mainly been successful because of its relatively early implementation and the strong cooperation between the national and provincial governments.

C. Tawi-Tawi



Figure 12. Map Showing Tawi-Tawi's Location in the Context of the Philippines and Mindanao

(Villar, 2003)

Tawi-Tawi, the southernmost province in the Philippines, shares sea borders with Sabah in Malaysia, Borneo, and North Kalimantan provinces in Indonesia as seen in figure 12. Tawi-Tawi has been the home of the Sama people for centuries (Peralta, 1980). In 1380, Sheikh Karimol Makdum established the first mosque in the Philippines in Tawi-Tawi (Sather, 2006). Islam

became prevalent in the province, especially when the Sultanate of Sulu was established. The province is also home to the Tausug people.

Tawi-Tawi was officially declared a province on September 11, 1973. During this period, Islamic insurgencies were already prominent in southern Mindanao. At the time of the province's establishment, then-President Ferdinand Marcos asked Commodore Romulo Espaldon what motivated the people of Tawi-Tawi to take up arms for the Moro National Liberation Front. Espaldon stated, "the Sama boys, like their elders, and leaders are tired and weary of their union with the Province of Sulu. They want to have their own leaders and their own affairs. If his excellency wants to solve the problem, I recommend that he create them into a separate province and allow them to exercise their own local prerogatives" (Tahang, 2005). Espaldon earned in the title of the "father of Tawi-Tawi" thereafter. This quote encapsulates why the people of Tawi-Tawi have joined the armed struggle and why Salafi-Jihadism may be attractive to them.

Tawi-Tawi and the Abu Sayyaf

Though Tawi-Tawi was not the center of operations of the ASG, its proximity to the headquarters, Sulu, made it into prominent place for kidnapping. Notably in 2012, two European birdwatchers were seized on the island and then brought to the island of Jolo in Sulu. The Philippine government was able to rescue one of the birdwatchers, but the other birdwatcher was reportedly shot during a clash with the military in Sulu (*Swiss Hostages Escapes Abu Sayyaf Captors in Philippines*, 2014). On March 20, 2016, 10 Indonesian seafarers were abducted near the Tawi Tawi province (Sanchez, 2016). The seafarer boats were freighting coal from South Borneo, when their boats were hijacked. The Indonesian government paid the group's ransom, and on May 2, 2016, they were released (Hume & Quiano, 2016). According to the Philippine

government, the province had a total of 20 members from the ASG at its height. Now, they have zero members (Suansing, *General Noel Plaza* 2023). However, this success may be attributed to factors other than their violence mitigation strategy.

Mixed Success: Delayed Implementation and Geography

Tawi-Tawi has lagged in its violence mitigation strategies because of its geographical distance from the rest of the region and the country. General Noel Plaza, the Regional Director of the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, stated that the province was never the epicenter of Salafi-Jihadist activity because of its geographical location. Plaza described that the province had its "own operations and way of life" because they are more geographically isolated from the region and the Philippines. Analyzing the Philippine map, it is evident that Tawi-Tawi is much closer to its neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia, than many of the provinces of the Philippines. Plaza also shared that this geographic distance allows for the province to be vulnerable to illicit activity like drug trafficking.

Sobejana also said that when he led development and "counterterrorism" efforts in the Western Mindanao region, the province was the last priority (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022). In Sulu and Basilan, the army and its provincial government counterparts imminently found a solution to the Salafi-Jihadism problem because of how rampant the problem had become. In the 2000s, the kidnappings and lone wolf bombings were so numerous in these two provinces that these officials were pressured to find a solution. The problem was not so endemic and rampant in Tawi-Tawi, so there was a delay in the implementation efforts. Now, the province lags in its violence mitigation strategy.

Task Force Balik Loob Operation Officer Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista stated that the national government has only recently started implementing the E-CLIP in the province in 2022 (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023). He added that the provincial government has been highly cooperative, and efforts are progressing considerably. Bautista also said that the BARMM government exacerbated the delay. The national government initially transferred information about E-CLIP training through the BARMM government, which was then tasked to relay the information to local government units. This transfer of information was significantly delayed, so Bautista and his team opted to conduct the training directly in Tawi-Tawi province.

D. Lanao Del Sur



Figure 13. Map Showing Lanao Del Sur's Location in the Context of the Philippines and Mindanao ("Ph Locator Map Lanao Del Sur," 2017)

Compared to Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, Lanao del Sur is more inland within Mindanao Island as shown in figure 13. It borders the Maguindanao province, which is also in the BARMM region. Lanao del Sur is named after its prominent lake. Lanao means lake in the indigenous Ranao language. Prior to Islam, the region possessed an extensive culture. They developed prominent cultural icons like the Maranao gong, metal craft culture, and the torogan. They also have an indigenous script named the "suyat" script (*The Traditional Dance of Lanao Del Sur, on the*

Spotlight in Teleserye Wildflower, 2021). The famous Marawi City is the province's capital and was renamed the Islamic City of Marawi in 1980 (Lancion, 1995). It is the only city in the Philippines with a predominantly Muslim population. This rich Islamic history attracted the Maute Group to yearn for an Islamic State in Lanao Del Sur.

Lanao del Sur and the Maute Group

The infamous Maute Group, also known as Dawlah Islamiya, was founded in 2012 by Abdullah and Omar Maute (*Terrorists Isnilon Hapilon, Omar Maute killed in Marawi battle* 2017). The family was prominent in the city because of their wealth and political connections. The family even has relatives in politics in the city of Butig in the province. The family's well-connectedness solidified finances, logistics, and recruitment (Fonbuena, 2017). Academic scholars cite the group as a key example of familial connections as a motivator for "terrorist activity."

The group is cited by academic scholars as a key example of familial connections as a motivator for "terrorist activity" (Calamba, 2018). Plaza states that many of the group's members were foreigners as well (Suansing, *General Noel Plaza* 2023). He also stated that in contrast to guerilla groups, this group has an urban approach to terrorism. The Maute Group hoped to mimic the conditions of urban warfare in Syria.

On May 23, 2017, the group attacked Marawi City (*Terrorists Isnilon Hapilon, Omar Maute killed in Marawi battle* 2017); Marawi was the capital of the group's Islamic caliphate. The Abu Sayyaf group was also involved in this siege. The siege destroyed the majority of the city's buildings and led to the death of numerous civilians and soldiers. The city's prominent, green-domed mosque was also destroyed in the siege. The siege

created over one million internally displaced people who moved to the neighboring province, Lanao Del Norte.

