

Statelessness, Identity, and Insecurity: Understanding Violent Extremism in Sabah's Borderlands

CRYSTAL GAYLE JIDY¹, KEVIN FERNANDEZ^{1*} & MUHAMMAD DANIAL AZMAN²

¹*Asia-Europe Institute (AEI), Universiti Malaya,
50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

²*International Institute of Public Policy and Management (INPUMA),
Universiti Malaya, 50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

Correspondence author: kevin@um.edu.my

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Abstract

This article examines the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in Sabah within the broader context of regional security and state society relations in maritime Southeast Asia. Drawing on thematic content analysis, it shows that irregular migration has produced a multigenerational stateless population that remains outside formal state protection and is routinely securitised by enforcement agencies. Persistent exclusion from education, healthcare, and social welfare increases vulnerability to recruitment and ideological manipulation by violent extremist groups. The analysis further demonstrates that Sabahan identity is shaped by stronger sociocultural and familial ties to the wider Bornean Nusantara sphere than to Peninsular Malaysia, a dynamic reinforced by the legacy of arbitrary territorial boundaries and by federal approaches to security and belonging that complicate these ties. The article argues that Malaysia's nativist, enforcement-oriented immigration framework grounded in a Hobbesian conception of state authority reproduces illegality and insecurity and should be reconsidered in favour of a Lockean perspective that recognises long-settled undocumented migrants as tacit consenters or potential citizens, based on their social and economic relationships with the host state. It concludes by assessing the limits of bilateral security initiatives, particularly ESSCOM and ESSZONE, arguing that their stabilising capacity remains constrained in the absence of credible pathways to citizenship, inclusion, and state legitimacy.

Keywords: Statelessness; Transnational Crimes; Violent Extremism; Terrorism; Regional Security

Introduction

Following Malaysia's 2020 Movement Control Order (MCO) during the COVID-19 pandemic, official security statistics recorded a notable decline in terror-related incidents.¹ This reduction, however, reflected constraints on physical mobility rather than the erosion of extremist ideology. The ideological currents underpinning violent extremism did not disappear; instead, they adapted.² Violent extremist organisations (VEOs) increasingly shifted propaganda dissemination, recruitment, and financial solicitation into digital and encrypted spaces, exploiting pandemic induced socioeconomic distress, labour precarity, and perceived state neglect in marginalised communities. According to the Royal Malaysia Police Counter Terrorism Division (E8), Malaysia continues to function as a "transit and logistics hub" for foreign extremists, with 558 terror-related arrests recorded since 2013, including 51 women underscoring the persistence and diversification of extremist networks despite episodic operational setbacks.³

While global attention has shifted mainly following the territorial collapse of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, empirical research indicates that support ecosystems for transnational jihadism remain resilient across Southeast Asia.⁴ These networks have demonstrated a capacity to reconfigure ideologically and operationally in response to geopolitical shifts. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021, for instance, has been widely interpreted as a symbolic victory by extremist movements elsewhere, coinciding with renewed propaganda efforts by Al-Qaeda linked affiliates.⁵ Such developments reinforce the importance of examining localised vulnerabilities that intersect with broader transnational currents.

Within this evolving security landscape, Sabah occupies a distinctive sub-national position. Its porous maritime borders, protracted migration and statelessness challenges, and enduring socio-political marginalisation generate a complex security dilemma that differs markedly from Peninsular Malaysia.⁶ This paper examines how identity fragmentation and statelessness in Sabah intersect with regional extremist dynamics, arguing that governance deficits rather than ideology alone constitute the primary source of vulnerability in East Malaysia. In particular, we contend that weak maritime governance along the Sulu Sea, when combined with financial incentives and ideological legitimisation, creates permissive conditions for kidnap for ransom (KFR) activities and other hybrid criminal extremist practices.⁷ These dynamics do not remain spatially contained; left unaddressed, they risk spillover effects into neighbouring regions, including Sarawak, through shared maritime routes and informal cross border economies.

