



**JOURNAL OF
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

<https://e-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/jis>

How to cite this article:

Ramli Dollah, Marja Azlima Omar, Hafiza Nur Adeen Nor Ahmad, Adi Jafar, & Dino, N. (2025). The Abu Sayyaf group and kidnapping for ransom in Sabah, Malaysia, 2000–2023. *Journal of International Studies*, 21(1), 137-155. <https://doi.org/10.32890/jis2025.21.1.8>

**THE ABU SAYYAF GROUP AND KIDNAPPING
FOR RANSOM IN SABAH, MALAYSIA, 2000–2023**

**¹Ramli Dollah, ²Marja Azlima Omar, ³Hafiza Nur Adeen Nor Ahmad,
⁴Adi Jafar & ⁵Nelson Dino**

^{1,2,3&4}Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

⁵Office of Cultural Affairs and Development (OCAD),
Mindanao State University Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography,
Philippines

³*Corresponding author: hafizanuradeen@ums.edu.my*

Received: 13/8/2022

Revised: 26/6/2024

Accepted: 13/8/2024

Published: 30/4/2025

ABSTRACT

Since the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, the country has faced various traditional security threats. These include the Philippines' territorial claim over Sabah since 1968 and the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation from 1963 to 1966. However, with the evolving nature of global security, the discourse has expanded to include the non-traditional security threats (NTS). One of Malaysia's key national security concerns is the prevalence of cross-border crimes, particularly along the maritime borders of Sabah's east coast. Since 2000, the Malaysian government has implemented security policies to combat kidnapping for ransom (KFR). However, the on-going conflict in the southern Philippines has further complicated the security landscape in the region. This study investigates the role of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in KFR activities from 2020 to 2023. It argues that two primary factors have contributed to the persistence of the KFR: (i) on-going violence in the southern Philippines and (ii) the lucrative nature of the crime. This study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing data from interviews with key informants, fieldwork observations, official documents from local authorities, and secondary sources. The findings highlight the growing prominence of NTS as a critical national security concern for Malaysia. Specifically, the study reveals that KFR has gained precedence over traditional security concerns, making it a top priority in Malaysia's national security agenda.

Keywords: National security, kidnapping for ransom (KFR), Abu Sayyaf Group.

INTRODUCTION

State and national security concerns are inherently intertwined. In modern times, threats to national security often extend beyond conventional military conflicts to include actions by non-state actors. These threats are often diverse and unpredictable, posing significant challenges for states to manage. Since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has faced both traditional and non-traditional security threats. Traditional security threats include the Philippines' territorial claim on Sabah, while non-traditional security threats encompass issues such as illegal immigration, cybercrime, terrorism, piracy, kidnapping, and the spread of contagious diseases.

Among these challenges, kidnapping for ransom (KFR), has emerged as a persistent and pressing issue, officially recognized as a national security threat. In Sabah, KFR has become deeply ingrained in the lives of residents, particularly those on the East Coast, who are most affected by such incidents. This paper argues that non-traditional security threats—such as KFR carried out by non-state actors like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)—have become a major national security concern in Malaysia. This is evident from the country's proactive responses and strategic measures to address these threats. Furthermore, this study highlights how, in many developing countries like Malaysia, non-traditional security threats are increasingly overshadowing traditional security concerns, making them a critical focus of national security agendas.

KFR AND THE CRIME-TERRORISM NEXUS APPROACH

The maritime industry faces various non-traditional security threats (NTS), including piracy, sea robbery, and KFR, which have become significant maritime security concerns (Martínez-Zarzoso & Bensassi 2013; Morabito & Sergi 2018; Murphy, 2007). For example, the Bay of Aden and the Indian Ocean are well-known for their high prevalence of maritime threats (Alpers, 2011). In the 21st century, KFR has affected not only Malaysia but also other countries including Madagascar and Somalia (Fu et al., 2010; Randrianantenaina, 2013). However, compared to Somalia, Nigeria, and other high-risk regions, maritime crime in Sabah occurs on a more intermittent basis (Dollah et al., 2016). Despite this, the Malaysian government considers KFR an imminent security threat that demands serious attention. This concern is reflected in official policy documents, including the Malaysia National Security Policy, 2021–2025 issued by the National Security Council (NSC) (2019), and the Defense White Paper (2020) under the Ministry of Defense. Notably, the KFR threat in Sabah closely resembles piracy and kidnapping incidents in Somalia and Nigeria, where most attacks are financially motivated by ransom demands (ESSCOM, 2024; Abdul Hamid & Dollah, 2020, 2021).

Kidnapping is not a new phenomenon in Sabah, as the state has long been vulnerable to security infiltrations by external groups from the southern Philippines (Dollah, 2004; Liss, 2010). Before criminal groups from the southern Philippines adopted KFR as their modus operandi, Sabah had already experienced frequent piracy attacks and armed robberies, commonly known as "*Mundu*" (Dollah, 2004; Warren, 1985, 2002). These activities were concentrated along Sabah's coastal islands. However, by the year 2000, changes in piracy tactics, coupled with the growing KFR threat, necessitated a stronger government response to maritime security challenges. Crime-terrorist groups have since used KFR to finance their illicit activities. Over time, KFR incidents in Sabah have not only disrupted peace and

security in the greater border regions, particularly the Sulu-Celebes Sea, but have also led to continuous travel advisories and alerts from foreign governments, warning their citizens against visiting Sabah's East Coast due to security risks (Amling et al., 2019; Rabasa & Chalk, 2012;).

Among the various kidnapping incidents in Sabah's eastern waters, the ASG has consistently been identified as the primary perpetrator, frequently dominating media coverage of these maritime attacks. However, existing literature has paid little attention to the connection between KFR and its role in facilitating the crime-terrorism activities of the ASG. While extensive research has examined the crime-terrorism nexus, particularly in the context of collaboration between terror groups and organized criminal networks (Hutchinson & O' Malley, 2007; Perri et al., 2009; Vincenzo, 2019; Wang, 2010), there remains a gap in understanding how KFR directly contributes to the ASG's operational capabilities. Studies have demonstrated a strong link between organized crime and terrorist groups, often through alliances, partnerships and collaborations, as seen in cases involving Hezbollah in Israel-Palestine, the Irish Republican Army in Ireland, and the Italian Red Brigades in Italy (Perri et al., 2009; Wang, 2010). These examples illustrate how KFR is not only used to fund terrorist operations but also serves as a crucial mechanism for executing criminal activities on behalf of the ASG.

The alliance between KFR networks and the ASG has significantly threatened national security in both the Philippines and Malaysia (Abdul Hamid & Dollah, 2020, 2021; Abdul Hamid, 2021; Dollah & Amrullah, 2025). Scholars have extensively examined organized crime, which includes activities such as drugs and narcotics smuggling, firearms trafficking, human trafficking, extortion, and kidnapping. The partnership between terrorist organizations and organized crime is primarily driven by financial incentives and the strategic benefits of resource sharing (Perri et al., 2009; Wang, 2010; Vincenzo, 2019). As Wang (2010) argues terrorist groups collaborate with organized crime for funding due to their operational similarities:

...both are rational actors, both use extreme violence and the threat of reprisals, both use kidnappings, assassination, and extortion, both operate secretly, though at times publicly in friendly territory, both defy the state and the rule of law, both present an asymmetrical threat to the United States and "friendly" nations, both can have interchangeable recruitment pools, both are highly adaptable, innovative and resilient, both have back-up leaders and foot soldiers, both have provided social services, though this is much more frequently seen with terrorist groups.