The group was defeated in October 2017 after the Armed Forces of the Philippines killed its leaders, Omar and Abdullah Maute. In December 2017, the group began to re-emerge as the "Turaife" group, named after the alias of their leader, Esmail Sheikh Abdulmalik (*Maute Recruitment Continues around Marawi, 2017*). This version of the group split from the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, the most prominent Salafi-Jihadist group in the Maguindanao province. The group persisted in 2017 and 2018, using money looted from the local bank and the abandoned homes of wealthy residents in Marawi City. The death of their last known leader was confirmed in April 2019 through a DNA test. Plaza states that most of their activity currently is now lone wolf terrorism like the bombing of the Marawi State University gym on December 3, 2023 (Suansing, *General Noel Plaza 2023*). The Maute Group now only has 24 members (National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, *DI-MAUTE Manpower & Firearms 2024*).

Mixed Success: Delayed Implementation and a Lack of Political Will

Unlike Basilan and Sulu, Salafi-Jihadism was absent in Lanao Del Sur until the 2010s. The siege in Marawi has been the first instance of Salafi-Jihadism in the province. Task Force Balik Loob Operation Officer Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista stated that the necessity for violence mitigation strategies is a recent development (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista 2023*). The provincial government is now creating "catch-up" plans and determining whether they will implement the national government backed ECLIP program or the Bangsamoro regional government program, Project TUGON. Bautista states that since Executive Order 25 states that all

former violent extremists can be instated in the ECLIP program, Bautista believes that the program can particularly benefit former members of the Maute group.

Plaza is also leading the introduction of the Bringing Resilience through Peace, Order, Security, and Awareness (BRPOSA) program (Suansing, *General Noel Plaza* 2023). This program under the regional government entails teaching the Islamic concepts of peace in Islamic *madrasas*, creating security awareness, and involving provincial offices. In these Islamic schools, the regional government engages *Imams* or *Ustadhs* to teach the possibility of coexistence. The regional government is also creating a consortium of non-government organizations that can participate in the peace process and coordinate with the regional government. These non-government organizations help with psychosocial counseling and community reintegration. Plaza emphasized the need for local executives to be involved and lead these programs. Their approach is "a no size fits all" mentality, according to Plaza, and each of their approaches is tailored to each former combatant.

During the 2017 Marawi Siege, youth were a prominent recruitment demographic (Calamba, 2018). The provincial government responded accordingly by creating violence mitigation strategies targeting the youth. The Ranao Youth Development Council was one such initiative. Niniay Mohammad, a Local Youth Development Officer and chair of the council said that one of the main objectives was to help internally displaced people (IDPs) who were now out of school (Suansing, 2020). Jamal Pandapatan, a member of the council, said that their programs focus on teaching former youth combatants and the broader youth about Islamic conceptions of peace. The program is also an incubator for social entrepreneurship. *Arete Style*, a social enterprise from the project, provides these out-of-school youth IDPs an opportunity to create woven

materials. Ten percent of the enterprise's proceeds go to scholarships for these IDPs, according to Johare Bohari, another member of the council.

Lanao Del Sur has not established a streamlined violence mitigation strategy because Salafi-Jihadism was not prominent in the province until the 2010s; however, the provincial government is now working to create this streamlined strategy in the coming years. With the youth council's and local officials' innovative ideas, the future of violence mitigation looks promising for the province.

E. Maguindanao



Figure 14. Map Showing Maguindanao's Location in the Context of the Philippines and Mindanao (File:Ph Locator Maguindanao.Svg, 2020)

Maguindanao collectively refers to the provinces of Maguindanao del Norte and Maguindanao del Sur. This division was approved through a plebiscite on September 18, 2022. Islam first came to Maguindanao in the 15th century (Mastura, 1979). Maguindanao was formerly in the territory of the old province of Cotabato until it was dissolved in 1973 (*"Presidential Decree No. 341 – Creating the Provinces of North Cotabato, Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat"*, 1973). The province was unfortunately infamous throughout the country for its horrific political violence. On November 23, 2009, the Ampatuan family attacked the election caravan of Esmael Mangudadatu (Al Jazeera, 2019). Fifty-seven people were killed, including Mangudadatu's wife, other family members, and local journalists. Former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo placed the province in a state of martial law because of the massacre.

Another notable event in Philippine history occurred on January 25, 2015 (*Government-MILF Report Casualties in Rare Clash*, 2015). Forty-four members of the Special Action Force of the Philippine National Police were killed in a raid against Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist Zulkifli Abdir, aka Marwan. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters entangled themselves in the attack in Mamasapano, Maguindanao. This spark in violence put a brief hamper on peace negotiations. The attack is known as one of the biggest failures of the Aquino Administration.

The province split into two on September 18, 2022 (*Resolution No. 83, 2020*). The proposal of this division emerged from the formation of Shariff Kabunsuan. This area was previously its own province through the Muslim Mindanao Autonomy Act, but the Supreme Court overturned the law. The Commission on Elections held a plebiscite in which the citizens of both provinces voted overwhelmingly for the separation. The separation created a leadership crisis in the two

provinces (Rebollido, 2023). The former governor of the province, Mariam Mangudadatu, unilaterally assumed the position of Maguindanao del Sur's governor. Her vice governor, Aimee Sinsuat, assumed her post as Maguindanao del Norte's governor. Political infighting occurred during this period between the two officials, the regional government, and the national government. On April 5, 2023, Philippine President Bongbong Marcos named Marian Mangudadatu as the OIC governor of Maguindanao del Sur, while Abdulraof Macacua was named the acting governor of Maguindanao del Norte. These appointments officially ended the polemic.

Maguindanao and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters emerged in Maguindanao after they rejected the 2012 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro, the preliminary peace agreement between the Philippine government and the MILF. The BIFF vowed to continue fighting after this agreement was signed.

After the final annexes of the agreement were signed, the Philippine Army launched Operation Darkhorse against the group. Ameril Umbra Kato led the group. In 2015, the group executed several attacks, including bombing an outpost of the Philippine Army into detachments of the Special Action Force of the Philippine National Police. Kato died during this series of attacks (*Is Biff the MILF's 'BFF'?* 2015). The group's new leader, Ismael Abubakar, started to adopt the ideology of the Islamic State increasingly and declared allegiance to I.S. (Weiss, 2015). The group was not unanimously behind these developments and their ideology. One commander of BIFF, Ustadz Karialan, separated from the group and created a new faction. Disagreements continued in the Abubakar faction, where some of his followers stated that his stance was too moderate. These

followers eventually left and created their own faction, the Jamaatul al-Muhajireen, which was the most radical faction of the BIFF (Sarmiento, 2020).

A spokesperson for the group in June 2017 stated that they welcomed the offensive by the Maute group and Abu Sayyaf (Weiss, 2017). In May 2021, several of the group's fighters were held in clashes with Philippine security forces. Between 50 and 200 militants occupied the market in Datu Paglas on May 8, 2021 (*BIFF Fighting Alongside Maute Abus in Marawi Military* 2017). The security forces have speculated that this attack was to demonstrate that the group had continued combat capabilities through its operation (Suansing, *General Noel Plaza* 2023). The group still has 122 members (National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, *BIFF Manpower & Firearms* 2024).

