Divergent Dimensions of Radicalization Risk: Migration and Violent Extremism in Sabah, Malaysia

Desk Study Report to the Bureau of Conflict and Stability Operations, U.S. Department of State

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About This Desk Study

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About START

Established in 2005 as U.S. Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence led by the University of Maryland, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. For more information, contact START at infostart@start.umd.edu or visit www.start.umd.edu.

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Executive Summary

This desk study is the product of a collaborative effort undertaken by researchers at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland, the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), and the Universiti of Malaysia Sabah (UMS). It endeavors to provide an account of local dynamics of violent extremism in the Sulu basin and vulnerabilities exploited by regional violent extremist organizations (VEOs) that make the region a hotbed of terrorist recruitment and training. Our initial research suggests that, despite the deficiency of extant research, the threat is especially high in the Malaysian state of Sabah, given its geographic positioning on the northeastern edge of the island of Borneo, sitting just across from western Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, where a resilient and violent Moro separatist movement (Bangsamoro), as well as a homegrown jihadist movement, have taken root. Recently, these movements have aligned ideologically with the Islamic State (IS), and receive financing, training, and weapons to carry out violent extremism and terrorist objectives in the region. Moreover, VEOs actively exploit existing security vulnerabilities and common drivers of violent extremism in the region.

In order to provide a holistic picture of the current state of violent extremism in the region, our research takes a *regionalist* approach that examines regional violent extremism movements, not as mere products of transnational jihadi activity as often argued, but rather as products of regional history and local political, ethno-religious, and sociocultural dynamics that became, often in a reductive manner, associated with global extremist movements. Sabah's close proximity to the Philippines and Indonesia, combined with longstanding trade routes, porous borders, and cross-border familial ties, facilitate high levels of irregular migrant flows between countries through clandestine channels. VEOs not only use Sabah as a transit point but also actively exploit these unique circumstances and grievances to radicalize and recruit impressionable Malaysians and Filipino expatriates living in Sabah.

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Introduction

Often considered the "second front" in the Global War on Terror, Southeast Asia has experienced a resurgence of violent extremism and terrorism in the post-9/11 era.[1] Varying degrees of weak governance with high levels of political instability and porous border regions, coupled with existing security vulnerabilities have drawn attention to the dynamic dimensions of radicalization and violent extremism risk across the region. Moreover, existing networks of diverse regional and local violent extremist organizations (VEOs) sympathetic to militant Islamist causes continue to offer pledges to transnational terrorist organizations, like the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ), indicating a desire to bolster connections and project strength. As such, a reorientation in terrorism analysis towards Southeast Asia is necessary. With IS' loss of a physical caliphate in Syria and Iraq, researchers and practitioners alike are looking towards Southeast Asia to determine if IS can, or will, revive itself by exploiting existing vulnerabilities configured by local and regional VEOs. Additionally, refocusing strategic attention to supporting state capacities to mitigate the continual regeneration of regional and local VEOs can assist in eliminating terror cells and their lines of communications in Southeast Asia.[2]

The types, actors, and underlying reasons for violet extremism and terrorism across Southeast Asia vary widely as violent extremism is not a new phenomenon in the region. Southeast Asia has some of the world's oldest and most active VEOs including militant Islamist organizations and separatist insurgencies dating back to the period of post-colonial state-building. Since then, radicalization and terrorism landscapes and networks evolved dynamically in Southeast Asia. Over time, the region constituted an "enabling environment" in which regional VEOs like, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Kumpulan Mujaheddin Malaysia (KMM)[3], Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), among others, flourished.[4] Beyond serving as an operational center for regional VEOs, Southeast Asia is also known to be a transit hub for foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) linking local populations to transnational VEOs, like IS and AQ.[5] The establishment of *Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyyah* (KN), a dedicated Southeast Asian military unit (mostly composed of Indonesians and Malaysians) within IS, is illustrative of this practice. While significant attention in research and counterterrorism (CT) practice focuses on radicalization, VEOs, and terrorist activities in Indonesia and the Philippines, the extant literature has not devoted sufficient attention to Malaysia. As such, studying Malaysia offers a unique lens to evaluate the changing dynamics of radicalization and extremism in Southeast Asia.

[1] John Gersham. "Is Southeast Asia the second front," *Foreign Affairs* 81 (2002): 60.
[2] Kumar Ramakrishna, "The Southeast Asian Approach" to Counter-Terrorism: Learning from Indonesia and Malaysia," *The Journal of Conflict Studies*. 25, no. 1 (2005): 27-47.
[3] Originally known as Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia, the group was later renamed Kumpulan Militant Malaysia by both the Malaysian security agencies and the media.
[4] Paul J. Smith (ed), *Terrorism and Violence in Southeast Asia: Transnational Challenges to States and Regional Stability* (London: Routledge, 2005), xii.
[5] Ramli Dollah, Dollah, Ramli, Wan Shawaluddin Wan Hassan, Diana Peters, and Zaini Othman "Old Threats, New Approach and National Security in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges in Dealing with Cross-border Crime in East Coast of Sabah," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences,* 7, no. 3 (2016): 178-186.

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On March 10, 2019, Mohamad Fuzi Harun, Inspector General of Police in Malaysia, warned that Malaysian police forces exposed a plan by foreign militants to use Malaysia as a "safe haven," as well as a transit and logistics center, following the territorial collapse of IS.[6] Two years earlier, on June 29, 2016, a bomb exploded at the Movida nightclub in Puchong, Selangor in an IS-inspired attack carried out by two local supporters, a first in Malaysia. Despite the relative dearth of attacks targeting the Malaysian homeland to date, since 2013, the Malaysian government revealed that over 100 Malaysians had joined the ranks of IS in Syria and Iraq.[7] Though only a handful have returned, radicalization and recruitment to violence remain a risk in Malaysia, as evidenced by more than 430 terror-related arrests since 2013 and, relatedly, the foiling of over 30 Malaysian terror plots.[8] In the past Malaysia was used as a staging area where regional VEOs planned and coordinated attacks.[9] Today, Malaysia not only serves as a staging area, but also serves as a transit hub and conduit for the transportation of weapons, operatives, finances, and supporters to other regional and global terrorist organizations.[10]

Problem Statement

Malaysia has, and continues, to face both home-grown and external extremist threats.[11] The country's geographic location, bordering multiple active centers of violent extremism (the southern Philippines, southern Thailand, and Indonesia), makes it particularly vulnerable to further threats from violent extremism and terrorism.[12] Figure 1, below, depicts the scope of regional violent extremism. Specifically, it depicts variation in the average number of fatalities per attack across the region.[13] This measure not only gives the reader a sense of where VEOs currently operate in the region, but also speaks to the varying degrees of sophistication and local support VEOs receive, with more capable VEOs benefiting from widespread support typically being able to perpetrate deadlier attacks.

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[6] Nadirah H. Rodzi, "Kuala Lumpur says foreign militants eyeing Malaysia as safe haven," *The Strait Times*, March 11, 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/kl-says-foreign-militantseyeing-malaysia-as-safe-haven.

[7] Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Aida Arosoaie, "Jihad in the Bastion of "Moderation": Understanding the Threat of ISIS in Malaysia," *Asian Security*, (2019), 1–14

[8] Ibid.

[9] Nadirah H. Rodzi 2019; Kristen E. Schulze and Julie Chernov Hwang, "Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: New Insights into Jihad in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 41, no. 1 (2019): 4.

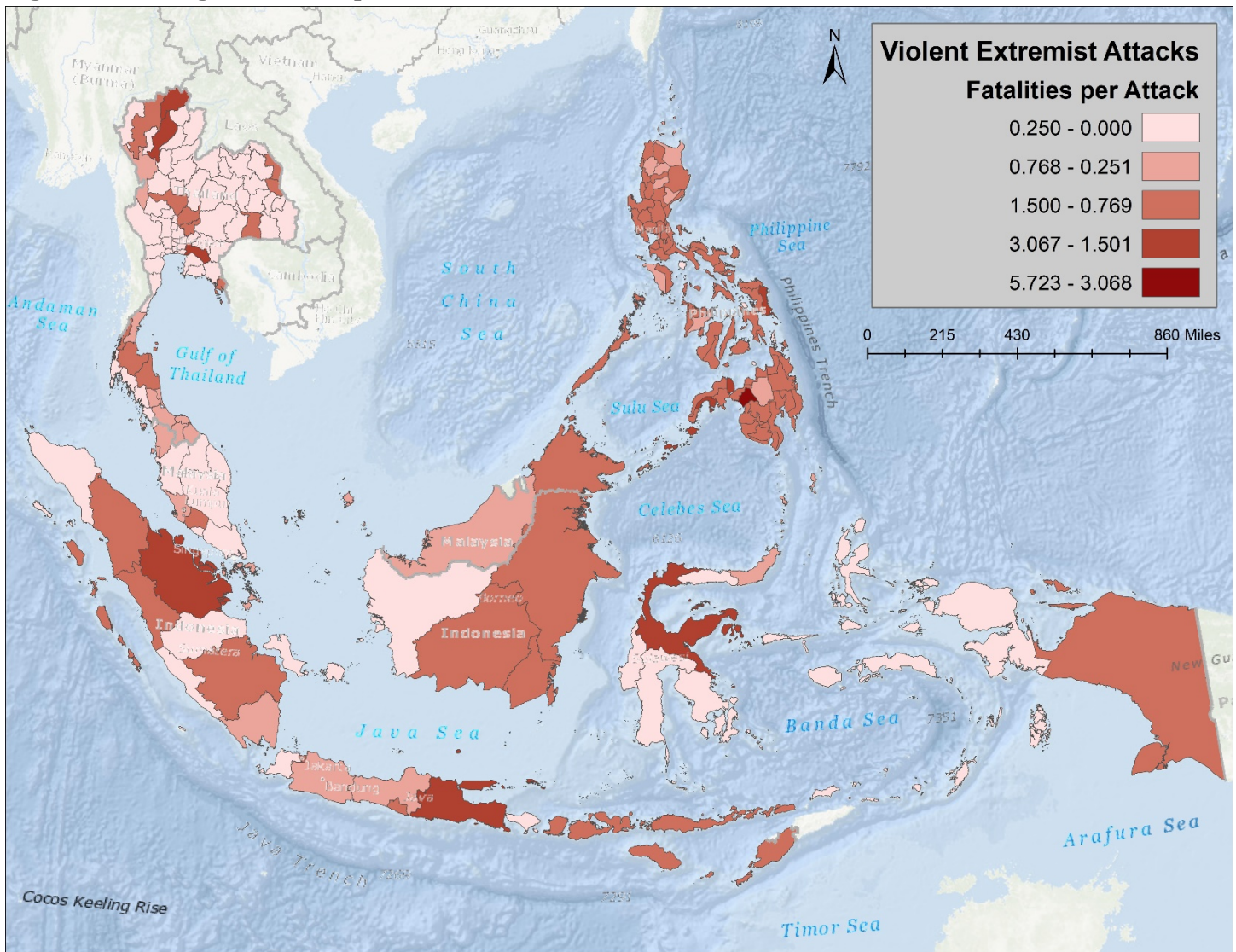[10] Andrin J. N. Raj, "Challenges in counter terrorism and counter violent extremism in Malaysia," in Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (ed.) *Countering Insurgencies and Violent Extremism in South and South East Asia*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 207

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), January 2010- December 2020; https://www.acleddata.com.

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Figure 1: Average Fatalities per VEO Attack Across Southeast Asia

Malaysians are most vulnerable to extremist ideologies related to actual and perceived persecution of fellow Muslims in these active centers of violent extremism, as well as areas outside Southeast Asia.[14] Enhanced understanding of broader historical, geopolitical, and social dynamics will illustrates the importance of Malaysia's role in Southeast Asian experiences of radicalization and terrorism.