(Wang, 2010, pp. 12-13)

Vincenzo (2019) further highlights that the deep-rooted connection between criminality and terrorism lies in the shared skills of terrorist groups and crime syndicates, particularly their ability to evade law enforcement and execute illegal operations. On Sabah's east coast, criminal syndicates and radical groups from neighbouring countries have strategically formed alliances by exploiting the state's porous borders and its socio-political vulnerabilities. These partnerships operate at the intersection of organized crime and terrorism (Nor Ahmad et al., 2021). Perri et al. (2009) argue that such collaborations flourish where central government is weak, law enforcement is ineffective and borders remain unregulated. The ASG-KFR alliance dates back to at least 2000, leveraging the expansive maritime borders between Sabah's East Coast and the Sulu Archipelago. Prior to the establishment of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) and the implementation of stricter border security measures on April 1st, 2013, Sabah experienced a significant influx of illegal migrants from neighbouring countries. This situation facilitated the movement and coordination of KFR and ASG operatives within the region, enabling them to plan and execute kidnapping more effectively. Despite operating through small and decentralized

networks, this study argues that KFR and ASG maintain systematic coordination allowing them to strategically plan and execute kidnappings. Their modus operandi follows a structured process, beginning with the initial planning phase—identifying potential targets and suitable locations—through to the final post-kidnapping phase, where ransoms are demanded and hostages are released.

KFR IN SABAH

Sabah (formerly known as North Borneo) is the second largest state in Malaysia, located in Eastern Malaysia between 115° to 119° east longitude and 4° to 7° north latitude. It spans 73,620 km² of land and 56,794 km² of maritime territorial waters, totalling 106,823 km², which constitutes for approximately 30 percent of Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Sabah has a 1,860 km coastline, stretching from Tg. Mengalom (Labuan) in the South China Sea in the west to the Sulu Sea in the north, extending along the eastern coast to encompass both the Sulu and Celebes Seas. Sabah is separated from Peninsular Malaysia by the South China Sea and shares interstate and international boundaries with Sarawak (Malaysia), Brunei, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Jabatan Ukur dan Pemetaan Malaysia [JUPEM], 2005). With approximately 495 islands, including sandbars, Sabah presents significant challenges in terms of security management particularly concerning maritime crimes (Ghazali, 2020).

The threat of KFR in Sabah is not a recent security issue; kidnapping incidents related to piracy in Sabah's waters date back to at least the 17th century (Warren, 1985, 2002). In recent years, KFR groups have continued to pose a security threat, employing similar tactics to those used by the ASG, a terrorist organization from the southern Philippines. Their targets frequently include commercial vessels, fishing boats, and foreign tourists. The infiltration of foreign threats into Sabah is largely driven by political instability in the southern Philippines (Nor Ahmad et al., 2021). For centuries, conflicts between the Moro nationalist movements and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) have contributed to persistent instability in the region. This prolonged conflict has led to mass migration, with many seeking refuge in Sabah as an accessible destination for survival (Dollah & Abdullah, 2018). The prevalence of KFR activities in the Sulu Archipelago is not just a long-standing issue but also indicates the broader economic hardships stemming from the crisis in southern Philippines. This instability has severe repercussions on the east coast of Sabah, where KFR groups have expanded their criminal activities, particularly through kidnapping (Nor Ahmad et al., 2021).

The ASG: Actor behind the KFR

The first recorded incident of KFR in Sabah occurred on April 1, 2000, revealing that the ASG as the main perpetrator of this threat (Dollah, et. al. 2016). The ASG is an Islamic separatist organization that emerged as a splinter group of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). It was founded in 1991 by Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, a prominent figure whose radical ideology was shaped by his experiences in Afghanistan during the 1980s Afghan war (Abuza, 2005; Banlaoi, 2008; Frake, 1998). Janjalani, having received education in Afghanistan, was deeply influenced by the Muslim fighters he encountered during the war, which reinforced his political and religious views on radical Islam (Banlaoi, 2008). Motivated by these experiences, he returned to the Philippines in 1989 and formed a group of revolutionary fighters in the southern Philippines province of Basilan, initially known as the Muhajideen Commando Freedom Fighters (MCFE) (Atkinson, 2012). Although initially, the ASG, being a fraction of the MNLF advocated for an autonomous independent state in the southern Philippines, it quickly gained notoriety in the late 1990s due to its involvement in high-profile

bombings, kidnapping and assassinations (Abuza, 2005; Banlaoi, 2008; Eklöf, 2006; Frake, 1998; Ugarte, 2008). Initially, both the Philippines government and the media dismissed the ASG as merely a criminal or bandit group. However, following a series of bombings in 2004 and 2005, the ASG was officially declared as a terrorist organization (Banlaoi, 2008; O'Brien, 2012). Today, the ASG is regarded as the most dangerous militant group in Southeast Asia (Malaysia Ministry of Defence, 2020; Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018).

KFR Incidents in Sabah, 2000-2023

Between 2000 and 2023, a total of 28 KFR incidents occurred along the east coast of Sabah. In nearly all recorded cases, the ASG was identified as the main perpetrator of these activities in Sabah (ESSCOM, 2024; Abdul Hamid, 2022). Over this period, ASG membership expanded with various small criminal groups aligning themselves under its patronage to share in the ransom proceeds (ESSCOM, 2024; Abdul Hamid, 2021). From 2000 until 2013, major KFR operations in Sabah were carried out by key ASG leaders, including Ghalib Andang (@ Commander Robot), Radulon Sahiron (@ Commander Putol), Isnilon Hapilon, Puruji Indama, Hatib Hajad Sawadjaan and Alhasbi Misaya (Dollah et. al, 2016). However, since 2014, KFR attacks have been predominantly carried out by small groups operating under ASG's influence, such as the Muktaadil Brothers Group, the Anjang-Anjang Group, and the Gumbahali Group (Dollah et. al. 2016). Many members of these groups have since been killed by Malaysian or Philippine security forces (Abdul Hamid, 2021).

Statistical data from 2000 to 2023 indicate fluctuations in KFR activities in Sabah. The first recorded incident on April 23, 2000, at a resort in Semporna, drew widespread attention from both Malaysia and the international community. Six perpetrators abducted 21 individuals, including 11 foreign nationals, and later transported them to the southern Philippines (Dollah, 2004; Liss, 2010). The ASG, claiming responsibility for the attack, issued several demands directed at Malaysia, the Philippines, and the United States (Manalo, 2004).

The first demand called for the GRP to grant independence to the southern Philippines to establish an Islamic state. The second demand was a ransom of US\$1 million per hostage (Dollah, 2004). Additionally, the kidnappers sought the release of two al-Qaeda-linked terrorists: Ramzi Yousef and Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman. Ramzi Yousef was the mastermind behind the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing in New York (Gunaratna, 2002; Manalo, 2004), while Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman was a key suspect in multiple planned attacks on New York landmarks (U.S. Department of Justice, 1998). After extensive negotiations by the Malaysian government, all hostages were eventually freed. Reports suggest that approximately RM57 million was paid as ransom for the release of 20 victims (Dollah, 2004, p. 181).

However, less than three weeks after the last hostage from the April 2000 kidnapping incident was released, Malaysia was once again shaken by another abduction. On September 11, 2000 a kidnapping took place on Pandanan Island, Semporna. In this incident, three Malaysians—George Solomon, Joe Joseph Jongkinoh, and Kan Wei Chong—were abducted (General Operations Force [GOF], 2003; Mohammad Aslam, 2018). This second kidnapping was believed to have stemmed from the internal feuds among ASG members over the distribution of ransom money from the previous abduction.

On October 5, 2003, another kidnapping incident occurred at the Borneo Paradise Eco Resort, located approximately 42km from Lahad Datu district (Dollah, 2016). In that incident, a group of 10 armed kidnappers took six civilians, hostage and demanded RM3 million as ransom for their release. However,

the Malaysian government changed its approach by refusing to comply with the ransom demand. Instead, the Malaysian authorities initiated negotiations through a third-party mediator. During the negotiations, a businessman intervened and secured the hostages' release by paying a reduced ransom of RM200,000 to the kidnappers' representatives (Dollah, 2004).