Agila Haven: A History

Like Basilan and Sulu, Maguindanao has a structured violence mitigation strategy. *Anak na may GInintuang LAyunin upang Hintuan Ang Violent Extremism Ngayon* or “AGILA Haven” is Maguindanao’s violence mitigation strategy. Maguindanao followed a similar template as the PAVE for Peace and BRAVE programs. Provincial officials and the military constructed AGILA Haven. Similar to Sobejana and Hataman, the commander of Joint Task Force Central, Major General Juvymax Uy, and then-Maguindanao Governor Mariam Mangudadatu created the program together. During its establishment, Uy said he hoped the mechanism would provide a "comprehensive, inclusive, enduring, and culture-sensitive program to address violent extremism for lasting peace, security, and development" (Philippine Information Agency Cotabato City, 2020).

AGILA Haven is similar to PAVE and focuses on combatant and community socio-economic development. Some subprograms in AGILA Haven include livelihood initiatives,

ARM to FARM, and *Rido* of War. Livelihood initiatives focus on providing tractors for former combatants and rolling stores.²⁴ ARM to FARM is also a livelihood initiative, where the provincial government encourages former combatants to lay down their arms and participate in the province's agricultural sector ("AGILA HAVEN PROGRAM PINURI NI DEFENSE SEC. TEODORO PINALAWIG Ng Provincial Government Ang AGILA HAVEN Program (Anak Ng May Ginintuang Layunin Upang...,” 2023). Mangudadatu touts AGILA Haven as a violence mitigation success story. However, national officials dispute the province's claim to success.

Five hundred former combatants commendably surrendered to the program, but on a broader scale, 122 combatants from the BIFF remain. This figure can be compared to Basilan, where only five ASG members remain in the province. Given that this study measures success by the elimination of the Salafi-Jihadist threat through group membership, Basilan is still a stronger success story because only 5 combatants remain. Also, it is difficult to trust surrenderee numbers published by local governments because there is no verification mechanism. The remaining group membership remains as the most unbiased figure to base success.

Based on this figure, Maguindanao has the least successful violence mitigation program. This section explores potential factors that influenced mixed peace outcomes in Maguindanao.²⁵

²⁴ Rolling stores or *sari-sari* stores in the Philippines are convenience stores that cater to small communities instead of entire towns. They usually run out of windows in houses.

²⁵ It is noted that many of these press releases link to Facebook pages. Publishing press releases on websites is not a common practice in the Philippines because Facebook is the most popular platform in the Philippines. Facebook is also free for data usage packages. See: <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/scitech/science/806672/facebook-is-most-popular-social-media-platform-among-internet-users-in-philippines-pulse-asia/story/>

Maguindanao's Mixed Success: Political Instability and Illicit Activity

Intra-provincial Infighting

Political infighting and instability are primarily accountable for the province's lack of progress toward a violence mitigation strategy. The former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Cirilito Sobejana stated that "the greed to remain in power" has been the top priority for the political officials in Maguindanao (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022). Sobejana shared that resources have been devoted to dividing the province into two, so power can be shared more amongst political officials. In the province, Sobejana said, most of the service delivery has only been tap services or projects that have immediate effect without consideration for the long-term.

In the early 2010s, the Maguindanao Massacre overshadowed any development efforts in the province. The national, regional, and provincial governments were fixated on creating a resolution on the case. During this period, fighting occurred between the Ampatuan political family and the Esmael Mangudadatu political family. In this decade, no progress was made regarding development efforts for violence mitigation.

The most recent political dispute occurred between the current governor, Mariam Mangudadatu, and the President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. After the province was split into two, the President appointed the former governor of Maguindanao, Mariam Mangudadatu, as the now Office in Charge of Maguindanao del Sur. The dispute emerged between the two when President Marcos appointed Abdulraof Macacua as the Officer in Charge of Maguindanao del Norte. Mariam Mangudadatu was vehemently against this decision because she

stated that the President cannot appoint officers in charge of the province and should respect the election of the governor and vice governor of the province. Mangudadatu wanted her vice-governor, Aimee Sinusuat, to be appointed as the Officer in Charge for Maguindanao del Norte. Mangudadatu added that more than 300,000 votes elected her during her gubernatorial race; thus, she should be referred to as the governor instead of the officer in charge (Rebollido, 2023). To challenge the President, Mariam Mangudadatu stated, "we do not know if he has been reading or has studied or did not adhere to the law. If ever, he can only show us what law he used in the case." Mangudadatu threatened to go to the Supreme Court to challenge the President's decision. Mariam Mangudadatu eventually took oath on April 28, 2023, ending the dispute. Even though AGILA Haven launched in 2020, there is an evident gap in press releases on the program. Of the 14 press releases this paper found on the program, only one was published in 2020, and the majority were published after the 2022 elections. This evidence supports the claim that political instability adversely affected violence mitigation strategies in Maguindanao.

National and Regional Political Dynamics

The national-regional power play in the province is also culpable for the delays in creating a violence mitigation strategy. Task Force Balik Loob Operation Officer Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista stated that the same national and regional dynamics that exist in the development of Basilan and Sulu contributed to the underdevelopment of Maguindanao (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023). Sobejana spoke extensively about how the former regional governor of ARMM, Mujiv Hataman, spearheaded the effort to execute the violence mitigation strategies in Basilan and Sulu (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022). Sobejana also stated that these programs were used as the template for developing these types of programs throughout

the region. However, Bautista stated that Hataman had preferential treatment for the province and its neighboring areas because he was from Basilan. Due to this preferential treatment, most of the resources from the ARMM government were diverted to Western Mindanao. At the time of PAVE's founding, it was experimental and the first of its kind. Without Hataman and Sobejana's support, it may have been difficult for PAVE to develop to the extent it has in the last decade. PAVE's functional struggles in the face of less support in the last five years are evidence of how powerful Hataman's support for the program was at that time.

Now, Bautista states that the BARMM government provides preferential treatment to Central Mindanao, Lanao del Sur, and Maguindanao because most of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front Members are from these two provinces (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023). BARMM Chief Minister Ebrahim Murad now funnels most of the resources to these two provinces. The current violence mitigation strategy, Agila Haven, is formulated like PAVE and BRAVE from Basilan and Sulu. With the support of the BARMM government, Agila Haven is expected to find success in the coming years.