In doing so, this paper contributes to the literature on non-traditional security threats in Southeast Asia, especially in Sabah, by foregrounding the interaction between sub-national governance failures and transnational extremist networks. This intersection remains under-theorised in regional scholarship. The paper proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the global literature on radicalisation and violent extremism alongside regional studies on non-traditional security and migration in Sabah and Southeast Asia. The second section outlines the methodological approach adopted. The final section synthesises key findings, examines the security implications of statelessness and extremism, and identifies critical governance gaps shaping Sabah's position within Southeast Asia's security periphery.

The Global Context: Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

The concept of violent extremism remains analytically contested, with no universally accepted definition. USAID defines violent extremism as “advocating, engaging in, preparing for, or otherwise supporting ideologically driven violence in pursuit of political or social goals.”⁸ While this definition provides an operational baseline for policy interventions, scholars have criticised⁹ it for insufficient sensitivity to context, particularly in non-Western settings where pathways to extremism are rarely linear or ideologically uniform.¹⁰ In Southeast Asia, VEOs frequently embed ethno-religious narratives within long-standing patterns of socioeconomic marginalisation, informal economies, and weak state penetration.¹¹ This integration often results in forms of radicalisation that are structurally conditioned rather than purely doctrinal. Framing this socioeconomic marginalisation as a curtailment of capabilities, rather than solely grievance-based, can sharpen our understanding of extremism's root causes. For instance, statelessness significantly hinders access to education and healthcare, grounding the argument in measurable development deficits and highlighting how these capability deprivations contribute to the cycle of radicalisation.¹²

Schmid's distinction between “non-violent” and “violent” extremism highlights essential gradations of ideological commitment.¹³ He cautions that rigid belief systems can create latent dispositions toward violence when enabling conditions arise. Building on this, Crone contends that

prevailing academic approaches often individualise radicalisation, privileging psychological or behavioural explanations while under-theorising the broader political and institutional environments that facilitate extremist mobilisation.¹⁴ Visualising these pathways by mapping key decision points at which individuals shift from holding rigid beliefs to engaging in extremist actions can provide clarity. This involves identifying stages of commitment such as the influence of social networks, exposure to radical ideologies, and socio-economic triggers that transform latent dispositions into actions.¹⁵ Understanding these decision nodes can illuminate how environments contribute to extremism. These “enabling environments” are particularly salient in peripheral and borderland regions.¹⁶ In Sabah, they manifest as chronic statelessness, unequal access to education and healthcare, labour precarity, and persistent distrust of formal authority. Collectively, these conditions erode state legitimacy and lower barriers to extremist recruitment.

Recent studies demonstrate that religious militancy in Malaysia is inseparable from issues of citizenship, governance capacity, and inclusion within the social contract. As Glazzard and Zeuthen note, although not all individuals who undergo radicalisation commit acts of terrorism, radicalisation remains a necessary precondition for ideological violence.¹⁷ This insight is critical for understanding Sabah, where radicalisation often functions less as an overt ideological project and more as a coping mechanism for structural exclusion and identity insecurity.¹⁸ However, contrasting Sabah's religious militancy with the cross-border militant logics of regions like Mindanao in the Philippines or Aceh in Indonesia can sharpen our understanding of Sabah's unique conditions. While Mindanao's insurgencies are often tied to historical grievances and territorial autonomy, Aceh's struggles have centred around specific resource distribution and local governance. A comparative perspective reveals that Sabah's drivers of radicalisation, such as statelessness and citizenship issues, are uniquely intertwined with its socio-political makeup, distinguishing it from broader struggles in other regions.¹⁹

We argue that radicalisation, whether ideological, political, or nativist can generate extremist worldviews when reinforced by sustained economic marginalisation. In Sabah, the absence of legal status and limited access to social protection structures, including viable pathways to social mobility, can transform such worldviews into observable extremist behaviour. These behaviours range from low level facilitation and informal collaboration with illicit networks to direct participation in criminal and violent acts.²⁰ Our primary concern is violence as a form of crime embedded within broader insecurity dynamics. From this perspective, Sabah is not merely a domestic policy challenge but a critical node within Southeast Asia's security periphery, where governance deficits, cross-border mobility, and transnational extremist networks converge. The following section situates Sabah within this broader regional context.