Six months later, in April 2004, another KFR incident occurred, involving the abduction of three civilians—two Malaysians and an Indonesian. The victims were crew members of the *East Ocean* tugboat, owned by *San Lim San Shipping Sdn. Bhd.*, and were on their way from Miri, Sarawak to the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, when they were attacked. The assailants looted valuable boat equipment, destroyed the vessel's communication systems, and took the three crew members hostage. Fortunately, other crew members on the boat managed to escape by hiding under the boat's deck.

The Governor of Tawi-Tawi, Sadikul A. Sahali, announced that the three victims kidnapped at Taganak Island were most likely being held on Sulu Island. However, no further updates regarding their whereabouts emerged. In January 2005, the Malaysian Armed Forces confirmed that the three abducted victims were believed to have been killed while in ASG custody (Dollah, 2004).

Nearly a year after the incident, in March 2005, three Indonesians were kidnapped at Matakang Island, Semporna. They were later released following successful negotiations between the kidnappers with the Indonesian government (Wan Hassan & Dollah, 2008). Strengthened border surveillance through close collaboration with neighboring countries, such as the Philippines, significantly reinforced security in the Sulu-Celebes Sea. As a result of these heightened security measures along Sabah's east coast, no kidnapping incidents were recorded from 2006 to 2009.

However, on February 8, 2010, another kidnapping incident occurred at a seaweed farm on Sebangkat Island in Semporna. The victims, two Malaysian nationals—Lai Wing Chau and Tsen Vui Chung—were abducted by five armed men and taken to the southern Philippines. The kidnappers demanded a ransom of approximately RM2 million (Dollah et al., 2016). The victims were held hostage for over 10 months before being released on Tawi-Tawi Island in the southern Philippines. Following this incident, no cases of KFR were reported in Sabah's waters throughout 2011.

In both 2012 and 2013, one kidnapping case was reported each year. The 2012 KFR incident, which took place on November 14, involved two Malaysians (ESSCOM, 2024). One of the victims, named Wee Wei, died after being held hostage for nine months, while the other victim managed to escape and return home to Lahad Datu. The following year, on November 15, 2013, a Taiwanese tourist was kidnapped from Pom-Pom Resort, Semporna (ESSCOM, 2024). During the incident, a group of eight kidnappers killed Hsu Li Min and abducted Chang An Wei. Although the Malaysian government declared that no ransom was demanded, the Taiwanese government claimed otherwise and reportedly paid RM80,000 (Dollah et al., 2016). On December 20, 2013, the victim was freed and later rescued by Philippine authorities.

In 2014, four kidnapping incidents were reported in Sabah. The first occurred at Singamata Resort, Semporna on April 2, 2014, involving two female victims—Gao Huayun from China and Marcy Dayawan from the Philippines (ESSCOM, 2024). The second incident took place at a fish breeding farm in Lahad Datu on May 7, 2014, where a Chinese national, known as Yang Zailin, who worked as the farm manager, was abducted (ESSCOM, 2024). Following these events, two more kidnapping took place in Sabah's waters in June and July 2014. On June 16, 2014, a victim named Chan Sai Chiun was kidnapped by a KFR group (ESSCOM, 2024).

The fourth incident that year in 2014 shocked the nation when kidnappers not only abducted but also killed a member of the security forces. On July 12, 2014, a security personnel, named Corporal Ab Rajah Jamuan was fatally shot, while another officer, Constable Zakiah Aleip, was kidnapped while on duty at Mabul Water Resort, Semporna (Dollah et al., 2016). In 2015, only one KFR incident was recorded in Sabah on May 14, 2015. This incident marked a shift in the kidnappers' strategy, as previous incidents had primarily taken place at sea, whereas this attack occurred on land at a seafood restaurant in Sandakan. The two victims were forcibly taken onto a speedboat and transported to the southern Philippines. One of the victims, Thien Nyek Fun, was released on November 8, 2015 (Dollah et. al, 2016), while the other victim, Bernard Ghen Ted Fen, was executed (beheaded)—believed to be a consequence of the ransom demand not being met (Abdul Hamid, 2021). Even though there was only one KFR case in 2015, the authorities were unable to curb the surge in KFR activities in 2016. That year witnessed the highest number of recorded kidnappings in Sabah's waters. A total of 10 cases involving 23 victims were reported, with incidents occurring as follows: one case in April; two cases in July, one case in September; three cases in November and two cases in December.

The first kidnapping in 2016 occurred on April 1, involving four Malaysian victims who were later released following a ransom payment of RM12 million. A month later, the kidnappers grew bolder, carrying out two attacks on the July 9 and July 18, 2016. The increasing frequency of these attacks led Malaysian authorities to believe that the ransom payments made by the victims' families were incentivizing kidnappers to continue their operations. In September 2016, two more KFR incidents were recorded. The first on September 11, 2016, occurred at Pom-Pom Island in Semporna and involved three Filipino nationals who were taken hostage. The second kidnapping incident on September 27, 2016, took place at Gaya Island, Semporna. where five Malaysians were abducted. (ESSCOM, 2024)

In the final months of 2016, three KFR incidents were recorded in November, followed by two cases in December. All the victims were Indonesian fishermen. On November 5, 2016, two KFR incidents took place almost simultaneously in the Kretam Sea and Kinabatangan district (Abdul Hamid, 2021). Another attack occurred in the waters of Merabung in Lahad Datu on November 18, 2016 (ESSCOM, 2024). Subsequently, on December 8, 2016, two simultaneous KFR attacks were reported—one at Bekapit waters in Lahad Datu and the other at Gaya Island in Semporna.

In 2017, no KFR incidents were reported in Sabah. Since 2016, the local authorities led by ESSCOM, have actively monitored high-risk areas, particularly along the eastern coast of Sabah, to ensure the safety of residents and tourists. The intensified border patrols by ESSCOM were believed to be a key factor behind the decline of KFR activities in 2017. Additionally, the leadership changes within the ASG, following the death of its leader, Isnilon Hapilon, during the Marawi Siege in 2017, were also seen as a major reason for the sharp decline in KFR cases, from 10 cases in 2016 to zero in Sabah (ESSCOM, 2024; Singh, 2017).

Despite the absence of KFR incidents in 2017, two cases were reported in 2018. The first case took place at Gaya Island in Semporna on September 2, 2018. The kidnappers adopted the same modus operandi as in previous incidents, targeting fishermen who were operating in territorial waters at night. In that incident, two Indonesian fishermen were kidnapped for ransom. The second incident took place on December 5, 2018, in Pegasus waters, Kinabatangan district, where three individuals—one Malaysian and two Indonesians—were abducted.

On June 18, 2019, two fishing boats with 16 crew members were hijacked by armed gunmen while travelling in the waters of Tambisan, Lahad Datu, en route to Semporna (Miwil, 2019). The gunmen

abducted four of the six crewmen from the first fishing boat and six of the ten crew members from the second boat (“10 fishermen feared”, 2019). In total, 10 Bajau Laut, also known as "palau" or sea gypsies, were kidnapped. The Bajau Laut are a subgroup of the Sama-Bajau people, traditionally hail from the islands of the Sulu Archipelago in the Philippines. Many of them are stateless and live at sea off Lahad Datu and Semporna (Dollah & Omar, 2022). The abducted individuals were believed to have been taken to Sitangkai Island, Tawi-Tawi in the southern Philippines, a mere 15-minute speedboat ride from the waters off Lahad Datu (ESSCOM, 2024). However, on June 22, 2019, they were spotted walking along a road in Talipao town, Sulu province. According to the Joint Task Force Sulu, all victims were released by their captors because they had no money or valuables to offer as ransom (Dancel, 2019).