Threats and risks of violent extremism are especially pronounced in the Malaysian state of Sabah, located on the northeast portion of Borneo. At the end of 2014, no resident of Sabah was reported to have joined IS in Iraq and Syria. However, in May 2015, Malaysian security forces captured six Sabahans with suspected ties to IS.[15] Also, in 2016, Malaysian security forces foiled an IS-inspired attack in Kuala

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[14] Rohan Gunaratna, "The Current and Emerging Extremist Threat in Malaysia," in Scott Helfsten (ed). *The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Radical Islamic Ideology in Southeast A*sia (2009)
[15] Laura Steckman, "The Abu Sayyaf-ISIS Nexus: Rising Extremism and its Implications for Malaysia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 8, no. 5 (2016): 16-21.

Lumpur after the arrest of a Sabahan IS-cell leader.[16] Sabah's close proximity to the Philippines and Indonesia, combined with longstanding trade routes and close, cross-border familial ties, facilitate highly unregulated migrant flows. Correspondingly, Sabah has the highest rates of undocumented migration in Malaysia.[17] While the vast majority of emigrants are motivated by economic opportunity, extensive evidence suggests that Filipino VEOs, particularly ASG, are also exploiting these flows.[18] Sabah is not merely a transit point for Filipino VEOs; rather some groups are actively engaged in radicalizing and recruiting Malaysians and Filipino expats living in Sabah, as well as building ties with local VEOs.[19]

The U.S. government can support efforts by the new Malaysian government to mitigate these risks by addressing the dynamics of radicalization to violence. This, however, requires nuanced understanding of the threat.

Literature Review: Tracing Religious Extremism in Southeast Asia and Malaysia

The literature on religious extremism in Southeast Asia captures a vibrant debate on the dynamic relationship between regional and local Southeast Asian VEOs and transregional Islamist terrorist organizations and networks. Additionally, robust research findings contend that the legacies of varying strains of militant Islamist groups with ties to post-colonial state-building has, and continues, to play a significant role in the construction of Islamist identities across the region.[20] While the dynamics of religious extremism are multifarious and historically contingent across Southeast Asia, certain trends are evident, particularly related to militant Islamist extremists. The most pronounced phases of violent extremism in Southeast Asia are the rise of regional and local VEOs in the early 2000s (e.g., JI, ASG, MILF) and their subsequent revival following the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Their revival also coincided with their targeted, Southeast Asian recruitment and propaganda efforts.[21]

Presently, two competing schools of thought dominate the literature on violent extremism in Southeast Asia—the globalists and the regionalists. Broadly, the division between the "globalists" and the "regionalists" reflect different methodologies and approaches to analyzing local, transnational, and transregional jihadism and militant Islamist extremists in Southeast Asia.[22] Globalists draw attention to and analyze the broader organizational structures (e.g., global networks and links), whereas the regionalists focus on complex local contexts (e.g., history, geography, local social and political relations) in their evaluations of VEOs and their radicalization efforts.

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Anni Santhiago, "Human smuggling, Migration and Human Rights: A Malaysian Perspective," In *Migration: Human rights Protection of Smuggled Persons*. The International Council on Human Rights Policy Review Meeting, Geneva (July 25-26, 2005).

[18] Shashi Jayakumar, "The Islamic State Looks East: The Growing Threat in Southeast Asia." *CTC Sentinel* 22 (2017); The Strait Times, "Terrorists turn to Sabah route." April 9, 2019; Teoh Pei Ying, "12 Filipinos, one Malaysian terror suspects nabbed in Sabah crackdown." *New Straits Times*, March, 18, 2019.

[19] Jayakumar 2017; Raj, 2019

[20] Kristien E., Schulze, and Julie Chernov Hwang, "Militant Islam in Southeast Asia." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 1 (2019): 1-13.

[21] Jayakumar 2017

[22] Schulze and Chernov Hwang, 2019

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For instance, when ties between JI and AQ were revealed following both Bali bombing attacks in the early 2000s, the globalists argued that JI, ASG, MILF, and KMM were functional regional affiliates and members of AQ's global jihadist network.[23] Furthermore, they contend that key leadership connections played an important role in bringing these regional Southeast Asian affiliates into AQ's global network. Globalists argued that vital meetings and personal relationships forged between Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Sungkar (the co-founder of JI), Riduan Isamudin (a top JI leader better known by his alias "Hanbali"), and leadership of ASG, MILF, and KMM reinforced JI's status as the leading AQ affiliate in Southeast Asia.[24] Globalists advance the argument that AQ created a "dependable proxy" network centered around JI leadership in the region that would facilitate the establishment of a large Islamic state across Southeast Asia.[25]

Regionalists, on the other hand, argue that a transnational and transregional approach to understanding violent Islamist extremism in Southeast Asia depends on a number of assumptions that do not necessarily reflect local realities. For example, while Hanbali maintained a privileged leadership role in JI's *Mantiqi I* (territory 1), regionalists point out that his leadership role did not extend into other JI *Mantiqis* (territories) and overestimated the consensus within JI about forming ties with AQ.[26] In reality, there were significant differences between the branches and territories of JI in terms of their priorities and relationships to other VEOs. Regionalists argue that focusing on local context, involving historical contextualization and social and political relations, reveals greater nuance in evaluating VEOs in Southeast Asia.

Regardless of the divisions between the globalists and the regionalists the literature underscores a perceptible shift in violent extremism in the early 2000s in Southeast Asia. In the early 2000s, radicalized militant and extremist Islamist groups in Southeast Asia demonstrated a substantial capacity to recruit, radicalize, and carry out successful insurgent activities and terrorist attacks across the region.[27] While links among these VEOs and connections to greater transnational terrorist networks, like AQ, existed, their geographic scope and operational boundaries and focus were limited principally to Southeast Asia.[28] Similarly, the importance of connections and networks forged between regional and local VEOs were more significant than their transnational connections, as the domestic nature of most grievances in Southeast Asia limits the reach and scope of regional and local VEOs.[29]

The October 12, 2002 Bali Bombing in the tourist destination of Kuta, Indonesia marked the rise of JI and their operational capacity to command numerous militia units, despite geographic barriers and diverse

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[23] Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*. (New Delhi, India: Roli Books, 2003); Abuza, Zachary. *Political Islam and Violence in Indonesia*, (London: Routledge 2006). Maria Ressa, *Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of Al-Qaeda's Newest Center of Operations in Southeast Asia* (New York: Simon and Schuste, 2004).
[24] Gunaratna 2002
[25] Abuza 2006
[26] Schulze and Chernov Hwang, 2019
[27] Ibid.
[28] Samuel Henkin, Marcus A. Boyd, and Adam Martin, "Southeast Asia After the Caliphate: Identifying Spatial Trends in Terrorism and Radicalization in Malayisa," *Statistics, Politics and Policy,* (2020).
[29] Scott Helfstein, "Radical Islam Ideology in Southeast Asia," in Scott Helfstein (ed.) *The Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point*. (2009).

ethno-nationalities among its members, across Malaysia, the southern Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Australia. JI's early success facilitated a range of interest in radicalization and terrorism in Southeast Asia, and is therefore critical to contemporary analysis of extremist violence in the region.[30] Officially formed in Malaysia in 1993 by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, JI established four *Mantiqis* reflecting different organizational and administrative operations across Southeast Asia. Originally, *Mantiqi* I (covering peninsular Malaysia and Singapore) was responsible for fundraising activities, *Mantiqi* II (consisting of Java, Sumatra, and most of the other islands of Indonesia excluding Sulawesi) was the primary focus area for terrorist attacks, and *Mantiqi* III (including the Philippines, Sabah in eastern Malaysia, Sulawesi, and eastern Kalimantan) served as their training grounds.[31] Operational and administrative functions did not eventuate in *Mantiqi* 4 (covering Australia) beyond latent support. JI successfully carried out significant acts of terrorism (e.g., Bali Bombings, JW Marriot Hotel Bombing, Australian Embassy Bombing) in *Mantiqi* III well into the mid-2000s. The importance of JI leadership and cells in Malaysia cannot be overestimated as it facilitated the growth of other localized VEOs, such as KMM, Al Maunah, Malaysia Mujahedeen Group, Al Arqam, and Darul Islam (DI).[32]

Furthermore, the early 2000s saw the revival of the *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (Aceh Freedom Movement; GAM) in Indonesia. Unlike the political violence in the late 1970s, and again in the early 1980s, the GAM grew and organized with substantially more funding that afforded them an opportunity to effectively challenge Indonesian forces in the Aceh province.[33] Concurrently, militant Islamist separatists' terror activities upset the delicate security situation in Thailand's southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat (commonly referred to as Thailand's Deep South) in 2001. The Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani (GMIP), the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), and related factions, employed terrorist tactics resulting in over 1,500 violent incidents aimed at civilians, police, soldiers, and Thai government officials.[34] Today, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Coordinate (BRN-C), a splinter group of the BRN, continues to employ terror tactics in the Deep South along the Thai-Malaysian border.[35] The Deep South Watch Database (DSW) has documented over 25,000 violent incidents in the border region, known for its political instability and mass irregular cross-border migration.[36]

Of significant interest to this study, the early 2000s witnessed the discovery of KMM in Malaysia and the prominent growth of MILF and ASG, splinter factions of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and

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[30] Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003); Stuart Koschade, "A Social Network Analysis of Jemaah Islamiyah: The Applications to Counterterrorism and Intelligence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29, no. 6 (2006): 559– 575.

[31] Sydney Jones, "The changing nature of Jemaah Islamiyah," Australian Journal of International Affairs, 59, no. 2 (2005), 170; Henkin et. al 2020.

[32] Raj 2019

[33] Michael L. Ross, "Rebellion and resources in Aceh, Indonesia," in *Understanding civil war: evidence and analysis*, Paul Collier., and Nicholas Sambanis (eds.), 2nd ed. (The World Bank, 2005): 2–43.

[34] Aurel Croissant, "Unrest in Thailand: contours, causes and consequences since 2001," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: a journal of international and strategic affairs*, 27, no. 2 (2005): 21–43.

[35] Anders Engvall, "Violent Incidents in Southern Thailand/Patani," (Situation Report, Deep South Watch and the Center for Conflict Studies and Cultural Diversity, Thailand, 2018).

[36] Ibid.

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their affiliates, like Raja Solaiman Movement (RSM), in the southern Philippines. Regarding the latter, in late 2002, the Bush administration deployed 660 U.S. troops to the southern Philippine islands of Basilan and Jolo.[37] They were tasked with addressing increased violent extremist activity and combatting MILF and ASG, and their affiliates like RSM. The U.S. government also provided $100 million in annual security and development aid to assist the Philippine government's CT and CVE actions in western Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago.[38] Manila's lack of success in countering the instability created by these VEOs, even after negotiating a peace deal with MNLF to establish the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), coupled with existing security vulnerabilities in the area, further entrenched the region in violence.[39] The continued insecurity and escalation of extremist violence in the southern Philippines continues to shape the security situation along its closest borders (Sabah, Malaysia and eastern Indonesia).

As various VEOs engaged in increasing levels of violence across Southeast Asia, an investigation into an attempted bank robbery in Petaling Jaya led to the discovery of a clandestine militant group known as the KMM based in Malaysia. The KMM sought to overthrow the Malaysian government and form an Islamic state spanning Southeast Asia. Before KMM's exposure and subsequent partial dismantling, strong connections were forged between KMM and JI, as well as other wider connections to regional VEOs, like MILF and PULO, and transregional networks like AQ.[40] This made KMM one of the most crucial and influential militant Islamist groups to operate in Malaysia, albeit only for a short period of time. In addition to political assassinations, robberies, and the bombing of churches and Hindu temples, KMM is alleged to have organized an attack on U.S. military personnel in Malaysia.[41] While the KMM has largely been dismantled by Malaysian security forces, former members, sympathizers, and supporters have been linked to other extremists groups and remain active.[42] The continued existence of Southeast Asian regional and local VEOs with links to KMM attests to the capacity of Malaysian VEOs to regenerate in one form or another.