The Regional Context: Sabah and Southeast Asia's Security Periphery

Building on the preceding discussion of sub-national governance deficits and transnational spillovers, Southeast Asia can be understood as a historically volatile theatre for Islamic militancy, shaped by porous borders, weak state penetration in peripheral regions, and long-standing sociopolitical grievances. Militant groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM), Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have historically sustained networks across the Sulu Celebes maritime corridor.²¹ This corridor functions not merely as a transit route but as a deeply embedded socio-economic and cultural space linking coastal Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago, eastern Sabah, and parts of Kalimantan. Sabah's geography bordering the southern Philippines and Indonesia's Kalimantan renders it simultaneously a corridor for movement and a buffer within this regional security continuum.²²

Figure 1 illustrates the sharp increase in criminal and terrorist related activity in Southeast Asia during the peak of ISIS linked mobilisation following the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019. Although transnational terrorism has not disappeared, its appeal and operational coherence have weakened in the absence of a unifying ideological centre.²³ Instead, violence in the region has increasingly taken hybrid forms that blur the boundaries between ideological extremism, organised crime, and opportunistic violence. This shift is particularly evident in maritime Southeast Asia, where KFR, smuggling, and arms trafficking intersect with residual extremist networks.

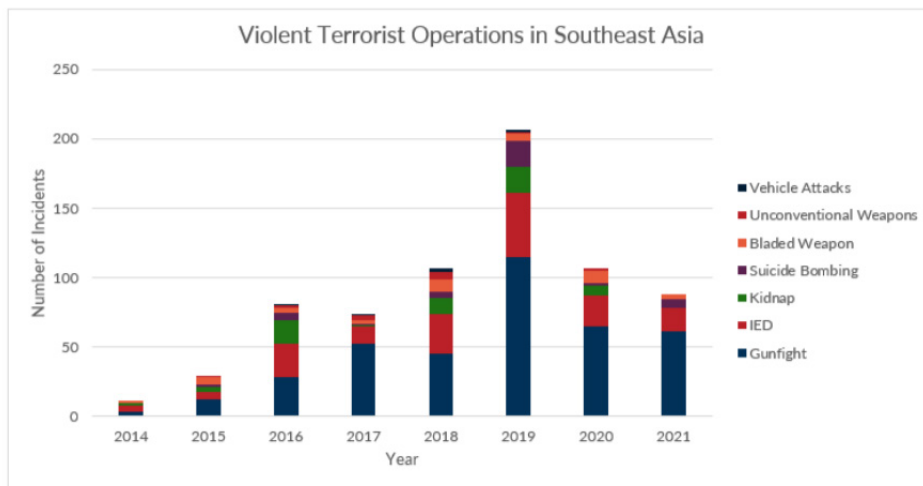


Figure 1: Number of violent terrorist incidents.

Source: Yeoh, Kenneth. 2019. “Southeast Asia Reopens: Will Transnational Terrorism Return?” *The Diplomat*, April 15. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/as-southeast-asia-reopens-will-transnational-terrorism-return/>.

For decades, security in Sabah has been shaped by this regional environment.²⁴ The state has faced persistent threats linked to terrorism, piracy, and cross-border criminal activity, reflecting its proximity to conflict-affected areas in the southern Philippines. Since 7 October 2022, communities within the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) have lived under permanent maritime curfews, distinct from mainland emergency measures.²⁵ These curfews underscore the enduring perception of threat along Sabah’s eastern seaboard. Malaysian authorities continue to associate ASG with past terrorist threats, KFR incidents, and cross-border criminal operations. Recent assessments²⁶ by Karisma Putera Abd Rahman and Fikri Rahman suggest that Mundi, ASG’s second in command, may be seeking refuge in Sabah, heightening concerns over the potential reactivation of VEO networks within the state. Historically, the early 2000s marked a defining phase of terrorist violence in Southeast Asia. The Bali bombings of 2002, which killed 202 civilians, constituted a watershed moment in the region’s security trajectory. As Ramakrishna argues, the attack perpetrated by the Al-Qaeda affiliated JI represented the first significant wave of transnational jihadism in Southeast Asia, lasting until approximately 2008.²⁷ During this period, Al-Qaeda-linked VEOs dominated jihadist violence, with JI in Indonesia and MILF-linked factions in the southern Philippines at the forefront. Abuza characterises this era as pivotal in elevating radicalisation and terrorism from a peripheral concern to a central focus of regional security agendas, prompting enhanced counter-terrorism cooperation among Southeast Asian states.