On September 23, 2019, three Indonesian fishermen were kidnapped by the ASG at Tambisan Island in Lahad Datu. The group later released a video demanding a ransom of 8 billion rupiah (“Indonesia, Philippines join hands”, 2019). All abducted crew members from the two incidents in 2019 were eventually rescued with assistance from the AFP. Two victims were rescued in Barangay Pugad Manual, Panamo Sulu, on December 23, 2019 (“Dua nelayan diculik”, 2019). Another victim, Muhammad Farhan, was rescued by the AFP on January 15, 2020, weeks after he managed to escape. Following his rescue, he was taken to a military hospital in Jolo town for a medical examination (Yusa, 2020).

On January 16, 2020, six gunmen dressed in black suits wearing masks used a grey speedboat with twin engines to abduct five Indonesian crew members from a Malaysian-registered fishing trawler (marked SSK 00543). The incident took place between Tambisan and Kuala Meruap in Lahad Datu, near the Philippines sea border. The vessel was later found abandoned with no crew on board on January 17, near Pulau Tambisan, Lahad Datu, Sabah, Malaysia (The Maritime Executive, 2020). In this incident, the suspected ASG kidnappers captured the ship's captain and four crew members, while three other fishermen were released and left aboard their vessel, which they returned to Sabah the next day (Asmara, 2020). Following the abduction, the Philippine and Malaysia authorities intensified their patrol efforts, launched pursuit operations and conducted military operations in the vicinity of Kalupag Island, Brgy Kalupag, Languyan, Tawi-Tawi, Philippines on March 21, 2021. During an engagement between AFP forces and ASG members, one of the abducted crew members managed to escape and was subsequently rescued by the AFP (“Three Indonesian hostages”, 2021). Meanwhile, on the night of March 18, 2021, four individuals were rescued from a jungkong-type watercraft that had capsized near the waters off Pasigan Laut Island, South Ubian, Tawi-Tawi, Philippines. Upon their rescue, they were brought to the Tandubas Municipal Police Station (MPS) for further investigation. Three of the rescued individuals were identified as crew members from the fishing trawler SSK 00543, who had been abducted by the ASG. The fourth individual was identified as a member of the ASG (“Three Indonesian hostages”, 2021). Table 1 below illustrates the KFR incidents on the East Coast of Sabah between 2016 and 2023.

Table 1

KFR Incidents on the East Coast of Sabah, 2016-2023

No	Date	Location	Nationality	Status of victim(s)
1	11 Apr. 2016	Ligitan Island, Semporna	4 Malaysians	Released
2	9 Jul. 2016	Lahad Datu waters	4 Indonesians	Released
3	18 Jul. 2016	Lahad Datu waters	5 Malaysians	Released
4	11 Sept. 2016	Pom-Pom Island, Semporna	3 Filipinos	In custody

(continued)

No	Date	Location	Nationality	Status of victim(s)
5	27 Sept. 2016	Gaya Island, Semporna	1 Malaysian	Released
6	05 Nov. 2016	Kretam waters, Kinabatangan	1 Indonesian	Released
7	05 Nov. 2016	Kretam waters, Kinabatangan	1 Indonesian	Released
8	18 Nov. 2016	Merabung waters, Lahad Datu	2 Indonesians	Released
9	08 Dec. 2016	Bekapit waters, Lahad Datu	1 Filipino	Released
10	08 Dec. 2016	Pom-Pom Island, Semporna	1 Indonesian	Released
11	11 Sept. 2018	Gaya Island, Semporna	2 Indonesians	Released
12	05 Nov. 2018	Pegagus Reef waters, Kinabatangan	1 Malaysian 2 Indonesians	Released 2-One died while escaping
13	10 June 2019	Felda waters, Lahad Datu	10 Sea gypsies	Released
14	23 Sept. 2019	Tambisan Island, Sabah	3 Indonesians	Rescued by AFP
15	16 Jan. 2020	Tambisan waters, Lahad Datu	5 Indonesians	Rescued by AFP

Source. MKN, 2019; ESSCOM, 2016; Abuza, 2005; Dollah et al. 2016; McCabe, 2018; East, 2018; Abdul Hamid, 2021.

The Modus Operandi of KFR Groups

An assessment of the modus operandi of Kidnap-for-Ransom groups reveals an intricate yet well-organized organizational structure. These groups operate as a network of small sub-groups functioning under the broader umbrella of the ASG. Each sub-group plays an intermediary role and acts as a crucial component in the larger organization, often referred to as “runners” in various stages of the KFR process (Abdul Hamid, 2021; ESSCOM, 2024). In other words, these smaller KFR groups are assigned different tasks and responsibilities under the ASG, for which they receive substantial financial rewards. These sub-groups operate independently and in highly clandestine settings to avoid being identified by local authorities and intelligence agencies. Consequently, KFR groups actively disguise their operations, making it difficult for law enforcement to identify and dismantle their activities.

Beyond kidnappings, some sub-groups generate income through illicit activities such as arms trafficking, drug smuggling, and the distribution of counterfeit goods (Santos et al., 2010, p. 241). Several KFR sub-groups have been particularly active in Sabah including the Muktdil Brothers, the Anjang-Anjang Group, and the Gumbahali Group. These KFR groups operate under the leadership of Al-Habsyi Misaya, Idang Susukan and Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan (Abdul Hamid, 2021; Dollah et al. 2016). However, many of these groups have since been disbanded, with their members either eliminated by Malaysian security forces or their Philippine counterparts. Ugarte (2008) argues that these sub-groups operate under the patronage of influential KFR groups, forming a criminal network characterized by their division of labour. The smaller sub-groups are primarily responsible for carrying out kidnappings, while the more dominant groups negotiate ransom. According to Ugarte (2008),

...it has become public knowledge in Sulu that certain Kidnap-for-Ransom (KFR) syndicates based on the island turn their victims over to the KAS. This was done particularly during the time of bandit-type commanders like the late Ghalib Andang (“Robot”) and Mujib Susukan, in a classic criminal partnership. The KAS could then jack up the ransom demands because of its reputation.

(Ugarte, 2008, p. 297)

In terms of transportation and equipment, KFR groups primarily rely on pump boats to manoeuvre along the coastal areas and evade Malaysian security forces (ESSCOM, 2024). A pump boat is a small boat

powered by a modified gasoline or diesel engine originally designed for water pumps. This mode of transportation is favoured by maritime criminal syndicates due to several key advantages. First, the ownership of a pump boat is relatively inexpensive to acquire, and maintain. Second, pump boats can operate at high speed and navigate through shallow waters with ease (Dollah, 2004; MMEA, 2016). Due to these advantages, KFR groups can swiftly move through peat swamp areas and water villages enabling them to evade capture by enforcement authorities (ESSCOM, 2016).

KFR groups are also equipped with various types of weaponry including M14, M16 rifles, grenade launchers, explosive materials, and samurai swords (ESSCOM, 2024). Their access to firearms and explosive devices is largely influenced by connections to high conflict zones in the southern Philippines. The Malaysian authorities have confirmed the use of weaponry by KFR groups, particularly when thwarting their kidnapping attempts. Confiscated materials from these incidents serve as concrete evidence of their arsenal. For instance, September 21, 2018, an ESSCOM task force successfully intercepted a KFR operation, resulting in the shooting and killing of two KFR members. Upon searching their possessions, authorities recovered a .38-caliber revolver, a live bullet, and five .38 cartridges (MAF, 2018). Additionally, one of the KFR members was found carrying a samurai sword (ESSCOM, 2024). Table 2 below illustrates the target patterns of KFR attacks in Sabah between 2000 and 2023.