Just over a decade later, the rapid rise of IS perceptibly shifted the global terrorism landscape and provoked significant security anxieties. In Southeast Asia, these security concerns materialized in numerous ways. First, IS radicalization materials and propaganda from Al-Hayat, IS's media division, strategically and successfully targeted vulnerable Southeast Asian Muslim communities, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia.[43] The emergence of KN, the aforementioned exclusively Southeast Asian IS unit, in Shaddadi, Syria attests to the relative success of IS outreach to the region. Initially a minimally trained unit of 100 Malay and Indonesian FTFs, KN grew into three military subunits in both Iraq and Syria

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[37] Gershman 2002

[38] Steven Rogers. "Beyond Abu Sayyaf: The Lessons of Failure in the Philippines. *Foreign Affairs*, 83 (2004: 15.

[39] Bileveer Singh and Jasminder Singh, "From "bandit" to "Amir"—The Rise of the Abu Sayyaf Group as a Jihadi Organization in the Philippines", *Asian Politics & Policy,* 11, no. 3, (2019): 399-416.

[40] Andrew T.H. Tan. *Al-Maunah and KMM in Malaysia in A Handbook of Terrorism in Insurgency in Southeast Asia*, (London: Edward Elgar, 2007.

[41] Rohan Gunaratna 2019

[42] Ibid.

[43] Kumar Ramakrishna, "The Growth of ISIS Extremism in Southeast Asia: Its Ideological and Cognitive Features–and Possible Policy Responses," *New England Journal of Public Policy*, 29, no. 1 (2017): 5.

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comprising radicalized fighters from across Southeast Asia. Within a year, over 450 Malaysian and Indonesian FTFs and their families traveled to Iraq and Syria to join IS/KN.[44] Some estimates place the number of Southeast Asian FTFs in Iraq and Syria between 600-900.[45] Concurrently, at the height of Southeast Asian recruitment in 2016-2017, other VEOs like ASG and former members of JI, offered pledges of allegiance (or *bayat*) and affiliation to IS. The southern Philippine island of Mindanao was pronounced as a *wilayat* (province) for IS (*Daulah Islamiyah Wilayatul Mashriq*; Islamic State-Eastern Region) and encouraged FTFs to travel to the southern Philippines.[46] IS-inspired attacks, such as the June 2016 bombing in Malaysia and the January 2016 Starbucks bombing in Jakarta, Indonesia, remain exceptional events, but IS-aligned cells and sympathizers across Southeast Asia, aided in part by regional and local VEOs, remain one of the most significant sources of risk as terror cells are becoming more organized and violence is escalating.[47]

The historic and current confluences of the violent extremist and terrorism threat landscape in Southeast Asia intersect in Malaysia where aggressive CT and CVE practices, as well as shifting dynamics of regional and local VEOs, with transnational ties, meet. While Malaysia has experienced, by far, the least amount of terrorism (both in number of attacks and fatalities),[48] its roles in Southeast Asian experiences of radicalization and terrorism are significant. First, there is a rise in public supportive sentiment for extremist ideology and radicalization of Malaysians, with particular emphasis on the role of social media and the internet.[49] It is reported that upwards of 75 percent of Malaysian IS sympathizers were radicalized online in 2015.[50] Additionally, Islamic groups that espouse radical and extremist ideologies (e.g., creation of an Islamic Caliphate), but are not linked to violence in the region, like Hizbut Tahrir, remain active in Malaysia without intervention from the government.[51] Second, and relatedly, there is a new generation of Malaysians composing diverse demographics radicalizing in Malaysia, particularly women and middle-class university students. Third, Malaysia has a long history of harboring and sending FTFs abroad, particularly to Afghanistan, Bosnia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Iraq, and Syria. The threat of returning Malaysian FTFs from Syria, Iraq, and the Philippines, as well as external FTFs who use Malaysia as a conduit, and for recruitment and fundraising is evident.[52]

It has become clear that Malaysia is an access point from which VEOs circulate and operate, including sourcing financial, moral, and logistical support for global and regional VEOs.[53] Malaysia offers a case

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[44] ibid; Henkin et. al. 2020

[45] Jayakumar 2017

[46] Richard Javad Heydarian, "The Philippines' counter-terror conundrum: Marawi and Duterte's battle against the Islamic State", in Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (ed.) *Countering Insurgencies and Violent Extremism in South and South East Asia,* (London: Routledge, 2019): 46.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland, College Park.

[49] Raj 2019

[50] "Islamic State: Defeating the Virtual Caliphate," *The Express Tribune*, October 6, 2017. http://tribune.com.pk/story/1524180/Islamic-state-defeating-virtual-caliphate.

[51] Gunaratna 2009

[52] Alex P. Schmid and Judith Tinnes, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Report*, 8, no 6, (The Hague, 2015): 3.

[53] Gunaratna 2019

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study into the importance of regional and local contexts of violent extremism, and how it relates to global jihadism. A granular review of the dynamics undergirding radicalization risk in Sabah, Malaysia offers an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the current and future threats and risks of violent extremism facing Southeast Asia in order to identify important trends.

The Security Situation in Sabah

The threat of violent extremism and terrorism to Malaysia is differentiated by its vast territorial footprint and the geopolitical differences between West Malaysia (commonly referred to as Peninsular Malaysia) and East Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah) on Borneo. East Malaysia, Sabah in particular, sustains unique sociocultural, political, and economic characteristics, as well as relations with neighboring states (the Philippines and Indonesia). Sabah's strategic location as the Malaysian state closest to the Sulu Archipelago and the seas between the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia makes it one of the most significant centers of terrorism threat and risk.[54] The state suffers from decades of poor governance and lack of state capacity, economic and political marginalization, irregular migration, and proximity to violent extremist conflicts in the southern Philippines, that pose great potential for radicalization and terrorist threats. Evidence suggests that Filipino VEOs, particularly ASG, exploit these insecurities and are actively engaged in radicalizing and recruiting Malaysians and Filipino expats living in Sabah.[55] For example, in 2017 four individuals (two Bangladeshi nationals, a Filipino man, and a Sabahan women) were arrested for alleged ties to a IS-linked cell in the southern Philippines.[56]

Sabah's Geography

Sabah (formerly known as North Borneo) is the second largest state in Malaysia. It covers just over 28,000 square miles and its land borders the Malaysian state of Sarawak, Brunei and Indonesia (Kalimantan).[57] Additionally, Sabah's maritime zone covers 2,100 square nautical miles, constituting 30 percent of Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).[58] The Malaysian EEZ stretches from the South China Sea in the West and extends to the East coast, incorporating the Sulu and Celebes Seas. The marine coastal zone is delimited by the interstate and international boundaries of Sarawak, Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines. The geographic features of the tri-border region (Sabah, southern Philippines, and Indonesia), such as numerous proximate islands, inlets, reefs, international waterways, long porous borders, dense jungles, proximity to international borders, and disruptive territorial disputes are of significant concern for the defense and security of Sabah.

The Philippines Territorial Claim on Sabah

During the time Sabah was considering joining the Malaysian Federation, the Congress of the Philippines unanimously adopted a resolution wherein it pronounced the Philippines claim to North Borneo (Sabah) as valid, and urged President Diosdado Macapagal (1961-1965) to take the necessary steps consistent

[54] Ian Storey, "The Triborder Sea Area: Maritime Southeast Asia's Ungoverned Space*," Global Terrorism Analysis* 5, no. 19, (2007).
[55] Jayakumar, 2017
[56] Ibid.
[57] *Yearbook of Statistics 2004.* Kota Kinabalu, Sabah: Department of Statistics Malaysia (2004).
[58] Bilson Kurus, "Migrant labor: The Sabah experience," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 7no. 2-3 (1998): 281-294.

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with the international law and procedures for its recovery in 1961.[59] This territorial claim by the Philippines over Sabah continues today and is a considerable source of tension in the region. The Philippines has continuously advanced its claim over Sabah, with varying levels of vehemence, for the past 60 years. The claim is based on the Philippines presenting itself as the sole successor state of the Sultanate of Sulu of which Sabah was a part of before being leased and/or accessioned to the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBC) in 1878 (a precursor to North Borneo). Throughout the 60 years of territorial claim, multiple bi-lateral and multilateral negotiations and discussions about the status of Sabah continue to uphold its sovereign inclusion in Malaysia.

Just recently, the Philippines Foreign Secretary, Teodoro Locsin Jr. informed U.S. Embassy Manila that, "Sabah is not in Malaysia if you want to have anything to do with the Philippines."[60] The statement drew a quick response from his counterpart, Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs Hishamuddin Hussein, who stated, "this is an irresponsible statement that affects bilateral ties," and Sabah "is, and will always be, part of Malaysia."[61] The ongoing conflict has filtered into national politics, and various local Sabahan political parties leverage claims of "pro-Philippines" against their opponents, as witnessed in the 2020 state elections.[62] While Malaysia, and other neighboring states, do not recognize the Philippines' territorial claim and consider the dispute a "non-issue," diplomatic tensions continue today, which complicates conversations about the number of disquieting issues in the region, like irregular migration, piracy, territorial intrusions, and the impact of Filipino VEOs in Sabah.[63]

Transition from North Borneo to Federation of Malaysia

The interplay between Sabah's geographic location and its historic and geopolitical context shapes ongoing social and political relations within Sabah and Malaysia's relations with its bordering states.[64] While a detailed discussion is outside the purview of this desk study, the region's geopolitical relations are fraught with territorial (terrestrial and maritime) disputes, competing federal-state interests, and irregular migration worth contextualization as they offer potential theories to explain ongoing radicalization in Sabah.

Sabah's strategic location drew attention from several colonial powers in the 19th and mid-20th centuries, including the BNBC (1881-1946), the Japanese army (1940-1945), and the British Colonial Office (1946-1963).[65] The geopolitical status of Sabah was vigorously contested after Tunku Abdul Rahmans, the father of an independent Malaysia, proposed to form the Malaysian Federation that included the states of Sarawak and Sabah in May 1961, in concert with the British Colonial Office.[66] Initially, Sabah's Chief Minister Muhammad Fuad Stephens (also known as Donald Stephens) and fellow

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[59] Erwin S. Fernandez, "Philippine-Malaysia dispute over Sabah: a bibliographic survey." *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 7, no. 1 (2007).

[60] Anna Malindog-Uy, "Sabah: Malaysia's or Philippines'?" *The ASEAN Post*, October 8, 2020.

[61] ibid

[62] Mohammad Agus Yusoff, *Malaysian federalism: conflict or consensus (*Bangi, Malaysia: UKM Press, 2006).

[63] Ibid. Gunaratna 2009

[64] Herman James Luping, "The Kadazans and Sabah Politics." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Victoria, Canada (1985).

[65] Lyndon DeVantier, Angel Alcala, and Clive Wilkinson. "The Sulu-Sulawesi Sea: environmental and socioeconomic status, future prognosis and ameliorative policy options." *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 33, no. 1 (2004): 88-97.

[66] Ibid.

leaders were skeptical of the proposal to join the Malaysian Federation as Sabah enjoyed unique autonomy, rights, and capacity to pursue strategic interests, which differed from that of Peninsular Malaysia. In order to address this challenge, the British and Federal Malaya governments formed a Commission of Enquiry, the Cobbold Commission, to determine if the peoples of Sarawak and Sabah supported joining the proposed Malaysian Federation. The Cobbold Commission determined that the majority of North Borneo peoples wished to join the Malaysian Federation provided certain interests, rights and autonomy were safeguarded.[67]

In order to safeguard those interests, Stephens formed the Malaysian Solidarity Consultative Committee (MSCC) that included representatives from Sabah, Sarawak, Singapore, Malaya, and Brunei observers, to discuss the implications of Sabah (and Sarawak) joining the Malaysian Federation and proposed specific demands that were required to be met in what would become the 20-Point Agreement (18-Point Agreement for Sarawak).[68] The 20-Point Agreement provided the terms for the successful incorporation of Sabah into the Malaysian Federation in 1963 as an equal partner of the former Federation of Malaya. Unfortunately, the friction which led to the 20-Point Agreement did not lessen the tension between what would become the federal government in Kuala Lumpur and Sabahans.