A key debate within the literature on Islamic militancy in Southeast Asia centres on the divide between “globalist” and “regionalist” interpretations.²⁸ The globalist perspective, rooted primarily in terrorism and security studies, emphasises the organisational and ideological integration of local

militant groups into global jihadist networks. From this view, JI, KMM, ASG, and MILF functioned as regional extensions of Al-Qaeda's transnational infrastructure.²⁹ Scholars such as Gunaratna and Abuza highlight the role of elite leadership linkages, pointing to documented interactions among Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Sungkar, and Riduan Isamudin that facilitated JI's gradual incorporation into Al-Qaeda's global network.³⁰

Regionalist scholars, by contrast, foreground local histories, geography, and political grievances in explaining militant trajectories. Solahudin traces the roots of Indonesian jihadism to nineteenth century Salafist influences in the Dutch East Indies, underscoring the deep historical foundations of militant mobilisation that predate contemporary global jihadist movements.³¹ From this perspective, transnational affiliations are contingent and adaptive rather than determinative. Contemporary terrorism in Indonesia, for example, reflects bifurcated allegiances to either ISIS or Al-Qaeda, shaped as much by domestic political dynamics, local grievances, and organisational fragmentation as by external ideological currents.

Sabah's ESSZONE encompassing ten east coast districts remains under near permanent maritime curfews due to persistent incursions and KFR activities.³² The 2013 Lahad Datu incident is widely recognised as a turning point in Malaysia's border security posture, leading to the establishment of Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) and a more militarised approach to security in eastern Sabah. While globalist analyses frame such threats primarily as spillovers of transnational jihadist networks, this paper adopts a regionalist lens. It situates Sabah's vulnerabilities within the broader Bornean–Nusantara geopolitical sphere, emphasising governance failures, identity fragmentation, and borderland marginality as central explanatory factors.

Seen through this lens, Sabah's security challenges are less about the strength of extremist ideology per se and more about the interaction between weak governance, historical mobility patterns, and socio-economic exclusion in a peripheral maritime region. This regional context is essential for understanding why enforcement heavy counter terrorism measures, while necessary, remain insufficient on their own. Sabah's position within Southeast Asia's security periphery thus reflects not only regional militant dynamics but also the enduring consequences of uneven state formation and development across maritime Southeast Asia.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design and employs content analysis of secondary data to examine the structural and contextual drivers of violent extremism and radicalisation in Sabah. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's emphasis on meaning, interpretation, and context rather than measurement or causal prediction.³³ Extremism in borderland settings such as Sabah is shaped less by isolated events than by long term governance deficits, identity fragmentation, and socio-political exclusion.³⁴ Content analysis, therefore, allows for systematic, transparent, and theoretically informed inference from textual materials that capture these dynamics.

Following Holsti, content analysis is understood as a method that enables replicable and systematic interpretation of texts to identify patterns, themes, and relationships.³⁵ In the context of terrorism and security studies, this approach is beneficial for analysing policy discourses, institutional framings, and narrative constructions of threat, vulnerability, and governance. Rather than focusing narrowly on individual terrorist incidents, this study adopts a context centred analytical orientation, examining the background conditions that enable extremist mobilisation in Sabah.

The methodological procedure is guided by the secondary data analysis framework proposed by Johnston,³⁶ illustrated in Figure 2. The framework structures the analysis into sequential stages, beginning with the development of research questions and proceeding through

data identification, evaluation, categorisation, triangulation, and interpretation. In this study, three research questions anchor the analytical process: (1) what dynamics have shaped the security situation in Sabah; (2) what are the key drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in the state; and (3) how do VEOs from the Southern Philippines influence Sabah’s security environment. These questions informed both source selection and thematic coding.