Table 2

Number of Cases Involving KFR Attacks, 2000-2023

Year	Case	Target
2000	2	Tourists
2003	1	Tourists
2004	1	Tug boat
2005	1	Tug boat
2010	1	Seaweed farming
2012	1	Plantation workers
2013	1	Tourists
2014	4	1 tourist & tourism worker
		1 tourist and security personnel
2015	1	2 fish farm incidents
		Seafood restaurant, Sandakan (mainland)
2016	10	2 tug boats
		8 fishing trawlers
2018	2	2 fishing trawlers
2019	2	Fishing trawler
2020	1	Fishing trawler

Source. ESSCOM, 2024; Abuza, 2005; Dollah et al. 2016; McCabe 2018; East, 2018; Peters et al. 2019; Abdul Hamid, 2021.

Exploring Factors That Lead to KFR in Sabah

Despite Malaysia’s established maritime jurisdiction over its territorial waters, maritime crimes—such as piracy, smuggling, and kidnapping—continue to rise. As discussed earlier, piracy activities have evolved over time. By the early 2000s, these crimes shifted from traditional sea robberies to kidnap-for-ransom (KFR). A thorough investigation of KFR incidents of in Sabah reveals several causal factors:

i) on-going conflicts in the southern Philippines; ii) The perception of KFR as a lucrative business among maritime crime syndicates iii) Sabah's geographical proximity to the southern Philippines.

Conflicts in the Southern Philippines

The southern Philippines has endured prolonged conflict and civil wars, particularly since the struggle for an autonomous Bangsamoro region gained momentum in the 1970s. This instability has had significant spillover effects on Sabah, particularly in the prevalence of maritime crimes occurring between the Sulu Archipelago and Sabah's east coast. Among these, KFR poses the most serious security threat in the Sulu-Celebes Sea which connects the two regions.

The Bangsamoro struggle traces its roots back to the arrival of Spanish colonial powers in the Philippines (Kiefer, 1972; Majul, 1985). The 333-year conflict between Spanish rulers and the people of Moro in the southern Philippines fuelled long-standing tensions between the northern and southern Philippines (Majul, 1985; Kamlian, 2011; Vitug & Gloria, 2000). Even after the Philippines gained independence on July 4, 1946, little changed for the Moro population, as economic, political, and social discrimination persisted (Jubair, 1999). Efforts to integrate the Northern and Southern regions faced significant challenges due to vast differences in culture, religion, values, and belief systems. Conflicts also stemmed from migration patterns, as northern Filipinos moved southward, gained economic dominance, and left the local population feeling marginalized and oppressed in the southern Philippines (Kamlan, 2011). In response, the southerners intensified their demands for autonomy from the GRP in Manila (Jubair, 1999; Majul, 1985).

However, the struggle for freedom in the southern Philippines has been marred by criminal activities, including armed rebellion, which has contributed to ongoing conflict, and resulted in spillover effects in Sabah (ESSCOM, 2024; Dollah & Joko, 2015; Nor Ahmad et al., 2021; Samuel et al., 2020). The ASG initially emerged as a splinter faction of the MNLF, advocating for an autonomous region. However, over time, it transformed into an infamous criminal organization that resorted to terrorism (Banlaoi, 2008; Katagiri, 2019; Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). The ASG employed militant terrorism tactics, with KFR operations serving as a primary source of funding to sustain their activities and finance their movement (Banlaoi, 2008; Eklöf, 2006). According to Santos et al. (2010), the ASG can be described as a 'quasi-rebel, quasi bandit' group—on one hand, seeking to free the southern Philippines from Manila, while on the other hand, resorting to violence and terrorism as a means of resistance. In recent years, however, ASG's motivations have shifted. Criminal activities within the group are now mainly driven by financial incentives rather than ideological goals. Under the leadership of Radulon Sahiron, the ASG has increasingly engaged in crime-terrorism activities, particularly KFR, to generate money for personal gain rather than for political or religious causes (Santos et al., 2010).

Kidnapping as a Lucrative Business

Economic strain and poverty in the southern Philippines, have pushed certain segments of the community towards criminal activities, particularly KFR, as it guarantees substantial financial returns (Abdul Hamid, 2021). Sabah known for its rapid economic growth and rich environmental resources both on land and at sea, has become a prime attraction for local and foreign tourists. Consequently, KFR groups have identified tourists as primary targets, classifying them as 'high-value victims' (ESSCOM, 2024). Before the year 2000, criminal activities in Sabah's territorial waters were primarily limited to sea piracy (Dollah, 2004).

Over time, however, maritime crime syndicates recognized the potential profitability of KFR, drawing inspiration from similar activities in Somalia's territorial waters. As a result, KFR became a highly lucrative business. Sabah's reputation as a major tourist destination made it an ideal location for capturing high-value victims, particularly along its eastern coastal areas. Most kidnapping incidents recorded in 2000 involved foreign travellers, underscoring the tendency of KFR groups to target individuals with the potential to generate significant ransom payments.

The ransom amount demanded varies based on the perceived value of the victims. High-value victims command significantly higher sums compared to low-value victims. The ransom typically ranges from RM25,000 to RM3 million per individual (Abdul Hamid, 2021; Dollah et al. 2016). For instance, in the 2000 Sipadan Island incident, the ASG demanded USD1 million per victim. In addition to tourists, state authority personnel are also considered high-value targets; in some cases, ransoms as high as RM3 million have been demanded for their release. In contrast, low-value victims—such as local fishermen—fetch much lower ransom. A notable example is the kidnapping of Ruslan Sarapin from his trawler on September 27, 2016, for which the ransom demand was only RM25,000 (East, 2018). Based on a 2016 assessment report by the Philippines security forces, KFR groups had gained approximately RM 30.5 million (AS\$7.3 million) worth of ransom during the first six months of that year. The report further indicated that this amount was acquired through the release of 14 Indonesian and four Malaysian hostages (Abdul Hamid, 2021; Abdul Hamid & Dollah, 2020).

Sabah's Geographical Characteristics and Proximity

Sabah, located in the northern part of Borneo Island—the third largest island in the world—shares borders with the Philippines, Brunei, and Indonesia. Its vast land area, long porous borders, numerous islands, and close proximity to conflict-prone regions, particularly Indonesia and the Philippines, make security coordination highly challenging. These geographical factors create vulnerabilities, allowing elements of KFR and other cross-border crimes to infiltrate into Sabah (Dollah et al., 2016).

Sabah's location near the conflict-ridden southern Philippines has made it easier for KFR groups to infiltrate its borders and escape into international waters (ESSCOM, 2024; Ghazali, 2020). Several districts in Sabah are in close proximity to the southern Philippines. For instance, the northern part of Banggi Island is close to Palawan Island (the Philippines), while the districts of Sandakan, Tawau, and Semporna are adjacent to Tawi-Tawi Island (the Philippines) (Dollah et al., 2024). This proximity facilitates movement of the ASG into Malaysian territorial waters. The distance between Bongao City (the Philippines) and Semporna (Malaysia) is approximately 150 km, while the island of Sitingkai (the Philippines) is only 92km from Semporna (Wan Hassan & Dollah, 2011).

Additionally, Sabah's geographical landscape—characterized by a vast coastline, scattered islands, and widespread peat swamps—provides a natural advantage for KFR groups, enabling them to infiltrate undetected and evade the authorities (Dollah et al., 2016; ESSCOM, 2024; MMEA, 2014). This challenge was highlighted by Mohd Amdan Kurish, the former Director of Malaysia Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) who explained the challenges faced in curbing KFR activities.

...the coastline of Lahad Datu alone is more than 100 kilometres long and it is not an easy task to man the territorial water. To make matters even more difficult, at certain locations along the coastline, the distance to the Philippines' territorial waters is only '10 minutes' on a boat.