Statements from Maguindanao del Sur Officer in Charge Mariam Mangudadatu illustrate tensions between the national and provincial governments ("AGILA HAVEN PROGRAM PINURI NI DEFENSE SEC. TEODORO PINALAWIG Ng Provincial Government Ang AGILA HAVEN Program (Anak Ng May Ginintuang Layunin Upang...,” 2023). Mangudadatu stated, in an interview with Maguindanao Del Sur does not "have E-CLIP," so she had to find ways to fund the program internally. Mangudadatu also claims that the program does not have funding from the BARMM government, which Bautista has disputed. Mangudadatu revealed inner governmental tensions when she said that their "goal of achieving peace in the province" will be "hard to reach" if

national agencies pursue a "hidden agenda." She added that the national and provincial governments should only "compete to improve the province." Mangudadatu said she would not entertain the "personalities" with "backward thinking" in the national agencies. These statements further solidify that alliances and power struggles exist between the provincial, regional, and national governments. These disputes are detrimental to peace outcomes in the province.

Illicit Activity

Unlike other provinces, illicit activity remains one of Maguindanao's major peace spoilers. Plaza stated that the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters were initially losing ground in the province, but illicit activity has revived the group's operations (Suansing, *General Noel Plaza* 2023). Initially, the group relied on kidnapping for ransom, like the ASG and Maute. Plaza said that the "crooks" of the province are now availing of the services of BIFF to protect the drug trade. Since the group has the armed infrastructure to participate in such a violent industry, their firepower is used to protect the drug lords and their operations. During the election, Plaza stated that the BIFF was closely affiliated with the local chief executives and politicians to become their private armies. Some of these local chief executives and politicians were also affiliated with the drug trade. The BIFF would act as the couriers for the local chief executives. Politically induced delays have been a significant factor in Maguindanao's failure to eliminate the BIFF threat. However, the politicians are additionally partaking in the extension of the BIFF's operations because they are using the group to continue illicit activity that they are involved in.

History supports Plaza's claim because Maguindanao political officials have been linked to the drug trade. Current Senator and Former Philippine National Police Director General Ronald Dela Rosa said in 2017 that 8 Maguindanao officials were linked to the drug trade. Former

Maguindanao Governor also submitted a list of politicians involved in the drug trade in 2016 ("Maguindanao Gov Submits List of Politicians Involved in Drugs to Duterte," 2016). The BIFF has also been deeply involved in the drug trade. The Philippine National Police arrested three drug dealers who reportedly funded the BIFF in 2014 (Unson, 2014). The Armed Force of the Philippines launched a "war on drugs" against the BIFF in 2017 ("AFP to Take War on Drugs to BIFF, Other Bandit Groups," 2017). Though specific intelligence has not been divulged on the link between politicians, the BIFF, and the drug trade, there are evidently links between the two parties and drug trafficking. A continuation of this infrastructure will become a continuing deterrent to successful peace outcomes in Maguindanao.

VIII. Analysis: Identifying Salient Factors

The paper's cross-provincial comparison reveals four explanations for the differences between the success or failure of violence mitigation strategies in the BARMM region: the duration of program implementation urged by the imminence of the threat, intra-provincial political disputes and strength of political will in program implementation, national-regional power allocations, and illicit activity. This section highlights these four themes and summarize the findings from the cross-provincial comparison.

Duration of Program Implementation

A significant determinant of the success of violence mitigation strategies is the duration of their implementation. It can be argued that the peace outcomes are more evident because Basilan's PAVE program has been implemented for over seven years. Sobejana stated that when he and Hataman devised the program, it was largely experimental (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022). In the previous decades, the government has taken a purely militaristic approach to

counterterrorism, and this program was the first of its kind. The amount of time for program implementation has allowed for the peace outcomes to be more evident. PAVE was first implemented in Basilan because Basilan was the epicenter of terrorism in the early 2000s. Sobejana stated that there was an imminence that a solution to terrorism had to be created in this province. The program led to the successful surrender of over 214 members of the Abu Sayyaf group. Sulu, like Basilan, has experienced significant success in the surrender of Abu Sayyaf group members. However, there was less of an imminent threat in Sulu because most were lone-wolf attacks in the early 2000s. Fewer members of the Abu Sayyaf group were in Sulu, so much of the implementation focus was on Basilan. The Philippine Army, however, has declared that Sulu is now Abu Sayyaf free.

On the other hand, Tawi-Tawi has lagged because of its geographical distance from the rest of the region and the country. Plaza stated that the province was never an epicenter of Salafi-Jihadist activity, though there were some lone-wolf attacks (Suansing, *General Noel Plaza 2023*). Since the province is so geographically distant, it was difficult to access both Salafi-Jihadist groups and the Philippine government. The attacks that occurred in the province was reduced to kidnappings in the Sulu Sea, where Malaysian and Indonesian fishermen were kidnapped for ransom (*Swiss Hostages Escapes Abu Sayyaf Captors in Philippines, 2014*). The Philippine government thus primarily focused on eradicating terrorism in Basilan and Sulu. Tawi-Tawi has only recently implemented a violence mitigation strategy two years ago. Sobejana also added that when he led the violence mitigation in Western Mindanao, the province was the last priority because terrorism was more rampant in the other two provinces.

A similar trajectory is evident in Lanao Del Sur because Salafi-Jihadism was not a key concern in the province until 2017 when the province experienced the largest eruption of Salafi-Jihadist violence in the late 2010s. Salafi-Jihadism was not a significant concern to the province in the early 2000s; thus, there was not much of a necessity to focus on violence mitigation strategies. Bautista stated that the province had only started a violence mitigation strategy (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023). He added that the province was now implementing a catch-up plan and is determining whether they want to participate in the national government backed ECLIP program or the regional government Project TUGON program. As evidenced by Basilan and Sulu, the duration of program implementation is a significant determinant of the success of the violence mitigation strategy. The program's success cannot be measured if the program was so recently implemented, as evidenced by Tawi-Tawi and Lanao del Sur. Maguindanao has also undergone a similar trajectory to both Tawi-Tawi and Lanao del Sur; however, other factors (i.e., intra-provincial political disputes) caused a delay in the implementation of the program, so Maguindanao's trajectory is explored at a later section.

Intra-provincial Political Disputes and Strength of Political Will in Program Implementation

Another significant determinant of the success of violence mitigation is the political will to implement such programs—this broad term of "political will" manifested differently in each province. In Basilan and Sulu, for example, there has not been significant political infighting in the last two decades. The Hataman family has been in power in Basilan for the last decade. In Sulu,

the Tan family has also been in power for the last decade.²⁶ The political stability in the two provinces has allowed these government officials to focus more on government programs and their long-term effects instead of on what political power moves are necessary to retain power. Political instability has not been a factor in Tawi-Tawi and Lanao Del Sur because the Sali and Adiong families have a monopoly of power in the provinces.