Over time, as the power of the federal government grew in Peninsular Malaysia the safeguards of the 20-Point Agreement began to weaken. For example, Sabah and Sarawak's equal partner status was amended in 1976 essentially demoting the territories to the status of states. The Malaysian federal government has pursued strong intervening actions against states that are perceived to project a regionalist agenda, especially Sarawak and Sabah.[69] A Sabahan regionalism movement ("Sabah for the Sabahans") is growing as relations with Kuala Lumpur continue to be marked by ongoing tension related to ethno-religious politics and the economy.[70] For example, promises of economic development from Kuala Lumpur, as the federal government controls development funds, have not materialized causing much animosity in Sabah.[71] Many Sabahans believe that the unique challenges Sabah faces cannot be understood by the Peninsular Malaysia-based central government thus straining federal-state relations. Federal-state relations continue to be a source of tension in Sabahan politics and require further examination to determine if arguments for self-determination are being exploited by VEOs and impacting radicalization and extremism in Sabah.[72] Many of the security issues discussed below are also deeply embedded in this dynamic.

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[67] Suffian Mansor, and Mohd Samsudin. "Reaksi Masyarakat Limbang terhadap Rancangan Pembentukan Malaysia Melalui Siasatan Suruhanjaya Cobbold 1962 (The Limbang Society Reaction to Malaysia Formation's Plan through the Cobbold Commission Enquiry 1962)." *Akademika* 89, no. 1 (2019).

[68] Kennedy Gordon Tregonning,. *A history of modern Sabah (North Borneo, 1881-1963)*, (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1965).

[69] James Chin, "Politics of federal intervention in Malaysia, with reference to Sarawak, Sabah and Kelantan." *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 35, no. 2 (1997): 96-120.

[70] Francis Loh Kok-Wah, "A 'New Sabah' and the spell of development: resolving federal-state relations in Malaysia," *South East Asia Research* Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 1996): 63-83.

[71] Chin 1997

[72] Mohammad Sinring Saiful, and Anantha Raman Govindasamy, "Sabah Sarawak Keluar Malaysia (SSKM): Hala tuju selepas PRU-14". *Jurnal Kinabalu*, Edisi Khas PRU14, (2019): 411-435.

Malaysian Ethno-Religious Policy

Malaysian politics is profoundly shaped by the politicization of Islam and the underlying sociocultural environments and ethnic relations in which this process takes place.[73] Indeed, Malaysia's complex ethno-cultural and political landscapes have become more complex with the growth of Islam. Malaysian ethno-religious politics categorizes citizens along religious (Muslim and non-Muslim) and ethnic (Malay and non-Malay) lines as stated in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.[74] *Bumiputera,* comprising Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak, are given special societal and economic privileges in accessing a range of services and opportunities, including public-sector jobs, business licenses, government contracts, and admission to public universities, through a race-based quota system.[75] In contrast, *non-Bumiputera,* such as Malaysia's large Chinese population and other non-indigenous peoples, do not have the same opportunities.[76] These policies are especially complicated in Sabah as both the *Bumiputera* and *non-Bumiputera* populations are highly heterogeneous. Nevertheless, ethno-religious groups in Sabah can be divided into two major categories namely *Bumiputera* (natives) and non-*Bumis* (non-natives). In Sabah, within the *Bumiputera* status, there are two different groups comprising of Muslim-*Bumis* and non-Muslim *Bumis*. The non-Muslim *Bumis* population includes Sabah's indigenous populations, including the Kadazan-Dusun, a coalition of indigenous groups that now form the largest indigenous population in Sabah. The Muslim-*Bumis* population also includes significant ethnic group heterogeneity with such diverse populations as the Bajau, Suluk, Illanun, Kedayan and Brunei Malay. While ethno-religious politics in Peninsular Malaysia stress differences between *Bumiputera* and *non-Bumiputera,* in Sabah, the differences between Muslim-*Bumis* and non-Muslim *Bumis* is most significant.[77]

The legacies of competition and rivalry between Muslim-*Bumis* and non-Muslim *Bumis* populations continue to contour the politics of Sabah today. Fear of assimilation among the Sabahan people through the "Malayization" and "Islamization" project practiced by the federal Malaysian government and state leaders in Peninsular Malaysia is a common concern that dates back to debates about Sabah joining the Malaysian Federation.[78] The process of Malayization and Islamization in Peninsular Malaysia is marked by the rise of Islamic political parties, such as the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and non-state actors, like *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia; ABIM) and Darul al-Arqam. At the same time, a Sabahan regionalism grows to counter these impacts. Sabah's earliest leaders worked to strengthen state identity through a range of ethno-religious policies aimed to sustain non-Muslim *Bumis'* political power. However, over time the non-Muslim *Bumis* political block fragmented and were subsequently excluded from political power for decades.

The effects were viewed as disastrous for non-Muslim *Bumis*, as Islamization reshaped ethno-religious relationships often privileging Muslim-*Bumis*, including the declaration of Islam as the state's official

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[73] Yong Liow, Joseph Chin. "Exigency or expediency? Contextualizing political Islam and the PAS challenge in Malaysian politics." *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2004): 359-372.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Vejai Balasubramaniam, "A divided nation: Malay political dominance, Bumiputera material advancement and national identity in Malaysia." *National Identities* 9, no. 1 (2007): 35-48.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Joseph Chin Yong, "*Piety and politics: Islamism in contemporary Malaysia*," (Oxford University Press, 2009).

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religion in 1976.[79] The current rise of Sabahan regionalism sheds light on the deepening ethno-religious divides in Sabah. Moreover, the steady presence of a significant number of foreign migrants (both regular and irregular) has gradually reshaped the ethno-religious and cultural landscapes adding further complexity to social, political, and economic relations in Sabah.[80]

Irregular Migration in the Tri-Border Area

Historically, longstanding trade routes and close, cross-border familial ties facilitated highly unregulated migrant flows throughout the region. Over the years, growth in economic opportunities in Sabah, increased levels of violence and instability in the southern Philippines (and Indonesia), and chain migration as a result of blending ethno-identity, culture, and religion has complicated the regulation of migration into Sabah. As such, migration is one of the most critical issues in Sabah today. The vast majority of migrants come from lower-income neighboring countries, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, which share cultural and geographic proximity. While a plethora of push factors exist, including escaping VEOs, that drive migration to Sabah, the primary motivation today is potential economic opportunities.[81]

Malaysia has experienced a rise in migrants looking to enter as foreign laborers in response to Malaysia's steady economic growth and demographic changes since the early 1970s. Foreign labor is usually concentrated in low-skilled occupations and accounts for about 15 percent of the total labor force in Malaysia.[82] Over time, foreign labor fulfilled labor shortages in low-skilled, labor intensive sectors such as manufacturing, construction, plantation agriculture, and domestic help sectors in the states of Selengor, Johor, and Sabah. The foreign labor market has direct micro and macroeconomic implications in Malaysia. Most importantly, low-skilled foreign workers fill labor shortages in labor intensive sectors while creating mid and high-skill opportunities for native Malaysian workers, enabling increased wage premiums for native Malaysians.[83]

While many sectors rely on foreign labor there have been increased concerns with irregular foreign laborers.[84] First, there is always a possibility that both regular and irregular foreign labor could depress employment opportunities and related wages for low-skilled Malaysian workers.[85] Second, and more relevant to this study, are the significant social implications arising from irregular laborers who actively work to avoid detection. In the process of avoiding detection, a range of illicit and illegal services rise, like smuggling routes and fake document syndicates, in areas with large numbers of irregular foreign

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[79] Francis Loh Kok-Wah, "A 'New Sabah' and the Spell of Development: Resolving Federal-State Relations in Malaysia." *South East Asia Research* 4, no. 1 (1996): 63-83.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibnor Azli Ibrahim, Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah Hajimin, Ezad Azraai Jamsari, Badlihisham Mohd Nasir & Mohd Hafiz Safiai, "The Impact of Filipino Muslim Ethnic Migration into Sabah on ASEAN Integration," *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering (IJITEE)*, 8, no. 11, 2019.
[82] Wei San Loh, Kenneth Simler, Kershia Tan Wei, and Soonhwa Yi, "Malaysia: Estimating the Number of Foreign Workers", Word Bank Group Report, March 28, 2019.
[83] Çağlar Özden and Mathis Wagner, "*Immigrant versus natives? Displacement and job creation*" The World Bank Report, 2014.
[84] Irregular foreign laborers are generally categorized into four distinct groupings: 1) Undocumented and illegal entries; 2) Persons not authorized to work; 3) Over-stayers; and 4) Refugee and asylum seekers.
[85] Özden and Wagner 2014

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laborers, particularly Sabah. These clandestine movements and flows are advantageous for VEO and criminal organization exploitation, with special reference to the issues of kidnapping, encroachment, international smuggling, and violent extremist threats from the southern Philippines. Additionally, the threat of Filipino VEOs actively engaging in radicalizing and recruiting Malaysians and Filipino migrants living in Sabah is of concern as the influence of extremist ideology in the region grows.[86]

Irregular Migration into Sabah
There are a range of factors that explain the irregular foreign migration patterns and numbers in Malaysia. In general, the Malaysian government does not distinguish between undocumented peoples, including refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless peoples.[87] While the presence of irregular migrants is an issue that many Malaysian states contend with, it is an issue that is especially entrenched in Sabah. Of significant concern for Sabah are: 1) poor border regulation along its porous land and sea borders; 2) significant numbers of clandestine cross-border channels; 3) weak enforcement of migration policies, particularly overstaying visas; and 4) the necessity of foreign laborers for Sabah's low-skilled and labor intensive economic sectors.[88] It has become clear that most of Sabah's economic sectors cannot survive without foreign migrants, but the increased presence of irregular foreign migrants has caused concern.[89] Relatedly, the presence of a significant number of stateless peoples in Sabah, as a result of irregular migration into Sabah, is also of concern as radicalization in these communities present a potential security threat. Overall, there are an estimated 1.2 to 1.5 million irregular migrants in Sabah.[90]

Irregular migration is not a new phenomenon in Sabah. Rather, it is the result of centuries of unregulated movement, particularly in the seas between the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sabah. For example, the first migrants to Sabah from the Sulu archipelago arrived in the late fifteenth century when the Spanish began pushing southwards toward Sulu and Tawi-Tawi in the southern Philippines.[91] Similarly, the first migrants from Sulawesi and Java began arriving for trade purposes in the late fourteenth century.[92] Over time, the centuries-old migration relationships largely normalized movement across the region and as a result impacted most aspects of Sabah's political, economic, and social development.[93] These historical migration patterns and relationships also reshaped the cultural, religious, and ethnic composition of the region.

Migration patterns were largely maintained and encouraged during colonial rule as the BNBC introduced wide economic expansion in order to exploit the natural resources of Sabah between 1878 and 1941. By

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[86] Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Influence of Transnational Jihadist Ideology on Islamic Extremist Groups in the Philippines: The Cases of the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Rajah Solaiman Movement," *Public Organization Review* 3, no. 4 (2003): 388.
[87] Özden and Wagner 2014
[88] Mauro Testaverde,, Harry Moroz, Claire H. Hollweg, and Achim Schmillen. *Migrating to opportunity: overcoming Barriers to labor Mobility in Southeast asia*. The World Bank Report, 2017
[89] Ramli Dollah, and Kamarulnizam Abdullah. "The securitization of migrant workers in Sabah, Malaysia," *Journal of International Migration and Integration,* 19, no. 3 (2018): 717-735.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Sadiq, Kamal. *Paper citizens: How illegal immigrants acquire citizenship in developing countries*, (Oxford University Press, 2008)
[92] Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, "Cultural and Religious Diversity in Sabah and Relationships with Surrounding Areas," *Islam and Cultural Diversity in Southeast Asia,* (2015): 269-294.
[93] Ibrahim et. al 2019.

