

A Systematic Review and Narrative Synthesis of Islamist Militancy in the Philippines (2000-2024)

Emil Arca

Abstract: *This article is a narrative synthesis and methodical analysis of empirical studies examining Islamist militant organizations in the Philippines from 2000 to 2024. The PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines (Page et al., 2021) were adhered to for the study of grey literature and peer-reviewed literature to identify recurring empirical trends linked to recruitment, radicalization, and violent behavior. A pooled statistical meta-analysis was not conducted due to the heterogeneity in the methodological approaches (Sands et al., 2020). Structured narrative synthesis reveals a consensus on four mechanisms: socioeconomic marginalization, kinship-based recruitment networks, ideological framing, and governance fragility. The results add to the idea of multi-level radicalization and have ramifications for counter-terrorism policy in situations where governance is fragile.*

Keywords: Islamist militancy; systematic review; radicalization; Philippines; political violence; governance fragility; counter-terrorism

1. Introduction

The Philippines constitutes one of the most significant cases of Islamist militancy in Southeast Asia. Armed organizations such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and Islamic State-affiliated factions have shaped the region's security landscape over the past three decades. The recent development of ISIS-affiliated factions, notably the Maute Group, has altered the danger picture, exemplified by the five-month siege of Marawi City in 2017 (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2018). While prior research has identified poverty, clan conflict (Rido), ideological narratives, and governance deficits as contributing factors, systematic integration of these findings remains limited (Torres, 2007). Looking deeper into the emergence of new Moro armed groups in Mindanao, it appears the main reason for their formation was frustration (Stange, 2019).

This review synthesizes empirical research published between 2000 and 2024 in order to consolidate existing knowledge and clarify the interaction of structural, social, and ideological drivers of militancy in the Philippine context.

2. Methods

This review followed the PRISMA 2020 reporting standards (Page et al., 2021). Relevant academic works were identified through searches in Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. Grey literature sources included publications from the International Crisis Group, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and datasets such as the Global Terrorism Database (LaFree & Dugan, 2007).

Studies were included if they:

- Examined Islamist militant organizations operating in the Philippines;
- Covered the period 2000–2024;
- Used research methods that involved collecting data (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods);

- Reported measurable results related to recruitment, radicalization, or political violence.

Given the variation in research design, measurement strategies, and operational definitions across studies, pooled effect-size estimation was not feasible. Therefore, a structured narrative synthesis approach was adopted to identify common themes.

3. Results

Analysis of thirty-eight qualitative investigations and fourteen quantitative assessments revealed four key themes. Initially, socioeconomic marginalization was consistently linked to increased susceptibility to recruitment, especially within Basilan, Sulu, and Lanao del Sur (World Bank, 2020). Structural deprivation seems to act as a facilitating factor, rather than a direct cause. Furthermore, kinship and clan-based recruitment strategies often take precedence over ideological adherence in mobilization processes. As Kreuzer (2005) observes, clan networks and patronage systems substantially influence the dynamics of local political violence.

Third, ideological framing intensified following the influence of Islamic State-aligned narratives. Exposure to transnational propaganda and symbolic connections facilitated mobilization, even though ideology alone was inadequate without local grievance frameworks (UNDP, 2019). Furthermore, the fragility of governance impedes the enduring effectiveness of military-led counter-terrorism initiatives. Institutional deficiencies, inconsistent service delivery, and incomplete peace agreements hinder long-term stabilization efforts (International Crisis Group, 2018).

4. Theoretical Contribution

This synthesis corroborates multi-level radicalization frameworks, which highlight the interplay between structural grievances, mobilizing networks, and legitimizing narratives (Kruglanski et al., 2019). The Philippine example

demonstrates how kinship-based social structures mediate the dissemination of transnational ideological influences. Instead of singular causal explanations, militancy arises from complex vulnerability environments shaped by economic marginalization, social integration, and institutional fragility.