Contrastingly, in the last decade, Maguindanao has experienced many shifts in the political dynamics of the province. The last two decades in Maguindanao have been characterized by political violence. On November 23, 2009, the infamous Maguindanao massacre occurred (Al Jazeera, 2019). This massacre transpired because of the political dispute between Esmael Mangudadatu and the Ampatuan family. During this event, 57 people were killed, including Mangudadatu's family members and local journalists.

Political disputes have also occurred in the province due to calls to separate the province into two in order to create a separation of powers. Disputes have even emerged between Mariam Mangudadatu and the president of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos Jr (Rebollido, 2023). Sobejana, who stated that because of the political tumult in the province, there has not been much focus on addressing the issue with the BIFF (Suansing, *General Cirilito Sobejana* 2022). Sobejana even added that there is less political incentive to address the BIFF issue because it allows for a political power grab. The political unity in the other four provinces has allowed them to focus on creating violence mitigation strategies. There is also an evident political will to address violence

²⁶ There is a separate discussion on the ethics of political dynasties, a widely debated topic in the Philippines. For the purposes of this paper, political dynasties and the political stability in these dynasties will be considered beneficial.

mitigation in Basilan and Sulu. The political tumult in Maguindanao has prevented government officials from focusing on violence mitigation.

National-Regional Power Allocations

The third determinant factor of the success of violence mitigation strategies is national and regional government support. Sobejana spoke extensively about how Basilan's success is attributed to how the Philippine government, the regional government, and the provincial government all came together to support the program. Then-Basilan Governor Hadjiman Hataman Saliman, a relative of ARMM Governor Mujiv Hataman, declared an all-out war against the Abu Sayyaf group. Sobejana stated that Mujiv Hataman had a unique vision for violence mitigation strategies can be implemented and had ample resources from the regional and provincial government to execute this plan. Both of these officials put comprehensive violence mitigation as the main priority for the province. These two officials were exceptionally determined to see the implementation of this program. Hataman directed much of the regional sources from the ARMM government to ensure that this program was successful. Hataman also had the support of Sobejana on the military side to execute this comprehensive violence mitigation strategy. This support from the military is also unprecedented because the military has historically taken a purely combative approached counterterrorism, and this strategy was the first of its kind that they supported. The program also had the support of Balay Mindanaw, one of the most prominent NGOs in the province. The fluctuations of the success of the PAVE program in recent years can be attributed to the lack of regional support that now exists in Basilan due to the transition from ARMM to BARMM. Bautista stated that the Western Mindanao provinces now feel neglected by the BARMM government. Due to the lack of support from the regional government, Gobway stated

that the provincial government is now unable to provide housing. Bautista said that the provincial government has now sought the help of the national government through the ECLIP program to maintain the success of the provincial program. Sulu and Tawi-Tawi followed the trajectory of Basilan; Sulu experienced complete success of their violence mitigation strategy. Tawi-Tawi had ample resources for a successful strategy, but delayed implementation has hampered its success.

Maguindanao has the opposite trajectory in contrast to Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. Bautista mentioned that at the time of ARMM, most of the resources were funneled into Western Mindanao, and there were few resources allocated to Central Mindanao. Bautista explicitly stated that there was preferential treatment for Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi during this period (Suansing, *Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Bautista* 2023). Now, Bautista has stated that there is preferential treatment for Central Mindanao because most of the members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front are from area of the BARMM region. BARMM Chief Minister Ebrahim Murad now funnels most of the resources to Maguindanao and Lanao Del Sur. Due to this historical preferential treatment, Maguindanao was unable to obtain the possible resources necessary to create a provincial development program. The Agila Haven program was only created in 2022 and as largely funded by the BARMM government.

Since Lanao Del Sur did not have a significant Salafi-Jihadist threat until 2017, the lack of resources from the ARMM government was not as detrimental to the success of their strategy. However, the province benefits from the BARMM government's disproportionate resource allocation to Central Mindanao. These case studies show how important national, regional, and provincial coordination is for the success of violence mitigation strategies.

Illicit Activity

The final key factor for the success of violence mitigation strategies is the presence of illicit activity.²⁷ Plaza mentions that the BIFF group threatened to fade into obscurity in the early 2020s. The group initially relied on kidnapping for ransom like other groups in the region; however, the Philippine army was able to develop tactics to counteract this method. Plaza also stated that due to former president Rodrigo Duterte's emphasis on cracking down on the drug trade, over 40 percent of drug activity in the Philippines was reduced, especially in the early years of his tenure. However, the crackdown was not maintained in the early 2020s (Suansing, *General Noel Plaza* 2023). The BIFF was able to maintain its terrorism operations due to its participation in the drug trade. During the 2022 election cycle, the group coordinated with chief local executives and politicians to protect them as their private armies during this time. After the elections, the group transitioned into affiliating themselves with politicians who were also affiliated with the drug trade. Due to their established armed infrastructure, the group was able to act as couriers for drugs and to continue protecting these politicians involved with the drug trade. Plaza also stated that the few remnants of the Abu Sayyaf group continue to do this in Tawi-Tawi. It is difficult for the government to reach this province due to its geographical distance and lack of transportation infrastructure to get to the province quickly. Currently, government officials can only go into Tawi-Tawi by 4 to 5 hours from Sulu. Plaza expresses the difficulty of cracking down on this specific drug trade because of the geographical constraints. Illicit activity

²⁷ This entire section is attributed to intelligence from General Noel Plaza and the articles from the section on Illicit Activity in Maguindanao. For the sake of brevity, these articles were not restated in this section, but these claims have strong evidence. See: Maguindanao: *Illicit Activity*

remains one of the significant peace spoilers that prevent the success of violence mitigation strategies in the BARMM region.

IX. Policy Implications

This section explores how these factors can affect policy and potentially suggest solutions to these spoilers. The key policy implications highlighted in this section are the following: the 2025 BARMM elections will be a significant test of peace in the region. They will directly affect the violence mitigation strategies. The BARMM government must also reallocate resources to Western Mindanao to maintain the success of its violence mitigation strategies. Finally, the national and provincial governments must cooperate to eliminate illicit activity in the region.

The 2025 BARMM Elections

Key barriers to the success of violence mitigation strategies are intra-provincial political disputes and national-regional power dynamics. The 2025 BARMM elections may exacerbate these challenges.

For all provinces in BARMM, the elections may cause the reemergence of political violence, a potential peace spoiler. The region has also been relatively peaceful because the MILF has the monopoly of power in BARMM. Questions emerge about a potentially violent, reactionary response of the MILF if they do not maintain this monopoly of power. For Maguindanao del Sur, the Officer in Charge, Mariam Mangudadatu, is indirectly involved in the BARMM elections because her husband will challenge the current BARMM governor, Ebrahim Murad, for his position. For Basilan and Sulu, the political instability in BARMM may cause the regional government to neglect funding for their violence mitigation strategies continually. This lack of

funding may cause conflict recurrence. This subsection explicates the particularities of the 2025 BARMM election that may upend peace in the region and inversely affect the success of the violence mitigation strategies in this paper.