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1920 Indonesian and Filipino migrants accounted for a significant percentage of the population in Sabah.[94] Migration inflows from the southern Philippines and Indonesia continued steadily even after Sabah joined Malaysia in 1963. Historically, Sabah welcomed the presence of Filipino and Indonesian migrants because they contributed to a low cost labor force assisting Sabah's economic growth.[95] In fact, several economic sectors, especially plantation agriculture, manufacturing, and construction, are dominated by foreign migrant workers today.[96] It is widely reported that Indonesians make up the largest number of foreign nationals, both documented and undocumented, in Sabah.[97] However, an influx of Filipino refugees and asylum seekers in the 1970s and 1980s complicated formal estimates of foreign migrants (regular and irregular).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Sabah experienced a rapid increase of both regulated and unregulated migration to the state by foreign migrant workers seeking employment and, more importantly, from individuals fleeing violence in the southern Philippines after President Ferdinand Marcos' (1965-1986) declared emergency rule under martial law in 1972.[98] In particular, violence drove large-scale Mindanao Muslim refugee migration into Sabah.[99] It was estimated that up to 150,000 refugees entered Sabah and received permission to stay and work with the special HF7 pass (later changed to the IMM13) that extended to their families and renewed annually.[100] The IMM13 pass allowed the Filipino refugees to stay and work in Sabah, but holders needed to renew the pass for an annual fee of RM90 per person and failure to renew would lead to an immigration status change to "undocumented." However, administrative failures regarding the renewal process have caused significant confusion and bureaucratic complexity with very real consequences. Of the 100,000 or so Filipino refugees who were given the IMM13 pass, only about half have been renewing their passes annually causing significant changes to the immigration status of Filipino refugees and their families. For example, because of failures to renew the IMM13 pass there are presently over 100,000 stateless children in Sabah.[101]

A stateless population of interest to this study is the Bajau Luat ("sea nomads"), a nomadic sea-faring population who roam the seas in the tri-border region. The Bajau Laut live on houseboats, known as *lepa*, which form floating communities along the borders of Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, and depend on the sea for their primary source of livelihood. Estimates place the number of Bajau Luat in Semporna, Sabah around 26,000 although accurate figures are difficult to ascertain because of their

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[94] Pugh-Kitingan 2015

[95] Bilson Kurus, Ramlan Goddos, and Richard T. Koh. "Migrant labour flows in the east ASEAN region: Prospects and challenges," *Borneo Review* 9, no. 2 (1998): 156.

[96] Azizah Kassim, *Dasar pekerja asing di Malaysia: Perlunya anjakan paradigma*. (Bangi, Malaysia: UKM, 2012); Ramli and Kamarulnizam, 2018

[97] Faiznur Fatin Ishak and Ibnor Azli Ibrahim. "Air Menurut Perspektif Syariah dan Keistimewaannya Sebagai Citra Mukjizat Rasulullah SAW" *BITARA International Journal of Civilizational Studies and Human Sciences,* 2, no. 3 (2019): 42-58.

[98] Olivia Killias, "'Illegal 'migration as resistance: Legality, morality and coercion in Indonesian domestic worker migration to Malaysia." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38, no. 6 (2010): 897-914.

[99] Azizah Kassim and Ubong Imang. "Orang pelarian di Sabah: status dan prospek." In *Proceeding of Seminar on State Responses to the Presence and Employment of Foreign*, (2005): 91-93

[100] Ibid.

[101] Kanapathy, Vijayakumari, "*Controlling irregular migration: The Malaysian experience*," International Labour Organization (ILO) Report: 2008.

nomadic lifestyle. Statelessness in Sabah is generally related to three primary factors.[102] First, there is a lack of knowledge on the part of the stateless person if irregular migration has occurred. Second, unregistered marriages, particularly involving undocumented migrants, may lead to unregistered births where no documentation can be produced for infants/children. Third, and finally, cultural patterns and practices of indigenous communities, like the Bajau Luat, do not conform to immigration policies. The issues of statelessness and irregular migration are deeply intertwined in Sabah as it presents real issues with enforcing migration policies and documentation practices.[103]

The vast amount of irregular migration in Sabah occurs through clandestine cross-border channels, or *jalan tikus* ("mouse paths").[104] These clandestine routes incorporate complex waterways and jungle paths that prove difficult to police. The high number of routes available because of the vastness of the porous borders and myriad of islands, inlets, and reefs in the region make them incredibly difficult to monitor for all states involved. While these clandestine routes are characteristic of transnational kinship networks and longstanding patterns of migratory movement and trade, increases in illicit and illegal smuggling (e.g., firearms), acts of piracy, kidnapping, and extremist activities in Sabah has highlighted the need to secure Sabah's borders.

Irregular Movement and Clandestine Channels into Sabah

Sabah's long porous sea border with multiple ports of entry, the presence of many islands in Sabah's territorial waters that complicate maritime patrolling, and close proximity to the southern Philippines and Indonesia makes it difficult to regulate maritime migration routes. While multiple legal ports of entry in the tri-border region exist, like the commonly used ferry between Zamboanga, Philippines and Sandkan in Sabah and PELNI Ferry from Nunukan, Indonesia to Tawau, Sabah, there are numerous irregular sea routes into Sabah.[105] Heavily used launching points for clandestine travel are scattered across the numerous islands of the Sulu archipelago in the southern Philippines, like Mangsee Island, Bakkungan Island, and Turtle Island. From Indonesia, irregular migrants usually leave from Pare-Pare, a south Sulawesi port city, to access various landing sites in Kalimantan, like Nunukan or Sebatik Island before entering, Tawau, Sabah.[106] Clandestine points of entry into Sabah are commonly, but not limited to, the districts of Kudat, Sandakan, Kinabatangan, Tambisan, Lahad Datu, Kunak, Semporna, and Tawau. Figure 2, below, depicts these pathways, but even though the start and end points of these clandestine channels are well known, the numerous routes taken once inside territorial waters and their short distances make policing these routes very difficult.[107]

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[102] Tamara Joan Duraisingam,, "Stateless persons of Malaysia-the causes and consequences." *International Journal of Public Law and Policy* 5, no. 4 (2016): 291-304.
[103] Azizah 2012
[104] Andrew M. Carruthers, "Clandestine Movement in the Indonesia-Malaysia Migration Corridor: Roots, Routes, and Realities," *Perspectives,* 58, (2017).
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Carruthers 2017; Senia Febrica, "Securing the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas from Maritime Terrorism: a Troublesome Cooperation?," *Perspectives on Terrorism,* 8, no. 3 (2014): 64-83; Choo Chin Low, "Extraterritorial migration control in Malaysia: Militarized, externalized, and regionalized." *Regions and Cohesion,* 9, no. 3 (2019): 1-28.

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Figure 2: Common Maritime Migratory Pathways in Southeast Asia
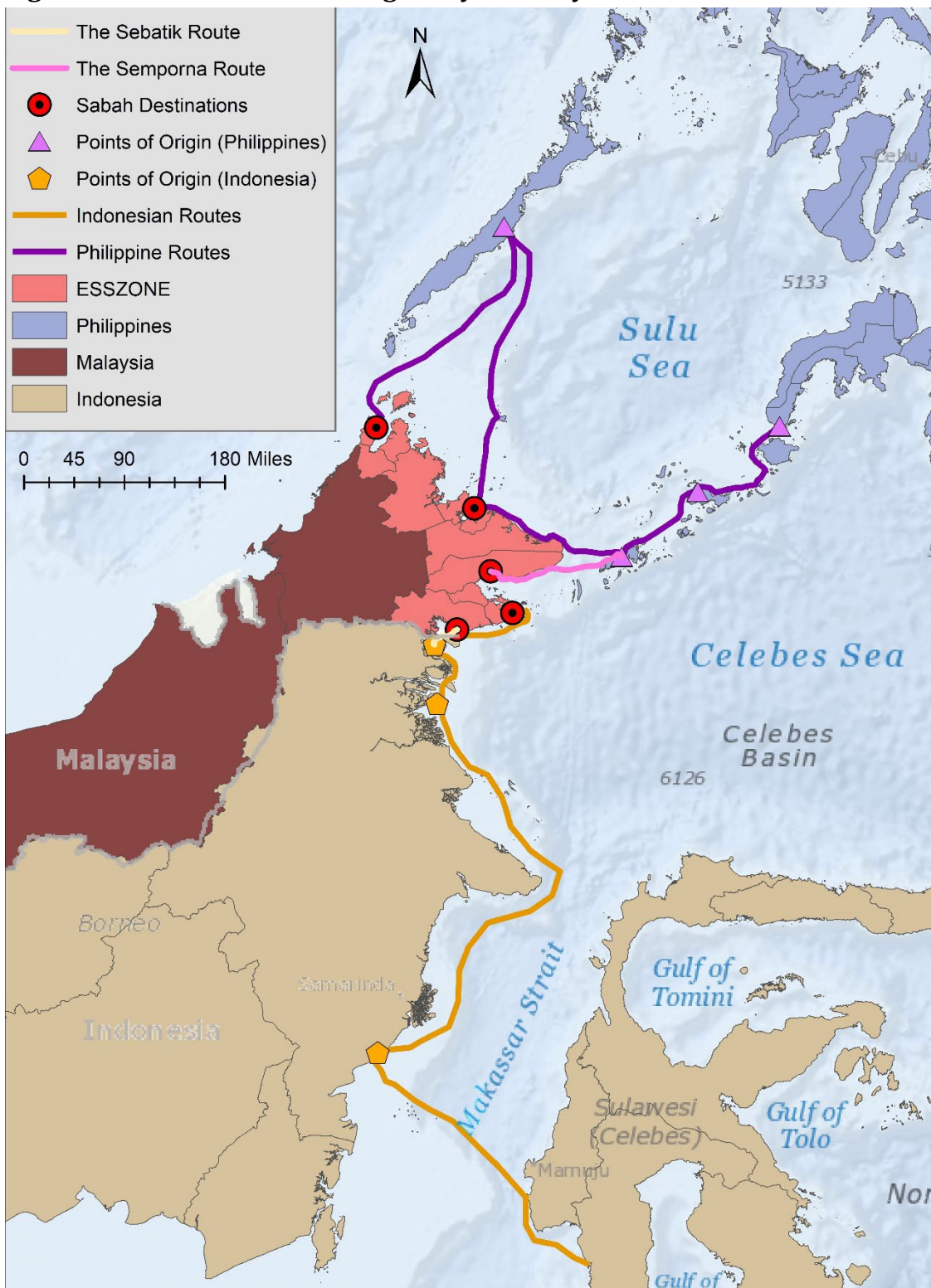
The Semporna route seems to be the most popular among Filipino migrants who opt for unregulated entry into Sabah. It only takes about 15 minutes to travel the three nautical miles between the islands of Tawi-Tawi, Philippines to Mataking Island, Semporna and it is another 16 nautical miles to Pekan

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Semporna (Semporna Town).[108] The Sebatik route is popular among Indonesian migrants who use clandestine channels to enter Sabah. Sebatik is an island that is evenly divided by an international border between the Philippines and Malaysia. Once Indonesian migrants reach Sebatik by means of small jetties from Tunon Taka port they are able to travel to the border on foot and can cross into Malaysia (depending on patrols) freely. Once on the Malaysian side, boats will take them into the territorial waters (a wide river with multiple estuaries) and drop them off in Tawau or somewhere along the less populated coastline.[109]