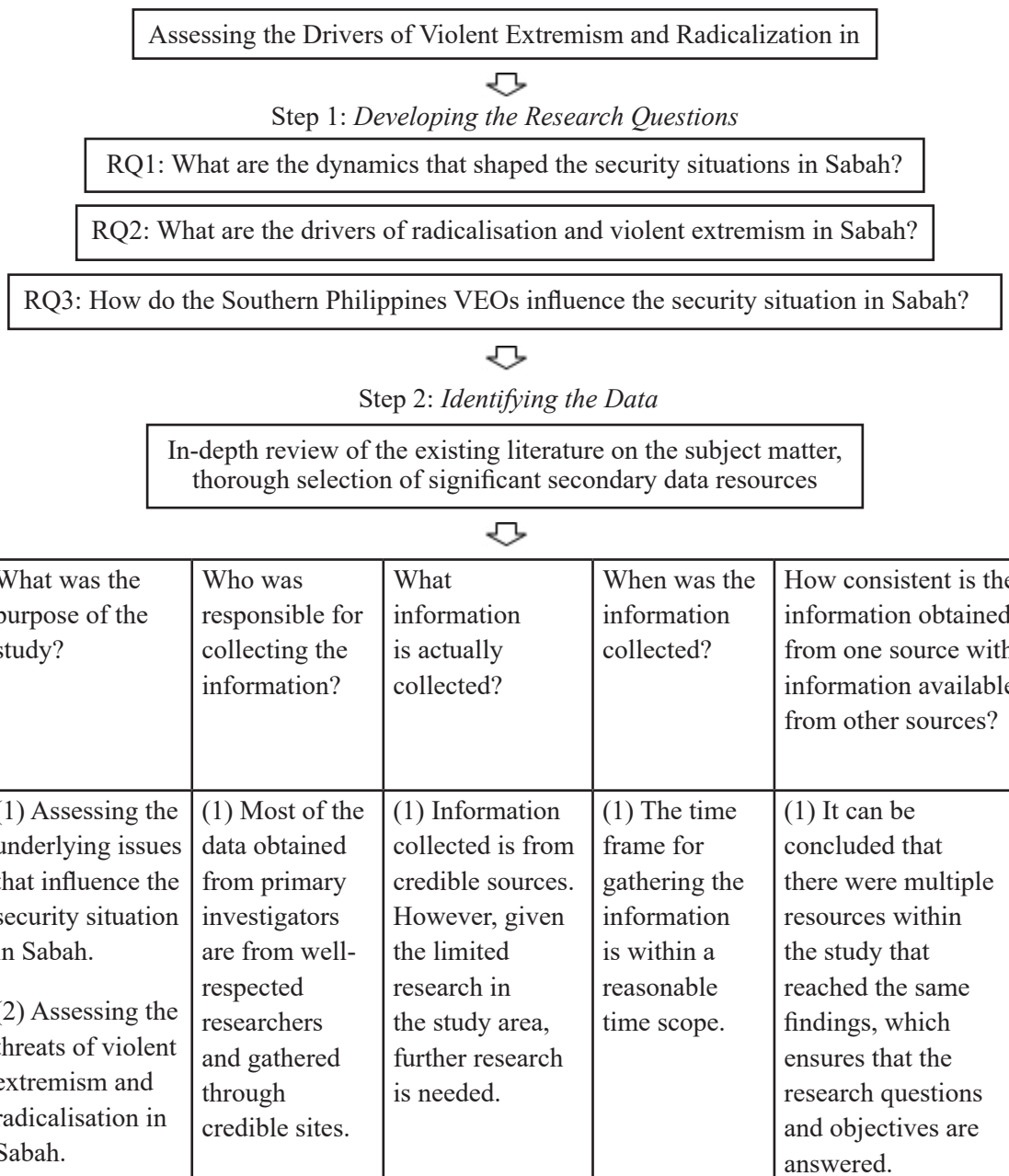


Figure 2: Secondary Data Analysis Processes.

Source: Johnston, Melissa. 2014. “Secondary Data Analysis: A Method of which the Time has Come,” *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries* 3: 625.