Though the intra-provincial political disputes, especially in Maguindanao, have been temporarily resolved, the regional elections threaten to upend the existing peace in the region. Former ARMM Governor Mujiv Hataman stated that the gains in the political deal between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front is set to be tested for the first time in 10 years (*2025 Mid-Term Polls' True Test' of Peace, Democracy in BARMM*, 2024). The monopoly of power that the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (affiliated with the MILF) will be challenged for the first time in 10 years.

The political parties, "Al-Ittihad Mindanawe Darussalam-Ungaya Ku Kawagibu Bangsamoro" and "Serbisyong Inklusibo-Alyansang Progresibo (SIAP)" pose the greatest challenge to the UBJP. Al-Ittihad Mindanawe Darussalam-Ungaya Ku Kawagibu Bangsamoro is headed by the husband of Maguindanao Del Sur Office in Charge Mariam Mangudadatu, TESDA Director-General Secretary Suharto "Teng" Mangudadatu. Serbisyong Inklusibo-Alyansang Progresibo (SIAP) is headed by Lanao del Sur Governor Mamintal "Bombit" Adiong Jr. These established political figures pose the greatest challenge to current BARMM Chief Minister Ebrahim Murad's governance.

The key challenge during the 2025 BARMM elections is whether the parties can refrain from political violence and conflict recurrence if the results are not in their favor. As early as March 2024, the parties have suppositions about the integrity and transparency of the elections.

The parties engaged in a forum organized by the Westminster Forum for Democracy, which aims to encourage fair, transparent, and honest regional elections, as well as a pledge to abstain from political violence (*BARMM Political Parties Seek Clean Parliamentary Elections in 2025*, 2024). BARMM Member of Parliament Lawyer Omar Yasser Sema, Deputy Secretary General and spokesperson of the Bangsamoro Party, emphasized the challenges that can be faced by other parties involved during this election. "It is difficult to make a statement on how to defend the integrity of the elections in BARMM, considering the history of violence and election malpractice. It is a task greater than the political parties, but we are obliged to ensure the elections in 2025 will be successful," Sema said.

Early polling results revealed that UBJP might lose its monopoly of power, which has kept political dynamics stable during the Bangsamoro transition. The inaugural election test revealed that the UBJP lost in electoral areas previously thought to be their strongholds. Members of the party even broke party lines and voted against UBJP-backed candidates. The inaugural election test was also marred by widespread electoral violence; however, there is a push for peace through the existing agreement, and parties have continued to use electoral violence to convince voters during electoral competition. During the electoral test, a UBJP-backed mayoral candidate, Datu Jamael Sinsuat, died from a gunshot during Friday prayers on September 30, 2022 (Xu & Bertrand, 2023).

"Since the start of the transition period, we are seeing more horizontal violence in the region," reported a former member of parliament for the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA). The director of a non-governmental organization monitoring disaster risk in the region stated that

"although the vertical conflict between the rebels and the government have largely subsided, the violence is now horizontal within the communities" due to "land and political office."

Political stability is also tenuous on a national level. There are disputes not only throughout the region but also between the national government, the regional government, and the provincial government. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. demonstrated partiality towards the UBJP during the Maguindanao political dispute in 2023. Marcos endorsed Abdulroaf Macacua, the Chief of Staff of the MILF, as the Officer in Charge of Maguindanao del Norte. This appointment was supported by the then secretaries of the Department of National Defense and the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity; this support shows a partiality between the national government and the UBJP, which can affect the already tenuous peace in the region.

The political dispute deepened a rift between Marcos and Mariam Mangudadatu, who endorsed former Vice Governor Maguindanao Fatima Ainee Sinsuat as the Officer in Charge of Maguindanao del Norte. Mariam Mangudadatu is also tangentially involved in the BARMM Regional Elections. Her spouse, TESDA Secretary Suharto "Teng" Mangudadatu, will oppose the UBJP in the next BARMM regional elections. The Maguindanao case demonstrates the complex interactions between national, regional, and provincial politics that threatens to upend regional peace in BARMM.

As in many tenuous electoral periods, the BARMM Parliament has also struggled to reach a consensus about districting lines. Cotabato City Mayor Bruce Matabalao, for example, said that his city qualified for three districts based on the population requirement. However, the current election code only divides the city into two. Other stakeholders have also questioned the inclusion of their area in specific districts when they believe they should be part of a different district. The

interior minister of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), Sha Elijah Dumama-Alba, stated that a potential no-election scenario could occur in 2025 if these issues are not resolved (Cabrera, 2024). This no-election scenario would undoubtedly agitate opposing parties and may be viewed as the UBJP's attempt to hold onto power.

The 2025 BARMM elections pose a major challenge to peace in the region and may exacerbate the existing challenges posed by intra-provincial disputes and national-regional power dynamics.

Reallocation of Resources and Bangsamoro Economic Self-Reliance

Another barrier to violence mitigation strategy success is the asymmetrical allocation of BARMM regional government resources. This subsection analyzes how BARMM Regional Appropriations can be reallocated and how the patron-client relationships that perpetuate national-regional power disputes can be addressed.

Analyzing BARMM Regional Appropriations

Interviewees, specifically Bautista, stated that the ARMM government disproportionately allocated funds to the Western Mindanao area (Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi). The members of the UBJP (the political party of the MILF) and the BARMM government now also disproportionately allocate funds to Central Mindanao (Maguindanao and Tawi-Tawi). The BARMM government could allocate more of the regional budget to Western Mindanao to support the violence mitigation strategies in Basilan and Sulu. Their provincial governments now struggle to obtain funds for PAVE for Peace and BRAVE. Without the ample funding, the provincial governments cannot continue the programs to the same extent they were implemented.

Analyzing the budgetary appropriations for the 2023 Fiscal Year, there are four sources of funding for the BARMM government: 64.755 billion pesos still remains of the block grant; 4.594 billion pesos from National Taxes, Fees, and Charges collected within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region; 5 billion pesos Special Development Fund in accordance with Article XIV of the BOL, for rehabilitation, rebuilding and development of the conflict-afflicted communities; 10.442 billion pesos savings from 2020, and 566 million pesos Local Revenue Collection Estimates.