Again, while these clandestine channels primarily function as conduits for long standing migration flows related to economic opportunities and chain migration there is concern that VEOs and related criminal elements are exploiting the routes and the peoples taking them. The most significant example is the Tanduo Incident, or 2013 Lahad Datu standoff, where over 200 Royal Sulu Army (RSA) militants and followers of a claimant to the sultanship of Sulu invaded eastern Sabah, using clandestine channels. The RSA held the town of Tanduo in Lahad Datu demanding Malaysia recognize the Sulu Sultanate, acknowledge that Sabah belongs to the Sultanate, and that the Sultanate be compensated for the occupation of Sabah.[110] Malaysian security forces surrounded the village and after several failed attempts at negotiations and missed deadlines for the RSA to withdraw, they launched a major operation to end the standoff.[111]

The Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) was established under the control of the Eastern Sabah Community Command (ESCCOM) to strengthen maritime security in eastern Sabah as a result of this event.[112] ESCCOM's primary objective is to mitigate and prevent a range of security threats and risks related to acts of piracy, irregular migration, militant and extremist activities, and related organized criminal activities, like kidnapping. As depicted in figure 3, below, the ESSZONE incorporates the districts of Kudat, Kota Marudu, Pitas, Beluran, Sandakan, Kinabatangan, Lahad Datu, Kunak, Semporna and Tawau. However, even with the establishment of the ESSZONE and increased securitization along the eastern shores of Sabah, significant security challenges arise as VEOs, particularly from the southern Philippines, and associated criminal affiliates continue to pursue their violent campaigns.[113]

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[108] Ramli and Kamarulnizam, 2018
[109] Carruthers 2017
[110] Siti Nur Azilayati Rahmah Raman and Mohd Adnan Hashim. "An Analysis on the Aftermath of Lahad Datu Incursion." *Journal of Media and Information Warfare Volume,* 13, no. 1 (2020): 87-104.
[111] Ramli Dollah, Wan Shawaluddin Wan Hassan, Diana Peters, and Zaini Othman, "Old threats, new approach and national security in Malaysia: issues and challenges in dealing with cross-border crime in East Coast of Sabah," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 7, no. 3 (2016): 178.
[112] Raman and Hashim 2020
[113] Dollah et. al 2016

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Figure 3: The Eastern Sabah Security Zone
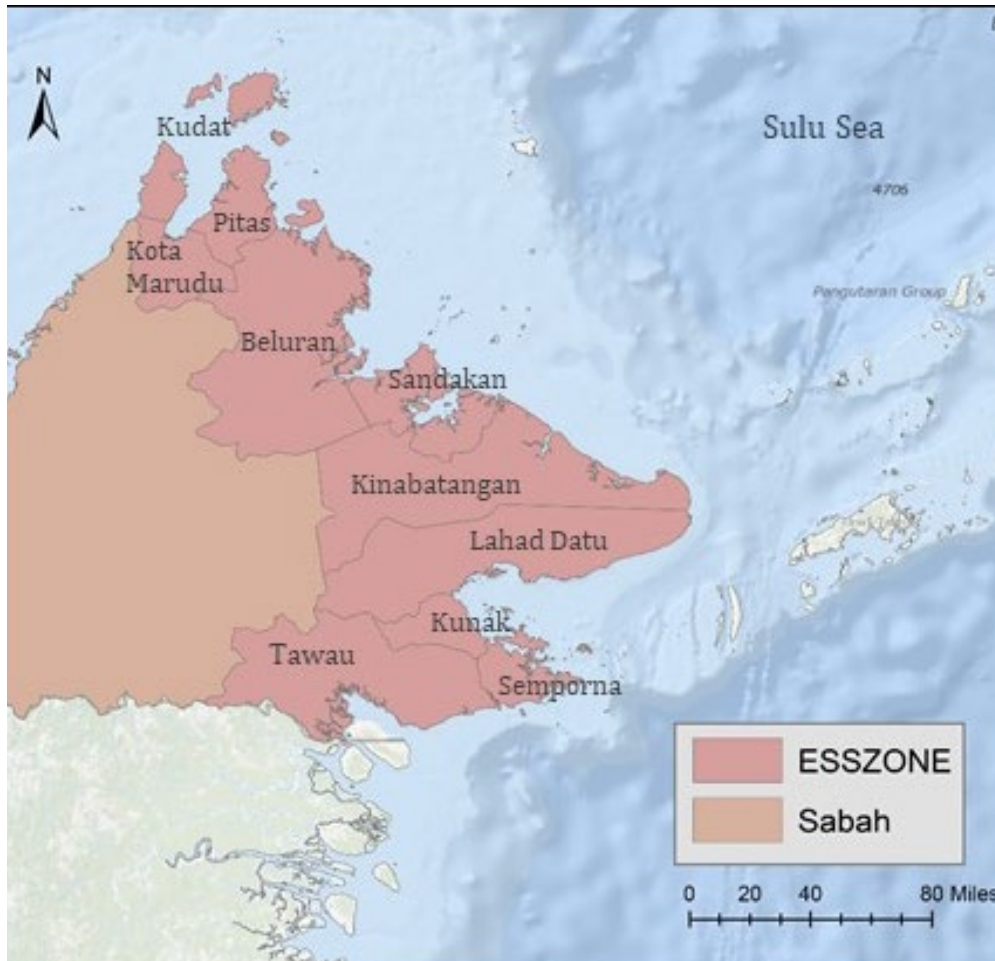
Philippine VEO Exploitation of Philippines–Sabah Dynamics

The past and current geopolitical, economic, and socio-cultural relationships between Sabah and the southern Philippines has fundamentally reshaped the threat and risk landscape in the region. More specifically, the political instability deriving from the long-established insurgent fight for self-determination, and direct armed conflict between the diverse movements of Bangsamoro and the government of the Philippines has tremendously impacted security in Sabah.[114] "Bangsamoro," a portmanteau, is an ethno-political designation for the political consciousness and movement for a nation ("Bangsa") of Muslims ("Moro") in Mindanao.[115] The long history of conflict between the government of the Philippines and Bangsamoro has evolved through various waves of violence since the 1960s, including separatists civil conflict, militant insurgencies, and its current incarnation, typified by violent extremist and terrorist campaigns.[116] Throughout these various iterations of violence in the southern Philippines security vulnerabilities in Sabah have been, and continue to be, exploited.

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[114] Ayesah Uy Abubakar, "The Study Area: Mindanao and the Bangsamoro Conflict Communities." In *Peacebuilding and Sustainable Human Development*, (New York: Springer 2019): 87-123.
[115] Abhoud Syed M. Lingga, "Role of third parties in Mindanao peace process," *Occasional Paper*, 1, (2006).
[116] Abubaker 2019

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Today, a number of security vulnerabilities and challenges are actively exploited by Filipino VEOs and must be better understood in order to develop comprehensive CT or CVE requirements in Sabah. Beyond the discussion of the potential for VEOs to exploit clandestine channels that facilitate irregular migration into Sabah, Filipino VEOs actively engage in a range of maritime violence, as well as territorial incursions into Sabah in an effort to generate funds and spread terror. Additionally, pledges of allegiance to IS by various VEOs in the southern Philippines only serve to heighten the risk. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen if these pledges are opportunistic propaganda efforts or signals of the internationalization of ideological currents undergirding radicalization in the Philippines, which could spill-over to the rest of the region.

Piracy

The waters in the tri-border region have a long history of maritime violence and piracy, especially between Sabah and the southern Philippines.[117] In fact, since 2013, International Maritime Bureau (IMB) data show that the territorial waters of Southeast Asia are the most pirate prone in the world and incidents of piracy continuing to rise in the area.[118] As such, piracy within and near Sabah's territorial waters are of significant concern and present a substantial security challenge. Piracy and maritime violence in the waters between Sabah and the southern Philippines is distinctive because of the political violence in the southern Philippines and the number of clandestine channels in the region.

There are three primary types of piracy that occur in the territorial waters between Sabah and the southern Philippines and the escalation of violence increases with each type.[119] The first type is harbor and anchorage attacks that target the relaxed security protocols of ports in the region. This type of piracy is usually an opportunistic attack in an effort to steal money and valuable items. Piracy raids into Sabahan port towns and villages were especially concerning in the 1990s but have reemerged as Sabah's tourism industry grows.[120] For example, in November 2013, armed raiders targeted a resort on Pom Pom Island ransacking three holiday villas, killing a Taiwanese tourist and kidnapping his wife.[121] The second type is ransacking and robbery of vessels on the high seas. Maritime violence related to this type of piracy has increased in the Sulu Sea targeting small- to mid-sized fishing vessels. For example, on Christmas day in 2013, eight fishermen were executed after pirates captured their fishing vessels.[122] The third type of piracy is hijacking vessels with the intent of converting them for illicit and illegal purposes (into so called phantom ships). This type of piracy is often conducted by well organized criminal networks, many of which have ties to regional VEOs.

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[117] Carolin Liss and Ted Biggs, (eds.) *Piracy in Southeast Asia: Trends, hot spots and responses.* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2016); Carolin Liss, "Piracy and maritime violence in the waters between Sabah and the southern Philippines," In *Piracy in Southeast Asia*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2016): 165-181.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Peter Chalk, "Contemporary maritime piracy in Southeast Asia," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 21, no. 1 (1998): 87-112.

[120] Liss 2016

[121] New Straits Times. "Murder, Abduction at Pulau Pom Pom an Isolated Incident: Sabah CP." *New Straits Times*, November 17 2013. http://www.nst.com.my/latest/ murder-abduction-at-pulau-pom-pom-an-isolated-incident-sabah-cp-1.403759.

[122] Roel Pareño "Philippines: Eight Muslim Fishermen Believed Executed by Pirates in Southern Island Religious, Ethnic Fighting." *Peace and Freedom* (2014).

The dividing line between piracy and violent extremist activities are blurred in the region as attacks are often conducted by VEOs, like MILF and ASG, or pirate gangs affiliated with VEOs.[123] Not surprisingly, piracy and kidnapping for ransom (KfR) efforts are often linked.[124] For example, in 2014 ASG attacked a yacht traveling from the southern Philippines to Sabah and held the two crew members and their passengers, a German couple, until ransom was paid.[125] An increase in well-organized pirate gangs who specialize in KfR has proven difficult to defend against and has impacted many economic sectors in Sabah, including tourism and fishing.

Kidnappings for Ransom

One of the most significant security challenges in territorial waters between Sabah, the southern Philippines, and Indonesia is the rise of KfR.[126] Kidnaping incidents worldwide have increased 275 percent in the last 10 years, and are concentrated in various hot spots, including Southeast Asia.[127] While KfR has a long regional history, it only re-emerged as a significant security concern in Sabah in the last two decades. Specifically, in April 2000, six ASG militants seized 21 hostages, mostly foreign nationals, from a resort on the Sabahan island of Sipadan.[128] The hostages were held for ransom in an ASG base in Jolo, Sulu until the Philippine Army staged a major offensive that led to the rescue of all hostages. The Sipadan KfR received international media coverage and was particularly noteworthy because it exposed the fact that violent extremists in the region were willing and able to engage in highly coordinated, cross-border violence.

Even with the establishment of ESSCOM in 2013, which was supposed to provide more effective maritime security measures, KfR continued along Sabah's coast, including another ASG KfR of a Chinese tourist and Filipina resort worker from Singamata Reef Resort in Semporna in 2014.[129] KfR in the region are often attributed to ASG, and while they do participate in many well known cases of KfR involving foreign nationals, there are a range of actors who conduct KfR in the tri-border region and local residents tend to be the most frequent victims.[130] So-called "kidnap-for-ransom-syndicates" are the primary KfR actors in the region. These syndicates embody individual units and heterogeneous coalitions of criminal enterprises that often complete specific operations and disband at their conclusion until another target is identified. They often collaborate with ASG and other VEOs in order maximize profit and for to benefit from VEO logistics networks (e.g., secure basing for holding captives).[131]

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[123] Eduardo F. Ugarte and Mark Macdonald Turner, "What Is the 'Abu Sayyaf'? How Labels Shape Reality," *The Pacific Review,* 24 (2011) 397–420.