Secondary data were drawn from a broad corpus of materials published between 2010 and 2025. Sources include peer reviewed academic journal articles, official government and security reports, and publications produced by reputable regional and international institutions such as ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, SEARCCT, and UNHCR. This time frame captures the evolution of post 9/11

regional militancy, the rise and decline of ISIS linked networks, and the institutional responses following key security events such as the Lahad Datu incident and the establishment of ESSCOM.

In line with Johnston's framework, each source was systematically evaluated using five criteria: (i) the purpose of the study or document, (ii) the credibility and institutional background of the data producer, (iii) the type and scope of information collected, (iv) the temporal relevance of the data, and (v) consistency with findings from other independent sources. This evaluative process, reflected in Figure 2, ensured that only reliable and contextually relevant materials were incorporated into the analysis.

Data were collected through structured keyword searches in Scopus and Web of Science, focusing on combinations of terms such as "Sabah," "violent extremism," "radicalisation," "statelessness," "border security," "Sulu Sea," and "kidnap-for-ransom." Targeted internet searches supplemented these searches to capture policy reports, grey literature, and official statements addressing extremism and security governance in East Malaysia. All retrieved materials were organised thematically and coded manually to identify recurring patterns related to governance deficits, identity insecurity, border permeability, and criminal-extremist convergence.

Consistent with Creswell, Denzin, and Lincoln, the study prioritises interpretive depth over generalisability.³⁷ To enhance analytical robustness, triangulation was employed through cross source validation, comparing findings across academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports. Although access to classified counter terrorism intelligence is necessarily restricted, triangulation mitigates this limitation by grounding interpretations in convergent evidence across multiple independent sources. This approach aligns with Spencer's critique of event centred terrorism research and their call for context centred analyses that foreground enabling environments rather than discrete attacks.³⁸

Overall, by combining a structured secondary data analysis framework with qualitative content analysis, this methodology enables a systematic yet flexible examination of how sub-national governance failures in Sabah intersect with regional extremist networks. The approach is well suited to illuminating the complex, layered drivers of violent extremism in Southeast Asia's security periphery.

Findings and Discussions

Sabah's Security Dynamics and Governance Deficits

Consistent with the earlier analysis of sub-national governance failures and regional spillovers, the findings indicate that Sabah occupies a structurally vulnerable position within Malaysia's and Southeast Asia's security landscape. The state confronts a complex mix of traditional and non-traditional security threats, including residual territorial claims associated with the Sulu Sultanate, as well as human trafficking, smuggling, piracy, and irregular migration.³⁹ These challenges are not discrete or episodic; instead, they are embedded within long-standing governance constraints that limit Sabah's capacity to manage security autonomously and sustainably.⁴⁰

Governance deficits emerge as a central explanatory factor. Limited enforcement capacity, fragmented inter-agency coordination, and unequal federal resource allocation have collectively weakened Sabah's ability to respond effectively to cross-border and internal security pressures. Federal dependence further constrains policy autonomy, particularly in border management, citizenship administration, and social protection.⁴¹ Despite being one of Malaysia's central oil-producing states, Sabah has experienced decades of uneven socio-economic development. This structural imbalance has contributed to Sabah's designation as the poorest state in the federation, reinforcing perceptions among local communities that the benefits of natural resource extraction accrue disproportionately to

Peninsular Malaysia.

These economic and institutional asymmetries intersect with demographic anxieties. Many Sabahans perceive the large and largely unregulated influx of migrants as a direct threat to Sabahan indigeneity and social cohesion. Over time, migrant communities particularly from the southern Philippines and eastern Indonesia have settled permanently, often integrating through intermarriage with local populations. While such integration reflects social adaptation, it also complicates citizenship verification and fuels contestation over identity, political representation, and access to state resources.⁴² The district of Tawau, for instance, has increasingly been characterised as a Bugis enclave, reflecting both historical migration patterns and contemporary cross-border mobility. Bugis migrants from South Sulawesi enter Sabah through formal entry points and through informal and illegal maritime routes, often facilitated by kinship ties and by informal migration brokers operating across the Sulu Celebes Seas.