5. Policy Implications

The strategies implemented in combating terrorism must extend beyond military intervention. To attain long-term stability, it is essential to conduct community-oriented preventative programs, integrated development initiatives, and institutional reform. Mitigating recruiting incentives can be achieved by implementing methods to resolve clan rivalries and enhance economic inclusion.

6. Limitations

This study has some limitations, including the possibility of publication bias, the use of different measurement methods, and the limited data from the longitudinal survey. In future research, radicalization metrics must be standardized, and mixed-method datasets should be significantly broadened.

7. Conclusion

Islamist militancy in the Philippines illustrates complex structural and societal vulnerabilities. Structured narrative synthesis uncovers consistent empirical patterns that can guide evidence-based counter-terrorism efforts. Long-term prevention efforts still depend on strengthening governance, encouraging economic inclusion, and addressing recruitment methods that rely on family connections.

Figure 1

Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

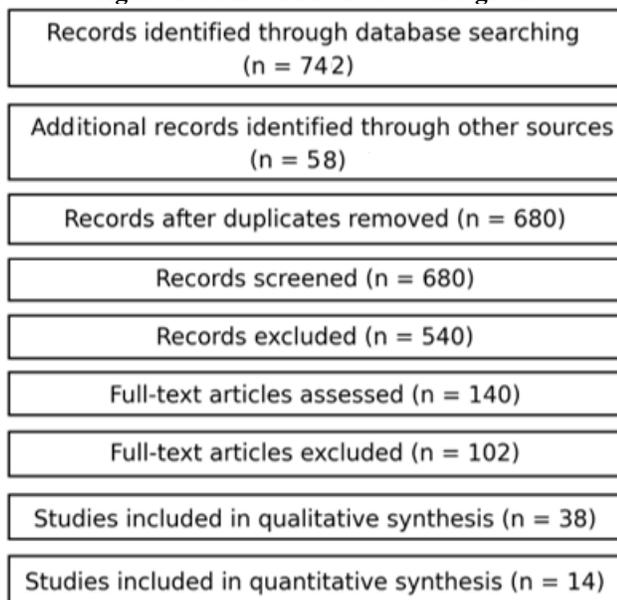


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process.

Appendix A. PRISMA 2020 Checklist

Section	Item	Description
Title	1	Identify report as systematic review.
Abstract	2	Structured summary.
Methods	5–13	Eligibility, search, synthesis methods.
Results	16–20	Study selection and synthesis results.
Discussion	21–23	Interpretation and limitations.
Other	24–25	Funding and conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] International Crisis Group. (2018). The long shadow of Marawi. Asia Report No. 286.
- [2] Kreuzer, P. (2005). Political clans and violence in the Philippines. Peace Research Institute Frankfurt.
- [3] Kruglanski, A. W., Bélanger, J. J., & Gunaratna, R. (2019). The three pillars of radicalization: Needs, narratives, and networks. Oxford University Press.
- [4] LaFree, G., & Dugan, L. (2007). Introducing the Global Terrorism Database. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 19(2), 181–204.
- [5] Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., et al. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
- [6] Sands, M., Aiken, A. M., Cumming, O., & Aunger, R. (2020). The effect of behavioural interventions targeting hand hygiene practices among nurses in high-income hospital settings: A systematic review. *Public Health Reviews*, 41(1), 29. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40985-020-00141-6>
- [7] Stange, G. (2019). “From frustration to escalation in Marawi”: An interview on conflict transformation in Southeast Asia with the Indonesian Peace and Conflict Advisor Shadia Marhaban. *Social Science Open Access Repository (GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences)*. <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.aseas-0007>
- [8] Torres, W. M. (2007). Rido : clan feuding and conflict management in Mindanao. https://bvbr.bib-bvb.de/443/F?func=service&doc_library=BVB01&local_base=BVB01&doc_number=016167603&sequence=00003&line_number=0001&func_code=DB_RECORDS&service_type=MEDIA
- [9] United Nations Development Programme. (2019). Journey to extremism in Asia and the Pacific. UNDP.
- [10] World Bank. (2020). Mindanao jobs report: A strategy for inclusive growth. World Bank.