In the Chief Minister's Budget Message, which delineates the budget allocations and expounds on the reasoning for these allocations, there are no sections devoted to the peace process. Accessible information is also not available for the specific budgetary allocations of the BARMM government to the local government units in each province, though the total obligation for the appropriate budget is 80,596,104 million pesos for 2024 (*Downloadables*, 2024). From these funds, 36.9 billion pesos are allotted for the social services sector (BARMM Government, 2024). The sector is defined by the Chief Minister as the programs for "programs on Education, Culture, and Manpower Development; Subsidy to Local Government Units (LGUs); Social Security, Welfare and Employment; and Health." These programs may include violence mitigation strategies. 250 million pesos is allotted for the peace and stability sector. The Chief Minister describes this as the "sector [that] focuses its efforts on promoting peaceful and inclusive Bangsamoro society for sustainable development with access to justice and build effective and accountable institutions."

Reallotment can occur if the BARMM regional government directly allocates its funds either from the social services sector or the peace and stability sector to maintain PAVE for Peace

and BRAVE. This reallocation can be motivated by a dismantling of patron-client relationships in BARMM to ease tensions between national and provincial governments.

Patron-Client Relationships in BARMM

As a result of the disproportionate budget allocation towards Western Mindanao, the provincial governments of Basilan and Sulu have aligned themselves more closely with the national government. Regardless of whether the provincial governments are more aligned with the national or regional governments, the same patron-client relationship still exists between the two parties. James C. Scott describes Patron-Client Politics in Southeast Asia as "the basic pattern is an informal cluster consisting of a power figure who is in a position to give security, inducements, or both, and his personal followers who, in return for such benefits, contribute their loyalty and personal assistance to the patron's designs" (Scott, 2009). Scott adds that such "vertical patterns of patron-client linkages represent an important structural principle of Southeast Asian politics." The national and regional governments are vying for power to serve as patrons for these provincial governments.

As a means of abstaining from reliance on national and regional governments, Basilan has turned to the Australian government as a source of funds. Robust accountability and transparency mechanisms are prominent advantages for international donor sources. However, Severine Autesserre mentions that international donors and local individuals have inherent power dynamics because of the inequality between the two groups (Autesserre, 2014). One group has much more resources than the other and, in turn, has more control over where the funds are allocated. This power dynamic can be deeply problematic because these international organizations, local contacts, and political dynamics have to be taken into account when implementing such

programs. This paper evidently highlights the importance of understanding local and political dynamics when implementing development programs. This upward accountability thus can have detrimental effects on the implementation of the development programs. This funding source also lacks the sustainability necessary for the flourishing of these development programs.

Perhaps the most ideal solution is to empower these provinces to tap into funding sources of their own. For example, eight wells were drilled into the Sulu Sea block. This block holds 209 million barrels of oil and 716 billion cubic feet of gas. The local government of Lugal Sulu, in partnership with the British enterprise Energy World International Limited, is set to construct a liquefied natural gas refinery plant. The project aims to provide affordable energy to Filipinos, especially in the Bangsamoro area. The project could also prove to be quite profitable for the provinces (*ALREADY EXPLORED NATURAL GAS READY FOR EXTRACTION IN LUGAL ISLAND OF SULU - Ministry of Transportation Communications, 2019*). [RS3] The natural resources in the BARMM region present a multitude of opportunities for provincial self-reliance. This natural gas project is only one example of how this self-reliance can be achieved. Since this paper is not a policy memorandum, tangible policy solutions are out of the scope of research. However, research on Bangsamoro self-reliance is essential in guaranteeing sustainable peace in the region.

Current policy challenges plague the success of violence mitigation strategies in the BARMM region: the 2025 regional elections, resource allocation, and economic self-reliance. To ensure the continuing and prospective success of violence mitigation strategies in the region, key actors must do their part in guaranteeing solutions to these policy challenges.

X. Conclusion: The Enduring Bangsamoro Project

The collective yearning for Bangsamoro autonomy has been one of the greatest puzzles in Philippine history. The Bangsamoro people have reclaimed their autonomy from the Philippine government for over five decades and from their colonial counterparts for over two centuries. After extensive historicization, this paper elucidates that this armed struggle emerged from centuries of structural neglect by those who held the keys to power. These centuries of struggle — armed for some and silent for many — have culminated in the Bangsamoro experiment. All top military officials interviewed for this thesis reiterated that combatants surrendered, and communities engaged with the strategies because they were “tired” of the conflict and the anguish it produced. However, as many post-conflict areas have learned, maintaining and creating a vision of peace poses atypical challenges that require different, unfamiliar solutions. Perhaps, the clearest blueprint for peace in the BARMM region lies within the success and failure of their own provinces.

This paper has explored the question: “What factors affect the success of violence mitigation strategies in areas infiltrated by Salafi-Jihadist groups?” The paper has found that the duration of strategy implementation, intra-provincial political disputes, strength of political will in program implementation, national-regional power struggles, and illicit drug activity have all influenced peace outcomes against Salafi-Jihadist groups in the BARMM region.

Reflecting on the scope of my research, I concede that there is subjective nature of qualitative research because it relies on interviews with officials who created and conducted the programs discussed and press releases. These pieces of evidence are expected to put the programs in a positive light. Qualitative research may also be inherently subjective because the

researcher has autonomy over the officials selected to be interviewed. However, due to the lack of secondary data and research on development-oriented violence mitigation strategies in the Philippines, fieldwork and qualitative interviews were the only appropriate methodology to address this question. As far as I know, this is the first attempt to codify and research certain national and provincial violence mitigation strategies.

My connections to the government and military officials in the Philippines, especially nationally, were much stronger than my direct connections to the provincial and non-governmental organization officials. Though this is an advantage in that I can access information on the security situation and the region's political dynamics, I acknowledge a lack of direct quotations from provincial and non-governmental organization officials. There was no lack of effort in pursuing provincial and non-governmental organization officials. I sent over 50 interview requests with provincial and non-governmental organization officials, but only ten individuals obliged. Many of these interviewees did not respond to inquiries or declined to comment due to a possible retribution fear from groups or political officials in the area. In the Philippines, much of the reason officials entertain someone from academia is based on their connections. My connections with national government and military officials allowed me to interview multiple high-level officials. These connections were absent in the provincial level and with non-government organization officials. To address this information gap, I directly quote press releases from extensive primary source resource.

Since the Bangsamoro regional government is in its infancy, officials have crackdown on dissent, especially in academia. For example, long-standing trusted academic scholars on the terrorism situation in Bangsamoro, like Francisco Lara, have been isolated from inner consultant circles of the BARMM government because they have published critiques on how the

government has handled the peace process. Academics, non-government organization officials, and politicians now fear dissenting with the BARMM government. This has made this research particularly difficult.

The higher proportion of information from military officials does not undermine the importance of my research. The relationship between military officials and academia has been fraught; most information on Salafi-Jihadist groups has been historically confidential because sharing this information compromised existing security operations conducted by the military. However, since the ASG has been dismantled and the other two groups do not have a significant stronghold in the region, military officials have been more receptive to sharing information with academics. This paper is one of the first in academia to incorporate data from the upper echelons of the military. As evidenced by the data in this paper, the military plays an especially significant role in the national peacebuilding efforts in the Philippines. An important information gap currently exists in academia because of the lack of insight from the military. This paper's heavy emphasis on military insights has been able to address this information gap.