[124] Eduardo F. Ugarte, "The Phenomenon of Kidnapping in the Southern Philippines: An Overview," *South East Asia Research*, 16 (2008): 293–341.

[125] BBC, "Philippine Militants Release Two German Hostages." *BBC*, October 17, 2014. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29665728.

[126] Mohd Kassim Noor Mohamed, "Kidnap for Ransom in South East Asia." *Asian Journal of Criminology* 3, no. 1 (2008): 61-73.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Thomas Fuller, "20 Kidnapped from Malaysian Resort Island," *New York Times*, April 25, 2000

[129] BBC, "Malaysia: Women Abducted by Suspected Militants Rescued," *BBC,* May 30, 2014.

[130] Ugarte 2008

[131] Ibid.

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Spillover of Islamist Terrorism

Prior to the rise of IS in 2014, insurgency and terrorism in Southeast Asia largely remained either regional or local in scope. Links to transregional VEOs, like AQ, existed before the rise of IS, but those links were relatively weak and often of largely of a transactional nature.[132] However, with the rise of IS and their declaration of a *wilayat* in the Philippines, the ideological influence and the transmission of effective practices for propagandizing as well as tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) for conducting sophisticated attacks has increased. While spillover from a transnational group, ASG, likely presents the largest threat to Sabah, there is also a risk of spillover from the transregional terrorist group, IS.[133]

It is important to note that the ASG grew out of discontent with the more moderate aims and tactics of MNLF during their negotiations with the Filipino government in the late 1980s and early 1990s. ASG's founder Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani was committed to waging jihad in Mindanao in order to create a pure Islamic state based on Salafi Wahhabism after many years serving in the mujahidin in Pakistan and Afghanistan.[134] In fact, very early on it became clear that ASG received financial and material support from AQ to strengthen its capabilities, although remaining ties are tenuous at best.[135] Regardless, the transnational nature of ASG is embedded in its ideology and reflected in much of its propaganda materials.[136]

ASG seeks an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines where non-Muslims and Muslim *kufrs* (infidels) are not welcome. For ASG, terrorism and banditry are justified to achieve this desired end state. While their primary focus is the Philippines, their struggle is not confined to secessionist objectives. They view the imposition Islamic rule beyond the southern Philippines as an important, albeit secondary objective.[137] This ideological affinity to transregional Islamist terrorist groups helps justify ASG's violent actions, like piracy and KfR, that transgress the Philippines borders, significantly impacting Sabah.

In the early and mid-2000s ASG was often considered as merely a "criminal nuisance" or group of "bandits" rather than as ideologically motivated violent extremists. This assessment was based on an initial focus on maritime crimes (namely piracy) and relatively low initial recruitment figures.[138] However, in 2014 ASG emerged as the nucleus of IS-aligned terrorism in Southeast Asia. Concomitantly, ASG's range of violent activities, especially its growing propensity for brutal tactics similar to those employed by IS fighters in Iraq and Syria, drew attention from IS leadership. ASG formally affiliated with IS in 2016, when IS released a video acknowledging ASG's *bayat.* The group was heavily involved in the

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[132] Renato Cruz De Castro, "The US-Philippine alliance: An evolving hedge against an emerging China challenge," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2009): 399-423.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Zachary Abuza, "Al Qaeda Comes to Southeast Asia," in Terrorism and Violence in *Southeast Asia: Transnational Challenges and Regional Stability*, ed. Paul J. Smith (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2005), 42; Zachary Abuza, "Tentacles of Terror: Al-Qeada's Southeast Asian Network," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (2002): 14.
[135] Larry Niksch, "Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-US Anti-Terrorism Cooperation," Congressional Research Service (Washington, DC: The Library of Congress, 25 January 2002)
[136] Cruz De Castro 2009
[137] Ibid., 23.
[138] Abuza 2003, 111.

Marawi Siege (2017), which served to further solidify its close ties to IS.[139] Virtually all of the nearly 1,000 IS-affiliated fighters in Marawi were killed by Philippine security forces, but only after a five month siege wherein the IS-aligned forces captured and held large swaths of a major city. Importantly, among the dead at the end of the siege were FTFs from around the region, and indeed the globe.[140] IS affiliates did not only import fighters, they also adopted TTPs first used by IS on urban battlefields in places like Iraq and Syria. Indeed, the Philippine armed forces were only able to break the siege by leveling most of Marawi.

There are a number of implications related to the Marawi Siege that impact overall security in the region.[141] First, the government of the Philippines and its security partners underestimated ASG's prominence in the regional VEO landscape. Second, IS proved adept at providing support in the form of FTFs and TTPs to their southeast Asian affiliates, even as they were suffering defeats in Iraq and Syria. Third, the Philippine armed forces, despite an intensive, decades long partnership with U.S. special operations forces proved incapable of quickly defeating the threat in Marawi. Moreover, in destroying most of Marawi and displacing over 1 million Muslim inhabitants, they may very well have sown the seeds for the next wave of IS recruitment efforts in the southern Philippines. Fourth, the siege motivated the reemergence of regional networks between VEOs and was hardly the end of attacks by groups like ASG, which for example, bombed the Jolo Cathedral in Sulu in 2019, killing 23 and injuring over 100.[142] Finally, ASG's rise to prominence signals that a large force of committed terrorists remain in the Philippines[143], even as other VEOs, like MILF, MNLF, and Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), move forward with the ongoing Bangsamoro Peace Process.[144]

Spillover effects from the political violence in the southern Philippines is already evident in many of the security challenges discussed above. However, the changing dynamics of the VEO landscape in the southern Philippines associated with the rise of ASG and a network of other IS affiliates creates the potential for more spillover of transnational Islamist groups, replete with FTF flows and sophisticated TTPs to Sabah. First, clandestine channels may be exploited by FTFs, ASG, and other IS-linked VEOs to move to and from the southern Philippines for transit purposes, radicalization efforts, and to evade Philippine security forces. Second, these same clandestine channels may be used more frequently to facilitate the range of maritime violence that ASG has long relied on to finance their fight. Finally, familiar and trade networks between the southern Philippines and Sabah, may facilitate new connections between local, Sabahan VEOs and Philippine groups with links to IS. This could easily perpetuate more attacks in Malaysia, like the IS-inspired Movida Bar attack in 2016.

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[139] Bilveer Singh and Jasminder Singh, "From "bandit" to "Amir"—The Rise of the Abu Sayyaf Group as a Jihadi Organization in the Philippines" *Asian Politics & Policy,* 11, no. 3 (2019): 399–416.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Talabong, Rambo, "Main Suspect' in Jolo Cathedral Bombing Surrenders," *Rappler,* February 4, 2019, https://www.rappler.com/nation/222635-alias-kamah-jolo-cathe dral-bombing-suspect-surrenders-february-2019#cxrecs
[143] Heather S. Gregg, "Defining and Distinguishing Secular and Religious Terrorism," *Perspective on Terrorism*, 8, no. 2 (2014): 36–51.
[144] For more information on the Bangsamoro Peace Process see Abuza, Zachary and Luke Lischin, "The Challenges Facing the Philippines' Bangsamoro Autonomous Region at One Year." USIP Special Report, 468 (June 2020).

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VEOs Active in Sabah

Despite concerns of spillover of MILF, JI, and ASG violence, at various points in Sabah's history, it has experienced a relatively low number of violent extremist and terrorist attacks over the last two decades. According to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), between 2000 and 2018, there were a total of 69 terrorist attacks in Sabah, of which, exactly one-third (23 attacks) were associated with ASG.[145] The following subsections provide brief background on VEOs that are active and have recently perpetrated attacks in Sabah. This is not an exhaustive list of threats, merely an overview of groups that have already perpetrated attacks. Just as the siege of Marawi took Philippine observers by surprise, it is entirely possible that a VEO that has not yet perpetrated attacks in Sabah, may be able to quickly mobilize to violence if they benefit from operational support from IS, or other significant transregional or transnational terrorist groups. Moreover, the extent literature on Sabahan VEOs is largely focused on historical analysis. There is a dearth of writing on VEOs in the region, that are actively recruiting, or engaging in other activities, but that have so far, stopped short of prosecuting terrorist attacks.

ASG and Affiliates

Not surprisingly, ASG is now considered to be one of the most, if not the most, violent militant Islamist groups in the southern Philippines. Unlike its forbearers the MNLF and MILF, which both sought peace with the Philippines government, ASG is not interested in placation. ASG claims to advance the establishment of an independent Islamic state in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago and commits a significant number of attacks in Sabah.[146] As discussed, ASG is known for its brutality and lethality and carries out a range of violent extremists activities.

ASG represents the most significant threat to Sabah as many of its terrorist attacks target Sabah directly. ASG has also cultivated an emergent network of local, Sabahan VEOs. ASG could easily form the basis for more direct linkages between local VEOs and IS.[147] ASG may also endeavor to set up a permanent cell in Sabah simply to further their range of criminal activities, like piracy and KfR, which sustain their extremist violence in the southern Philippines. However, even if the motivation for continued ASG inroads in Sabah is primarily financial, it's hard to envision said presence being divorced from violent extremist exploits in Sabah.

JI and Affiliates

Since its inception, JI has grown into multi-faceted splinter Islamist movement in Southeast Asia. The importance of their establishment and string of successful terrorist attacks in the early and mid-2000s cannot be overestimated in an understanding of violent extremism in Southeast Asia. While JI was formed in Malaysia in 1993 by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, its history is long and deeply entrenched in the conflict between secular governments and the role of Islam in Southeast Asian society. The successful establishment of JI's four *Mantiqis* across Southeast Asia engendered a serious network that allowed many other radical and extremists groups to be established in Malaysia, such as the KMM, al-Manuah,

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[145] Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland, College Park.
[146] Zachary Abuza, *Balik-Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf,* (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2005).
[147] Peter Chalk, "Militant Islamic Extremism," in Paul J. Smith (ed.) *Terrorism and Violence in Southeast Asia: Transnational Challenges to States and Regional Stability,* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 20.

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Malaysia Mujahedeen Group, al-Arqam, and Darul Islam, and Tanzim al-Qaeda Malaysia. Additionally, JI was seminal in coordinating terrorist activities with regional and local VEOs.[148] However, due to a decades-long police intervention after the Bali Bombings, JI was largely dismantled by Indonesian security forces and remains mostly dormant.

Nonetheless, some members, sympathizers, and supporters have aligned themselves into distinct JI cells such as Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT) and Jamaah Ansharusy Syariah (JAS) to spread extremist thought and carry out terror attacks. Also, the continued prominence of JI leadership like Ba'asyir, who continues to propagandize despite being imprisoned, has rekindled connections to regional VEOs, like ASG. In fact, JI operatives were discovered assisting ASG and their IS-affiliates during the Marawi Siege.[149] The various JI splinter cells are divided on their stance towards IS. Notably, however, Ba'asyir has pledged allegiance to IS from prison, and recruitment efforts seem to be increasing.

JI and its factions present a security threat to Sabah today for a multitude of reasons. First, JI historically used Sabah as a training ground for its extremist operatives, as well as a transit point for the movement of trainees and potential recruits between Indonesia and the southern Philippines. The current security vulnerabilities in Sabah make this type of relationship a possibility again. Second, given the current revival of JI, recruitment and radicalization efforts could impact the large Indonesian expatriate population in Sabah. Third, while ongoing internal debates on the transnational direction of JI continue, their alignment with ASG makes them a direct threat to Sabah, as ASG continues to commit violent acts in Sabah.

IS and Affiliates

While IS has faced significant defeats in Iraq and Syria, the threat remains. Indeed, the loss of its physical caliphate corresponded with an increasing focus on gaining strategic depth by establishing footholds throughout the world. As such, IS constitutes a substantial challenge for Malaysia in two major ways: online radicalization and FTFs.