(“APMM pertingkat kawalan”, 2013)

Successes and Challenges in Combating KFR

Since the first KFR incident in Sabah, the government has implemented various security measures to curb such threats. These efforts include *Operasi Pasir*, and the enhancement of *Operasi Tayang*, as well as the establishment of new security agencies such as the Malaysia Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) and the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) (Abdul Hamid & Dollah, 2025; MMEA, 2019;). Following the Sipadan and Pandanan incidents, the government-initiated *Ops Pasir* in September 2000, deploying security forces to strategic locations in Sabah. This large-scale operation involved all branches of Malaysian security forces, aimed at strengthening maritime security and preventing cross-border incursions. The Army mobilized nearly 200 Special Forces personnel and around 600 troops, while the GOF deployed five battalions, stationing over 1,000 personnel across 23 island posts and 35 coastal posts. In Semporna, GOF personnel were stationed in 16 outposts on islands such as Sipadan, Mabul, and Si Amil. The operation also included over 100 Special Forces personnel, approximately 40 combat boats, six surveillance aircraft, 30 police vessels, and 17 patrol boats in Sandakan, Tawau, and Semporna. Additionally, the navy contributed 30 ships and boats, along with two Special Forces teams, while the air force deployed six aircraft, including three Hawk jet fighters. As a result of *Ops Pasir*, significant progress was made in deterring illegal activities. In 2001 alone, authorities detected 790 boats, detained 174, and screened 4,697 individuals. Several arrests were made, including 40 Malaysians, 505 Indonesians, 1,070 Filipinos, and 31 individuals of other nationalities—mostly illegal immigrants or suspected extremists. However, the operation came at a high financial cost, with annual expenses exceeding RM300 million as revealed in 2010 (Dollah et al., 2016; Dollah & Abdul Hamid, 2025).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the government allocated RM1 million to repair security posts in the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZone) (Rizuan et al., 2025). Additionally, funding was increased to strengthen maritime defense assets, focusing on acquiring patrol boats, sea bases, and radar systems. To further reinforce security operations, the government established two sea basing facilities: the Tun Azizan Marine Base Auxiliary Vessel (PLTAZ) and the Tun Sharifah Rodziah Marine Base (PLTSR) in Semporna, which began operations on July 15, 2015 (Abdul Hamid, 2021). These bases serve as Forward Operating Bases (FOB), providing logistical and operational support to security forces in the ESSZone.

Another critical measure introduced by ESSCOM was a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew, later referred to as the Movement Control Order (MCO) (Maraining & Dollah, 2025). This curfew required residents within the ESSZone to stay indoors and restricted access to the waters during night time hours. Certain hotspot areas, identified as key routes for cross-border crimes, were given special attention under this policy. The curfew aimed to minimize encounters between the local community and KFR groups, whose activities primarily occur at night and early morning. Beyond military efforts, security forces also adopted a psychological strategy known as *Gerak Saraf Perang Saraf* (GSPS) program. This initiative provided a platform for community members to engage with law enforcement officers, express their concerns, and foster a sense of shared responsibility within the ESSZone community (Abdul Hamid & Dollah, 2021, 2025; Maraining et al., 2025). By strengthening community trust and discouraging local collaboration with KFR groups, this program played a crucial role in limiting the flow of internal intelligence to criminal networks.

Meanwhile, the government remains committed to enhancing regional cooperation to combat the threat of KFR. One key initiative involves strengthening collaboration between ESSCOM and its Philippine counterpart, the Western Mindanao Command (WESTMINCOM). This partnership was further

expanded through the Trilateral Cooperative Agreement (TCA) on July 14, 2016, between Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Under this agreement, the three countries established Maritime Coordinating Centres (MCCs) in each member country to oversee maritime and aerial patrols, facilitate intelligence sharing, and enable rapid response actions (Febrica, 2014; Dollah et al., 2025; Storey, 2018). Following the signing of the TCA, the Trilateral Maritime Patrol (TMP) was launched on June 19, 2017, with warships from all three countries conducting joint patrols. By August 2023, a total of 47 patrols had been completed. However, operations were temporarily suspended from 2020 to early 2023 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to the TMP, the Trilateral Air Patrols (TAP) initiative was introduced to bolster security and surveillance capabilities in the shared maritime area. As of June 2023, 81 air patrols had been conducted (Dollah et al., 2024).

Through these sustained efforts, Malaysia's security forces, particularly ESSCOM, have effectively reduced and contained security threats along the eastern coast of Sabah. In 2023, Minister of Home Affairs, Saifuddin Nasution reported that ESSCOM had detected and thwarted a total of 40 KFR attempts in Sabah since 2017 (Fabian, 2023). This includes foiling an attempted plot to abduct tourists aboard the cruise ship in Semporna in 2014, preventing a robbery attempt on the tugboat in the waters off Pegasus Reef, Kinabatangan in 2018, successfully thwarting six robbery and kidnapping attempts in 2019, including three cases in Kinabatangan, and one case each in Semporna, Lahad Datu, and Sandakan, among others (Abdul Hamid, 2021; ESSCOM, 2024; Fabian, 2023; Ridzuan et al. 2025).

Despite on-going efforts to enhance security and combat the threat of KFR in the region, Malaysia faces several major challenges. One of the most significant challenges is the on-going conflict in the southern Philippines, which remains beyond Malaysia's control. Malaysia recognizes that stability in the southern Philippines is crucial for the broader security of Sabah. This understanding underscores Malaysia's continued support for the peace process in the Philippines. Since the 1990s, Malaysia has adopted the "Prosper Thy Neighbour" policy, based on the belief that the country's own security is closely linked to that of its neighbours. As part of this policy, Malaysia has actively participated as a third party in the peace negotiations in the southern Philippines. The Malaysian government maintains that as long as the conflict in the southern Philippines remains unresolved, Sabah will continue to experience its spillover effects (Dollah & Joko, 2015; Dollah et al. 2025).

The geographical characteristics of Sabah further complicate security enforcement. The state's vast maritime area, long coastlines, dense forests, and extensive oil palm plantations create significant logistical and operational challenges. These factors make it incredibly challenging to control cross-border crime, especially given Sabah's proximity to neighbouring countries. Furthermore, limited financial resources, assets, logistics, and manpower pose significant obstacles to security operations. Budget constraints hinder the acquisition of new assets, the maintenance of existing infrastructure, and the establishment of necessary security checkpoints in maritime areas. The shortage of maritime assets, in particular, remains a major obstacle to effectively addressing security threats (Nor Ahmad et al., 2021; Abdul Hamid, 2021).

Another major challenge is the competition between security agencies, which affects enforcement efficiency. ESSCOM, for instance, is responsible for coordinating multiple security agencies, including the MMEA, the Armed Forces, and the Police to ensure security within the ESSZONE. However, discrepancies in enforcement arise due to competition between agencies, different command structures, varying ministerial oversight, and inconsistent standard operating procedures. These factors hinder effective coordination and weaken overall security enforcement. While some efforts have been made to

address these issues, competition among agencies remains a significant hurdle in national security management (Nor Ahmad et al., 2021; Abdul Hamid, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the significant threat that non-traditional security challenges posed by non-state actors present to national security. In particular, kidnapping for ransom (KFR) has emerged as a major concern for Malaysia. The recurring KFR incidents in the Sulu-Celebes Sea not only threaten the safety of individuals—particularly tourists and fishermen—but also undermine regional stability by disrupting economic and social structures of the region. The government has demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing this issue through a range of security measures, including unilateral actions to multilateral collaborations at both domestic and international levels. However, despite these efforts, several challenges remain. These include inter-agency competition, budget constraints, insufficient assets, and manpower, and logistical limitations, all of which hinder security enforcement. To effectively counter the KFR threat, enhanced regional cooperation, improved coordination among security agencies, and substantial investments in security resources and infrastructure are essential. Only through an integrated and strategic approach can Malaysia and its regional partners mitigate the risks posed by KFR, ultimately strengthening the security and stability of the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors express their deepest gratitude to the Malaysia National Security Council (NSC), the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM), and all parties who contributed to this research. Special appreciation is also extended to Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) for providing financial support through the allocated grant SDN013-2019.