There is also an asymmetry of information in the cross-provincial comparison. For example, information on Basilan is also more extensive than Tawi-Tawi. This imbalance in the information is because the violence mitigation strategy in Basilan was implemented earlier. The programs in Basilan have been implemented for seven years. The case has also been branded as a success by officials, so they were more willing to discuss the specifics of the program in this region. Tawi-Tawi only recently implemented its development program, and the government does not have an extensive press release system, so it was difficult to obtain any information aside from the information presented by the interviews. In contrast, Maguindanao has the most extensive communications machinery, so there are numerous press releases in its section. Information

asymmetry exists for reasons outside of this paper's scope and considerable efforts were put into addressing these asymmetries.

These points do not invalidate my research but open opportunities for further research. For instance, I plan to conduct further research on the role that non-governmental organizations can have in social service delivery to prevent conflict recurrence in the Philippines. More direct insight from provincial officials can enrich this research and expound on the particularities of violence mitigation strategies. There is much potential for this research in the Philippines, and I hope to see this type of research thrive in the coming years.

Though this paper celebrates the successes and laments the failures of violence mitigation strategies in the Bangsamoro region, I desire to heavily emphasize that these strategies are only the most ostensible pathways to peace. A latent-level recognition of enduring questions on the integration and reinforcement of the Bangsamoro-Filipino identity is necessary to achieve extensive, enduring peace in the region.

“There is a huge difference between a Bangsamoro, a Muslim, and a terrorist. I call out for people who are from other parts of the Philippines that we need to stop discrimination and hasty generalization. We need to keep educating people, especially young children, about peace—telling them how peace works, how peace circulates. We don’t only need to counter violent extremism, but we need to prevent it from happening over and over again. I believe we need to establish greater ties between the Bangsamoro and the Filipino identity.”

— *Jamal Pandapatan,*

Member of the Lanao Youth Development Council,

a Violence Mitigation Initiative from the Lanao del Sur Government

Establishing a Bangsamoro-Filipino Identity: The Work in Progress

During an exhibition and trade fair that I hosted for the internally displaced people of Marawi City last year, tear-filled exchanges between me and the IDPs characterized the day. The event occurred during the Independence Day of the Philippines, the country’s most nationalistic holiday. The IDPs decried that they believed the people in Manila had forgotten about them since the siege occurred seven years ago. Their plight is only relevant in security efforts, and their silent battle against discrimination continues to go unnoticed.

In my speech, I reflected that:

The intentionality of holding this event on our country’s Independence Day is not to be missed. On this day, we honor the bravery of those who have lost their life fighting for our independence and those who have bolstered our posture as the Republic of the Philippines. We remember the valor of those who fought for the liberation of Marawi City for those five months. But we also remember that their fight was for us to preserve our right to be Filipinos. We thus remember those who have most exemplified what it means to be Filipino on this day— and nothing exemplifies what it means to be Filipino more than these IDPs, who have long fought to preserve tradition and culture. Who have fought to retain their humanity and dignity despite the insurmountable challenges they have faced.

The Moro people still contend with the challenge of being recognized as Filipinos by their own countrymen. Their decades of armed struggle generalized their personhood as traitors and disruptors in the broader Philippine narrative. True *salam* can only be achieved with the recognition that Moro people experience discrimination — overt or concealed, isolated or systemic. This recognition begins with those in other parts of the Philippines who believe that they are uninvolved with this problem. Efforts begin with a proactive effort from these individuals to inform themselves of persisting, insidious means through which discrimination endures. *Salam* necessitates a recognition that Moro people are Filipinos, first and foremost. The Filipino identity is not defined by those who live in Manila or those in the upper echelons of academia. The Filipino identity exists in multiplicities of religions, cultures, and ethnicities.

There must be a recognition that *salam* and the Filipino identity is a lifetime project. Though these violence mitigation strategies started and found success in the 2010s, *salam* is a continuous effort to ensure that all communities feel empowered by the government system. Only with the participation of all Filipinos can enduring *salam* be realized in the *Bangsamoro*.

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Appendix 1: Interviews

Participants	Date of Interview
General Cirilito Sobejana	December 2022
General Noel Plaza	February 2024
Lt. Colonel Clarence Bautista	June 2023
General Domingo Gobway	June 2023
Niniay Mohammad	June 2023
Nurhati Tangging	July 2023
Ica Fernandez	June 2023
Jamal Pandapatan	November 2020 ²⁸
Johare Bohari	November 2020

Appendix 2: Sample Interview Script

Interview Plan:

Interviews are lined up and confirmed for all individuals during June and July.

General protocol: Since these individuals will be speaking officially, they will need to sign consent forms that their words will be publicized for the purpose of the paper.

General Cirilito Sobejana: Former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines

1. Discuss the Joint Task Force Basilan
 - a. What were the specifications of the approach? How is the Task Force initiated in terms of governmental support and also the logistics of creating the task force on the ground?
 - b. What were the challenges that he encountered as he started conceptualizing what this task force would be and also the on the ground challenges that they encountered especially with the decommissioning process of the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front)?
2. Discuss Joint Task Force Sulu

²⁸ Interview with Pandapatan and Bohari occurred in November 2020 for another project cited in the body paragraphs but permitted to use their quotes

- a. What was the difference in the approach of creating this Joint Task Force versus the aforementioned one?
- b. What is the difference is in the challenges they encountered in creating the joint task force that is specific to this province?
3. Discuss Joint Task Force Tawi-Tawi
 - a. What was the difference in the approach of creating this Joint Task Force versus the aforementioned one?
 - b. What is the difference is in the challenges they encountered in creating the joint task force that is specific to this province?
4. What are the efforts within Maguindanao and Lanao Del Sur?
5. What do they view are the causes of terrorism and Insurgency and what type of targeted approach did they create for each of the causes?
6. Which of these two Joint Task forces were more successful and why?
7. Bangsamoro specific questions
 - a. What is different in the composition of the Bangsamoro government that will ensure that they will be more successful than the ARMM?
 - b. What is the effect of the Bangsamoro Organic Law on the peacebuilding and violence mitigation efforts in the region?
8. New Programs
 - a. What are the new programs that you have implemented during your time as chief of staff and what are the specifications of these programs?
 - b. What were the challenges that he encountered as he started conceptualizing what these programs would be and also the on-the-ground challenges that they encountered especially with the decommissioning process of the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) and also the persistent acts of terrorism by the Abu Sayyaf?
 - c. What is the role of development programs in your violence mitigation and peace-building efforts? What is the role of militarization?