The scale of unregulated migration has introduced a distinct and persistent security dimension. Sabah's official population stands at approximately 3.9 million, yet this figure excludes an estimated 1.1 million non citizens residing in the state.⁴³ Even this estimate is widely regarded as conservative, given the inherent difficulty of capturing accurate data on irregular migration and illegal border crossings. The absence of reliable demographic data further undermines effective policy design and enforcement, reinforcing cycles of marginalisation and informality.

Field-based evidence and secondary security assessments suggest that violent extremist organisations exploit these structural vulnerabilities by embedding themselves within the socio-economic networks of stateless and marginalised migrant communities. Such embedding provides anonymity, logistical support, and access to informal economies. The discovery of an Abu Sayyaf Group training encampment in Beaufort in 2021 is particularly significant, as it signals a shift of militant activity from coastal and maritime zones into Sabah's interior. This inland movement reflects adaptive strategies by extremist actors seeking to evade maritime surveillance while capitalising on weak local governance and limited state presence.

Taken together, these findings underscore Sabah's dual vulnerability: porous borders that facilitate illicit mobility, and fragile social integration shaped by statelessness, economic exclusion, and identity insecurity. Extremism in Sabah should therefore not be understood solely as an external threat imported from neighbouring conflict zones, but as a phenomenon rooted in structural governance deficits that intersect with regional militant networks. This reinforces the paper's central argument that addressing violent extremism in Sabah requires not only security enforcement but also deeper reforms in governance, citizenship administration, and inclusive development.

The 2013 Lahad Datu Incident: Sovereignty under Siege

Building directly on the earlier discussion of porous borders, statelessness, and governance deficits, the 2013 Lahad Datu incursion stands as a critical inflexion point in Malaysia's contemporary security history and a defining episode for Sabah's role within Southeast Asia's security periphery. The incursion involved more than 100 armed militants claiming allegiance to the Sultanate of Sulu, who crossed into eastern Sabah and asserted historical sovereignty over the territory. Beyond its immediate security implications, the episode revealed how unresolved historical claims, borderland marginality, and weak maritime governance can converge to challenge state authority directly.⁴⁴

Operationally, the Lahad Datu incident exposed significant deficiencies in Malaysia's early warning intelligence, coastal surveillance, and maritime domain awareness. As illustrated in Map 1, maritime movement across the Sulu Sea particularly from Jolo, Tawi-Tawi, and Zamboanga remains relatively unimpeded due to the fragmented island geography, narrow straits, and extensive

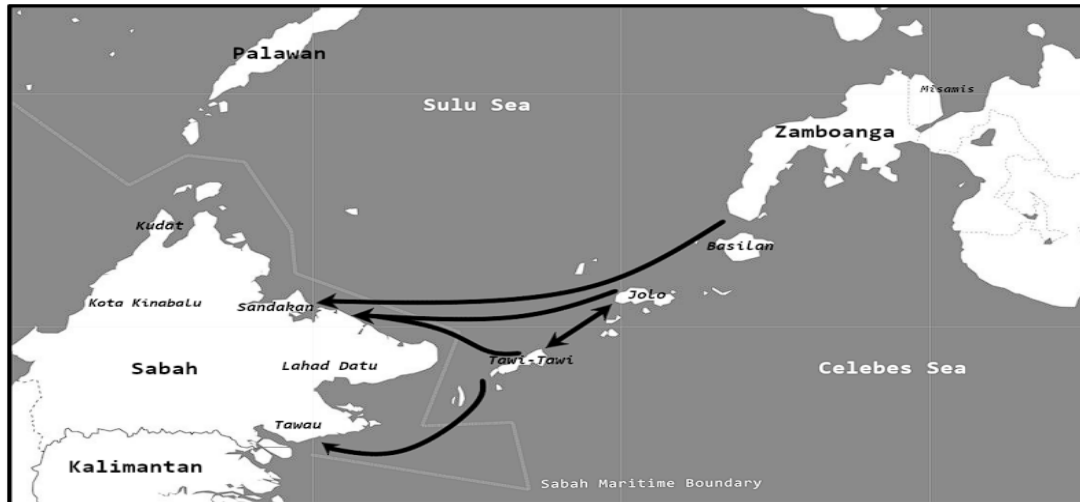
coastlines. These routes have long facilitated everyday mobility through fishing, informal trade, and kinship based migration. Such entrenched patterns render comprehensive securitisation extremely resource intensive and difficult to sustain. The militants involved in the incursion exploited these same maritime pathways, allowing armed movement to blend into routine cross border flows and evade detection during the early stages of infiltration.