The increasing rates of radicalization among diverse Malaysian populations are often facilitated by IS-inspired online recruitment and radicalization practices. IS-inspired radicalization occurs on a variety of online platforms (e.g., social media) and communication applications, like Telegram, and has formed what many have called a "virtual caliphate," where support for IS ideology is bolstered and grown. [150] It has been reported that upwards of 75 percent of IS supporters in Malaysia were radicalized online in 2015 and that number continues to rise.[151] While online radicalization does not necessarily lead to violent actions, IS propaganda in the virtual caliphate has promoted the formation of IS-inspired cells across Malaysia, including Sabah, that should be considered credible threats. Of significant concern, IS' online presence has allowed it to reach a wider range of people including women and university students. A 2018 study demonstrated that 21 percent of Malaysian university students "felt that terrorism is an

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[148] Banlaoi 2019: 30
[149] Raj 2019
[150] Ibid., 206.
[151] Ibid., 206.

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effective strategy to achieve an objective, and slightly more than half of those surveyed felt that it was possible for them to develop violent radical ideas that could then evolve into violent acts."[152] Moreover, traditional radicalization practices through extremist co-optation of *Usrahs* (religious discussion groups) have moved into the online space and are more difficult to regulate. Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts in Malaysia must take into account the increased use of the internet and social media in radicalization processes.

A major security threat related to IS stems from Malaysian FTFs, both through their return to Malaysia, as well as through their broader links to Malaysia and Malaysians that continue to exist even if they do not return. There is real concern that Malaysian FTFs will inspire the creation of smaller cells or lone actors, while also providing them the expertise to conduct attacks leveraging TTPs learned from their IS and KN training.[153] For example in 2018, it was revealed that 26 Malaysian men belonging to an IS-affiliated cell received bomb-making instructions and planned to attack various targets across Malaysia.[154] The detailed bomb-making instructions included ways to transform everyday materials into a deadly weapon. A direct threat to Sabah also stems from FTFs who recruit extremists within in Malaysia to go train in the southern Philippines with IS-affiliated groups, such as ASG, with the intent to return to Sabah to carry out attacks. In February 2018, Malaysian authorities arrested seven Filipinos and three Malaysians for smuggling extremists into the southern Philippines via Sabah for militant training.[155]

Other Emergent VEO Threats

In late 2014, the Malaysian Press reported on the formation of four VEOs in country based on a range of intelligence sources, but the four groups were only identified by acronyms, BKAW, BAJ, DIMzia, and ADI,[156] with little information made accessible.[157] There is a dearth of information on emerging VEOs in Malaysia related to Malaysian security forces concerns over ongoing interventions and surveillance. As such only scattered information is often released. Many of these groups are organized diffusely across small cells and are only publicly acknowledged by authorities after being apprehended and charged by Malaysian security forces.[158] Therefore, information about their existence is filtered through the Malaysian security apparatus. Nevertheless, analysts generally believe these groups are connected to active elements of older and more established VEOs in Malaysia and the region, and that these new groups, as was evidenced by a Malaysian police operation in mid-2014, are attempting to establish

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[152] Nahdohdin et. al 2019: 18; Rashvinjeet S. Bedi, "One in five Malaysian undergrads feel terrorism an effective tool for achieving objectives, say survey," *The Star Online*, July 27, 2018, https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/07/27/one-in-five-msian-undergrads-feel-terrorismeffective-tool-for-achieving-objectives/.

[153] Nahdohdin et. al 2019

[154] Amy Chew, "Slain Indonesian IS leader Bahrun Naim Recruited Malaysians to Launch Terror Attacks in Country," *Channel Newsasia,* July 13, 2018. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/indonesian-islamic-state-leader-bahrum-naim recruitedmalaysians-10528876.

[155] Nahdohdin et. al 2019, 16.

[156] The groups were later named by intelligence sources: Briged Khalid Al-Walid, Briged Darul Islamiyah, Darul Islam Malizia, , Arakan Daulah Islamiyah.

[157] Anton Chan, "Malaysia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 7, no. 1 (2015): 13-16.

[158] Muh Nahdohdin, Desca Angelianawati, Ardi Putra Prasetya, Kenneth Yeo Yaoren, Jennifer Dhanaraj, Iftekharul Bashar, Sylvene See and Amalina Abdul Nasir, "Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses," 11, No. 1, Annual Threat Assessment (January 2019): 6-32.

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Malaysian cells, replete with training camps and safe houses.[159] These hard-to-detect cells and networks affiliated with a diverse array of VEOs almost certainly pose a threats to Malaysia. However, additional research is needed to further understand the scale and scope of the threat.

Sabah also faces noteworthy security challenges from local cells, such as Darul Islam Sabah, which are affiliated to ASG but that are hard to detect and monitor. In the case of Darul Islam Sabah, the group was formed after the split between Indonesia's Darul Islam from JI in 1993. It has appeared and gone dormant multiple time since its founding. In the past, Darul Islam Sabah facilitated the movement of extremists and weapons in the region. More recently ties between Darul Islam Sabah and ASG have been exposed.[160] Another threat in Sabah stems from the connection between the Sabah-based Muslim Filipino group, the Knights of the Right Keepers (KotRK). KotRK was founded as a Greek fraternity, Kappa Rho Kappa (KRK), in the 1970s but has since transformed to serve ASG's interests in Sabah.[161] It is alleged that the KotRK serves as an intelligence-collection network for ASG in Sabah with special emphasis on identifying potential targets for KfR.[162] The unique geopolitical positioning of Sabah near the southern Philippines where ASG and IS-affiliates continue to operate raises concerns that these small, hard-to-detect local cells may be leveraging their international networks to help facilitate larger plots or accelerate radicalization and recruitment efforts in Sabah.

Malaysian State Responses

Malaysian authorities have proven effective at taking various steps to mitigate and prevent the threats of terrorism. CT efforts remain ongoing. In tackling the emerging threats of violent extremism and terrorism, Malaysia has adopted several strategies. While a full discussion of Malaysia's state responses and strategies to security threats in Sabah is outside the scope of this desk study, an abridged discussion offers important context and is therefore provided below.[163]

From a legislative perspective, initially Malaysian authorities relied on the Internal Security Act (ISA) 1960, a highly controversial law that empowers authorities to detain any suspected individuals for 60 days without trial in an open court. However, due to incessant pressure from the general public and opposition parties, the law was repealed in 2012 and replaced by the Special Measure Act (SMATA). In addition to this, other laws, such as Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and Penal Code 130 (Terrorism) are used to prosecute suspected extremists. More recently, in order to address the growing threats in Sabah, the National Security Council Act 2016 was passed, which strengthens the government's ability to tackle national security threats including terrorism. Moreover, Malaysia is also determined to enhance its border security using the NSCA 2016 to bolster ESSCOM's mission, as well as by providing more resources for border security in other high-risk border areas, like southern Thailand.

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[159] Chan 2015: 14
[160] Steckman 2015: 17
[161] Steckman 2015: 18
[162] Malaysian Digest, "Abu Sayyaf Planting Agents In Sabah For Kidnaps: Expert." *The Strait Times*, November 29, 2015.
[163] See Gentry White, Michael D. Porter, and Lorraine Mazerolle. "Terrorism risk, resilience and volatility: A comparison of terrorism patterns in three Southeast Asian countries," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 29, no. 2 (2013): 295-320; Muhammad Bakashmar, "Winning the battles, losing the war? An assessment of counterterrorism in Malaysia," *Terrorism and political violence* 20, no. 4 (2008): 480-497; Hamidi 2016

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Malaysia has also increased its cooperation with other governments at regional and international bodies, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, East Asia Summit, and Senior Official's Meeting on Transnational Crime. Finally, Malaysia is heavily invested in rehabilitative approaches to violent extremism. Malaysia adopted a deradicalization and rehabilitative strategy that involves collaboration between the government, civil society, and the private sector. Even though there are critiques regarding the methods employed and the effectiveness of the programs, this program continues to be adopted as part of Malaysia's approach to countering terrorism and violent extremism.

Conclusion

Southeast Asia has experienced a diverse range of violent extremist attacks over the past few decades. Many of these attacks are embedded in longstanding national and regional ethno-religious struggles but others reflect transnational or transregional Islamist ambitions. The future of violent extremism and terrorism in the region are inherently linked to the ways Islamist ideologies filter into society and their adoption and adaptation by local and regional VEOs.[164] Beyond concrete relationships, extremism sustains ethereal interconnections in the hearts and minds of different populations across Southeast Asia espousing both latent and active support for VEOs.[165] The diffusion of violent Islamist ideologies in the region is reshaping the landscape for both CT and P/CVE efforts. The complexity of violent extremism and terrorism in the region requires nuanced analysis to tease apart the extensive ties among VEOs, ideological cross-fertilization and competition, and the recent impact of transnational and transregional interests proliferating across the region.[166]

Malaysia has historically served as a staging ground and transit state for FTFs in the region and abroad. While Malaysia has experienced relatively low incidents of terrorism, research suggests that there are higher levels of radicalization in Malaysian society compared to most in the region.[167] Just five years ago, a Pew Research survey discovered that 11 percent of Malaysians expressed "favorable" views towards IS, the fourth highest among Muslim majority countries.[168] Concerns over the possibility of radicalization to violent extremism and terrorism are significant as Malaysia contends with, 1) its FTFs in Iraq, Syria, and the southern Philippines; 2) increases in domestic terrorism related arrests and foiled plots; and, 3) the more recent politicization of Islam that has had polarizing effects in the multi-ethnic and multicultural communities of Malaysia, thereby escalating confrontations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia.[169] Additionally, Malaysia must contend with cross-national mobility, particularly related to foreign laborers, along borders where significant violent extremist activity is occurring (southern Thailand and the southern Philippines). There is concern that these longstanding irregular migration

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[164] Helfstein 2009
[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid.
[167] : Nicholas Chan. "The Malaysian "Islamic" State versus the Islamic State (IS): evolving definitions of "terror," in an "Islamising" nation-state," *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 11, no. 3 (2018): 415-437.
[168] Ibid., 415
[169] Joe Liaw Siau Chi, "Expansion of ISIS in Malaysia: root causes and countermeasures*," Southeast Asian Affairs*, 3 (2017): 65–78.

patterns are facilitating extremist messaging and the radicalization of Malaysians and expatriates residing in Malaysia, as well as the movement of extremist operatives and resources for VEOs.

As this study examines, the most significant violent extremist and terrorist threats that Malaysia faces are intimately tied to Sabah. A confluence of geopolitical, social, ethno-religious, and economic factors facilitates increased radicalization risk in Sabah relative to Peninsular Malaysia. Crucially, Sabah's geographic proximity to the Philippines and Indonesia, combined with enduring trade routes and close, cross-border familial ties facilitates highly unregulated migrant flows through clandestine channels and associated illicit and illegal enterprises. Even though the vast majority of migrants are pursuing economic opportunities, the ease with which VEOs, particularly from the Philippines, exploit these flows and clandestine channels is of significant concern. It has become clear that Sabah is no longer merely a transit point for Filipino VEOs, but rather, some groups are actively engaged in radicalizing and recruiting Malaysians and Filipino expats living in Sabah, as well as building ties with local VEOs.

The security situation in Sabah will most likely continue to evolve in unpredictable ways as efforts to mitigate and prevent VEOs from exploiting existing security vulnerabilities are complex and layered. First, the geopolitical tension between Malaysia and its neighbors in the tri-border region make security coalition building difficult. Second, increased tensions in federal-state relations escalates existing grievances in Sabah as Kuala Lumpur continues to consolidate (political and economic) power. Finally, the increasingly transnational and transregional nature of violent extremism and terrorism filtering into Malaysia solidifies ties to VEOs in the region, particularly the southern Philippines, and the world.

Broadly speaking, the two major security threats facing Sabah are the ongoing exploitation of existing socio-political and geographic vulnerabilities by VEOs from the southern Philippines and the growing presence and influence of transregional Islamist terrorists in the region. Both are very likely impacting radicalization patterns in Sabah. While distinct, these two threats are closely related.