REFERENCES

- Abdul Halim, N.E., & Dollah, R. (2025). Pendekatan ‘Non-Military’ dan Jenayah Rentas Sempadan di ESS Zone. In R. Dollah & A. Maraining (Eds.) *Pengurusan Keselamatan di Pantai Timur Sabah*. UMS Press.
- Abdul Hamid, A. R. (2021). *Ancaman non-tradisional dan keselamatan nasional di Malaysia: Kajian kes ke atas penculikan untuk tebusan (KFR) di Sabah* [Tesis Doktor Falsafah tidak diterbitkan. Universiti Malaysia Sabah].
- Abdul Hamid, A. R., & Dollah, R. (2020). Dari ‘mundu’ ke penculikan untuk tebusan: Evolusi ancaman keselamatan maritim di Pantai Timur Sabah. *Kinabalu*, 26(1), 1-22.
- Abdul Hamid, A. R., & Dollah, R. (2020). Penguatkuasaan Undang-Undang dan Operasi di Pantai Timur Sabah In. R. Dollah & A. Maraining (Eds.) *Pengurusan Keselamatan di Pantai Timur Sabah*. UMS Press.
- Abdul Hamid, A. R., & Dollah, R. (2021). Peranan angkatan tugas bersama 2 (ATB2) Malaysia dalam memerangi ancaman penculikan untuk tebusan di Pantai Timur Sabah, Malaysia. *Sinergi*, 1(Julai), 31-55.
- Abuza, Z. (2005). *Balik-terrorism: The return of the Abu Sayyaf*. Strategic Studies Institute.
- Alpers, E. A. (2011). Piracy and Indian Ocean. *Journal of African Development*, 13(1-2), 17-38.

- Amling, A. Bell, C., Salleh, A., Benson, J., Duncan, S. (2019). *Stable Seas: Sulu and Celebes Sea*. Maritime Institute of Malaysia [MIMA].
- Asmara, T. (2020, Januari 23). Penculikan warga Indonesia di perairan Sabah, Jakarta panggil duta besar Malaysia. *Benarnews*.
- Atkinson, G. (2012). Abu Sayyaf: The father of the swordsman – A review of the rise of Islamic insurgency in the Southern Philippines. *Perspective: Journal of American Security Project*, (March), 1-8.
- Banlaoi, R. C. (2008). *Al-Harakatul Al Islamiyyah: Essays on the Abu Sayyaf Group*. PIPVTR.
- Bernama. (2019, December 12). Dua nelayan diculik di perairan Lahad Datu diselamatkan tentera Filipina. <https://www.bernama.com/bm/news.php?id=1801828>
- Dancel, R. (2019, June 22). Philippine security forces find nine 'sea gypsies' kidnapped by Abu Sayyaf off Sabah. *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippine-security-forces-found-nine-sea-gypsies-kidnapped-by-abu-sayyaf-off-sabah>
- Dollah, R., Wan Hassan, W. S. W., Peters, P., & Othman, Z. (2016). 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(3), 178-186.
- Dollah, R. (2004). Lanun atau mundu di Sabah? *JATI: Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 9, 171-188.
- Dollah, R., & Abdullah, K. (2018). The securitization of migrant workers in Sabah, Malaysia. *Journal of International Migration & Integration*, 19(3), 717-735.
- Dollah, R., & Joko, E. P. (2015). Dasar 'memakmurkan jiran' dan penglibatan Malaysia dalam proses keamanan di Selatan Filipina. *Jebat*, 42(1), 77-112.
- Dollah, R., & Omar, M. A. (2022). Legal documents as a prerequisite for change in social status: A case of nomadic seafaring (pala'u) community in Sabah, Malaysia. In R. Baikady, S. M. Sajid, V. Nadesan, J. Przeperski, M. R. Islam, J. Gao. (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of global social change*. (pp. 1-21). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87624-1_155-1
- Dollah, R., Abdul Hamid, A. R., Ridzuan, M. I. M., & Nor Ahmad, H. N. A. (2025) Kerjasama tiga negara dalam mengurus keselamatan di Pantai Timur Sabah. In. R. Dollah & A. Maraining (Eds.) *Pengurusan Keselamatan di Pantai Timur Sabah*. UMS Press.
- Dollah, R., Joko, E. P. J. & Wan Hassan, W. S. W., (2025) Dasar memakmurkan jiran (*Prosper Thy Neighbour*) dan pengurusan keselamatan negara: Malaysia dan proses perdamaian di Selatan Filipina. In. R. Dollah & A. Maraining (Eds.) *Pengurusan Keselamatan di Pantai Timur Sabah*. UMS Press.
- Dollah, R., Maraining., A., Jafar, A., Joko, E.P., & Sakke, S. (2024). Exploring the interdependence model in Malaysia-Indonesia relations: Insights from Sabah, Malaysia. *Intellectual Discourse*, 32(1), 213-237.
- East, B. (2018). *21st Century Philippines piracy: The Abu Sayyaf adds a new dimension to terror*. Cambridge Scholar Publishing.
- Eklöf, S. (2006). *Pirates in paradise: A modern history of Southeast Asia's maritime marauders*. NIAS Press.
- ESSCOM. (2024). Taklimat oleh Datuk Victor Sanjos, Komander ESSCOM, ESSCOM dan Keselamatan Sabah, Sesi Libat-Urus UMS-ESSCOM, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 17 June.
- Fabian, N. (2023, October 18). 40 kidnap cases thwarted by ESSCOM since 2017. *Daily Express*.
- Febrica, S. (2014). Securing the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas from maritime terrorism: A troublesome cooperation? *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8(3), 64-83.
- Frake, C. (1998). Abu Sayyaf displays of violence and the proliferation of contested identities among Philippine Muslims. *American Anthropologist*, 100(1), 41-54.
- Fu, X., Ng, A. K. F., & Lau, Y. Y. (2010). The impacts of maritime piracy on global economic development: The case of Somalia. *Maritime Policy & Management*, 37(7), 677-697.

- General Operations Force. (GOF). (2003). *Fail Pasukan Gerakan Am (General Operations Force - GOF): Kajian Status Operasi Pasir Briged Sabah Pasukan Gerakan Am*.
- Ghazali, H. (2020). Sabah's Police Commissioner, Webinar Sabah border security during pandemic era. 11 Nov.
- Gunaratna, R. (2002). *Inside Al Qaeda: Global network of terror*. Columbia University Press.
- Jabatan Ukur dan Pemetaan Malaysia [JUPEM]. (2005). *Sabah land and survey: Maklumat keluasan and perimeter negeri, daerah dan pulau di Malaysia*. Government of Malaysia.
- Jubair, S. (1999). *Bangsamoro: A nation under endless tyranny* (3rd ed.). IQ Marina.
- Kamlan, J. A. (2011). The secessionist movements in Southern Philippines: Prospects and challenges in negotiating for the Mindanao peace process. *The Mindanao Forum*, 24(1), 1-1.
- Katagiri, N. (2019). Organized insurgency, lethality, and target selection: Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 30(3), 518-542.
- Kiefer, T.M. (1972). *The tausug, violence and law in a Philippine Moslem Society*. Rinehart and Winston.
- Liss, C. (2010). Contemporary maritime piracy in the waters off Semporna, Sabah. In J. Kleinen & M. Osseweijer (Eds.), *Pirates, ports, and coasts in Asia: Historical and contemporary perspectives* (pp. 237-268). ISEAS Publishing.
- Majul, C.A. (1985). *The contemporary Muslim movement in the Philippines*. Mizan Press.
- Malaysia Armed Forces (MAF). (2018). Unpublished.
- Malaysia Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA). (2014 & 2016). Malaysia Maritime Enforcement Agency. Unpublished.
- Malaysia Ministry of Defence. (2020). *Defence White Paper (DWP), 2020-2030*. Malaysia Government.
- Malaysian National Security Council (NSC). (2019). *National Security Policy (NSP), 2021-2025*. pmo.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Bahasa_Melayu-DASAR_KESELAMATAN_NEGARA.pdf
- Manalo, E. P. (2004). *The Philippine response to terrorism: The Abu Sayyaf Group* [Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA.].
- Mapping Militant Organizations. (2018). Abu Sayyaf Group. Stanford University. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/abu-sayyaf-group>
- Maraining, A., & Dollah, D., & Ramli, I. (2025) Memasyarakatkan ESSCOM Menerusi Penglibatan Bersama Komuniti ESS Zone. In. R. Dollah & A. Maraining (Eds.) *Pengurusan Keselamatan di Pantai Timur Sabah*. Kota Kinabalu: UMS Press.
- Maraining, A., & Dollah, D., (2025) Penguatkuasaan Perintah Berkurung Di ESS Zone: Isu dan Cabaran. In. R. Dollah & A. Maraining (eds.) *Pengurusan Keselamatan di Pantai Timur Sabah*. UMS Press.
- Martínez-Zarzoso, I., & Bensassi, S. (2013). The price of modern maritime piracy. *Defence and Peace Economics*, 24(5), 397-418.
- McCabe, R. C. (2018). *Modern maritime piracy: Genesis, evolution and responses*. Routledge.
- MMEA. (2019). Operasi Baharu APMM di ESSCOM. 25 April.
- Mohammad Aslam, M. M. (2018). Cross border crime in funding terrorism activities in Southeast Asia: Malaysia case. *Advance Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Discoveries*, 25(9), 64-75.
- Morabito, G., & Sergi, B. (2018). How did maritime piracy affect trade in Southeast Asia? *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 18(2), 255-265.
- Mstar. (2013, March 2). APMM peringkat kawalan di perairan Lahad Datu Sabtu. <https://www.mstar.com.my/lokal/semasa/2013/03/02/apmm-peringkat-kawalan-di-perairan-lahad-datu>
- Murphy, M. N. (2007). *Contemporary piracy and maritime terrorism: The threat to international security*. Routledge.

- Nor Ahmad, N. H. A., Dollah, R., Wan Hassan, W. S., & el-Muhammady, A. (2021). *Divergent dimensions of radicalization risk: Migration and violent extremism in Sabah - The United States Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO)*. U.S. Department of State. START.
- O'Brien, M. (2012). Fluctuations Between crime and terror: The case of Abu Sayyaf's kidnapping activities. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24(2), 320-336.
- Perri, F.S., Lichtenwald, T.G., & Mackenzie, P. M. (2009). Evil Twins: The Crime-Terror Nexus. The Forensic Examiner. <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/evil-twins-crime-terror-nexus>
- Peters, D., Abubakar, A. U., Dollah, D., & Wan Hassan, W.H. (2019). Security-defence dimension to the security of eastern Sabah. In D. Peters, J. C. K. Lian, G. Saat, A. Estim, M. A. Sebastian, (Eds.) *Holistic development and security for ESSZONE*. UMS Press.
- Peters, D., Omar, M.A., Dollah, R., and Wan Hassan, W.H. (2022). Undocumented workers during Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO). *Migration Letters*. 19(2), 107-121. <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v19i2.1280>
- Rabasa, A., & Chalk, P. (2012). Non-traditional threats and maritime domain awareness in the tri-border area of Southeast Asia: The Coast Watch System of the Philippines. RAND Corporation.
- Randrianantenaina, J. E. (2013). *Maritime piracy and armed robbery against ships: Exploring the legal and the operational solutions. The case of Madagascar*. United Nations.
- Ridzuan, M. I. M., Abdul Hamid, A. R., Dollah, R. et. al. (2025). Dinamika Usaha-Usaha ESSCOM dalam mendepani ancaman keselamatan di Pantai Timur Sabah sebelum, semasa dan pasca era Covid-19. In R. Dollah & A. Maraining (Eds.) *Pengurusan Keselamatan di Pantai Timur Sabah*. UMS Press.
- Samuel, D. H., Nor Ahmad, N. H. N., Dollah, R., Wan Shawaluddin, W. H., Singh, J., & el-Muhammady, A. (2020). Divergent dimensions of radicalization risk: Migration and violent extremism in Sabah, Malaysia. Desk Study Report to the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, U.S. Department of State. START.
- Santos S. M. Jr., Santos, P. V. M., Dinampo, O. A., Kraft, H. J. S., Paredes, A. K. R., Quilop, R. J. G. (2010). *Primed and purposeful armed groups and human security efforts in the Philippines*. Small Arms Survey.
- Singh, J. (2017). 'Liberation' of Marawi: Implications for Southeast Asia. *RSIS Commentary*. No. 197.
- Storey, I. (2018). Trilateral security cooperation in the Sulu-Celebes Seas: A work in progress. *Perspective*, 48, 1-7.
- The Jakarta Post. (2021, March 20). *Three Indonesian hostages rescued in Philippines*. Police. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2021/03/20/three-indonesian-hostages-rescued-in-philippines-police.html>
- The Maritime Executive. (2020, January 19). *Eight crew kidnapped from fishing vessel off Malaysia*. <https://Maritime-Executive.Com/Article/Eight-Abducted-From-Trawler-Off-Sabah>
- The Straits Times, (2019, December 26). *Indonesia, Philippines join hands to free sailor kidnapped by Abu Sayyaf terror group*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-philippines-join-hands-to-free-abductee-of-abu-sayyaf>
- The Straits Times. (2019, June 18). *10 fishermen feared kidnapped by Abu Sayyaf gunmen off Sabah*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/10-fishermen-feared-kidnapped-by-abu-sayyaf-gunmen-off-sabah>
- U.S. Department of Justice. (1998). *Terrorism in the United States 1998 Counterterrorism Threat Assessment and Warning Unit National Security Division*.

- Ugarte, E.F. (2008). The phenomenon of kidnapping in the southern Philippines: An overview. *South East Asia Research*, 16(3), 293-341.
- Vincenzo, R. (2019). Hybrids: On the crime-terror nexus. *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 43(1), 49-60.
- Vitug, M. D., & Gloria, G. M. (2000). Under the crescent moon: Rebellion in Mindanao. Ateneo Center for Social Policy & Public Affairs.
- Wan Hassan, W. H., & Dollah, R. (2008). Isu-isu keselamatan Sabah dan impak kepada Malaysia. *JATI: Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 13, 49-68.
- Wan Hassan, W. H., & Dollah, R. (2011). *Pendatang dan isu keselamatan di Sabah*. Universiti Malaysia Sabah.
- Wang, P. (2010). The crime-terror nexus: Transformation, alliance, convergence. *Asian Social Science*, 6(6), 11-20.
- Warren, J. (1985). *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898*. New Day Publisher.
- Warren, J. F. (2002). *Iranun and balangingi: Globalization, maritime raiding and the birth of ethnicity*. Singapore University Press.
- Yusa, Z. (2020, Jan 15). Kidnapped Indonesian fisherman rescued in southern Philippines. *Benarnews*. <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/philippines-militants-01152020154104.html>