The incursion thus demonstrated how historical identity narratives, when combined with porous borders and limited enforcement capacity, can be mobilised into armed action. In response, the Malaysian government established the ESSCOM and the ESSZONE, significantly enhancing coordination among the Malaysian Armed Forces, the Royal Malaysia Police, and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency. These measures improved surveillance coverage, rapid response capabilities, and inter agency information sharing. Nevertheless, as the earlier sections of this paper argue, enforcement led solutions alone are insufficient when underlying governance and citizenship challenges remain unresolved.

One of the most enduring social consequences of the Lahad Datu incident has been the heightened securitisation of local communities, particularly among the Suluk and Bajau populations of eastern Sabah. Despite their long standing presence and social integration, these communities have often been subjected to suspicion and collective scrutiny following the incursion. This has exacerbated trust deficits between local populations and the state, reinforcing feelings of marginalisation and insecurity of identity. In this sense, the incident illustrates how sovereignty crises can deepen existing social fractures, especially in borderland societies characterised by mixed ancestry and transnational ties.

The diplomatic ramifications of the incursion were equally significant. Relations between Malaysia and the Philippines were strained, although the Philippine government categorically denied any official involvement.⁴⁵ Then, President Benigno Aquino III publicly urged the militants to surrender and return to the Philippines, describing the incident as a humiliation that threatened the peace process between Manila and the Bangsamoro region. His statements underscored the extent to which a sub-national security breach in Sabah reverberated across regional diplomatic and peace building frameworks.

The Lahad Datu episode also reactivated dormant sovereignty disputes that continue to shape Sabah's security environment. In March 2022, heirs of the Sultanate of Sulu initiated legal proceedings against the Malaysian government to revive territorial claims over Sabah.⁴⁶ In the same month, a French arbitration tribunal controversially ruled in favour of the claimants, awarding USD 14.9 billion in compensation.⁴⁷ Although Malaysia rejected the ruling, subsequent attempts to seize Malaysian state linked assets including subsidiaries of Petronas registered in Luxembourg demonstrated how historical claims can migrate from the realm of armed contestation into legal and financial domains. These developments have prolonged diplomatic tensions and reinforced uncertainty among local populations.



Map 1: Illustration of the nexus flow between statelessness, exclusion, and vulnerability to extremism.

Source: Somiah, Vilashini, and Jose Ricardo Sto. Domingo. 2021. "Sabah's unrelenting exclusionary and inclusionary politics." *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) Working Paper* no. 334. May 5. <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/sabahs-unrelenting-exclusionary-and-inclusionary-politics/>.

Viewed alongside Map 1, the Lahad Datu incident highlights the structural relationship between statelessness, exclusion, and vulnerability to insecurity. The exposed nature of Sabah's maritime boundaries, combined with unresolved citizenship issues, creates an environment in which historical narratives of sovereignty can be refracted through contemporary grievances and mobilised by armed actors. For communities of mixed ancestry, recurring claims over Sabah's status perpetuate identity anxiety and undermine reconciliation efforts.

Taken together, the Lahad Datu incursion should not be understood as an isolated anomaly but as a crystallisation of deeper structural dynamics discussed throughout this paper. It underscores how weak maritime governance, unresolved historical disputes, and exclusionary citizenship regimes intersect to produce enduring security vulnerabilities. Addressing these challenges requires more than militarised deterrence; it demands integrated maritime governance, credible pathways to citizenship and social protection, and sustained regional diplomacy to prevent sovereignty disputes from being continually reproduced through Sabah's borderland insecurities.

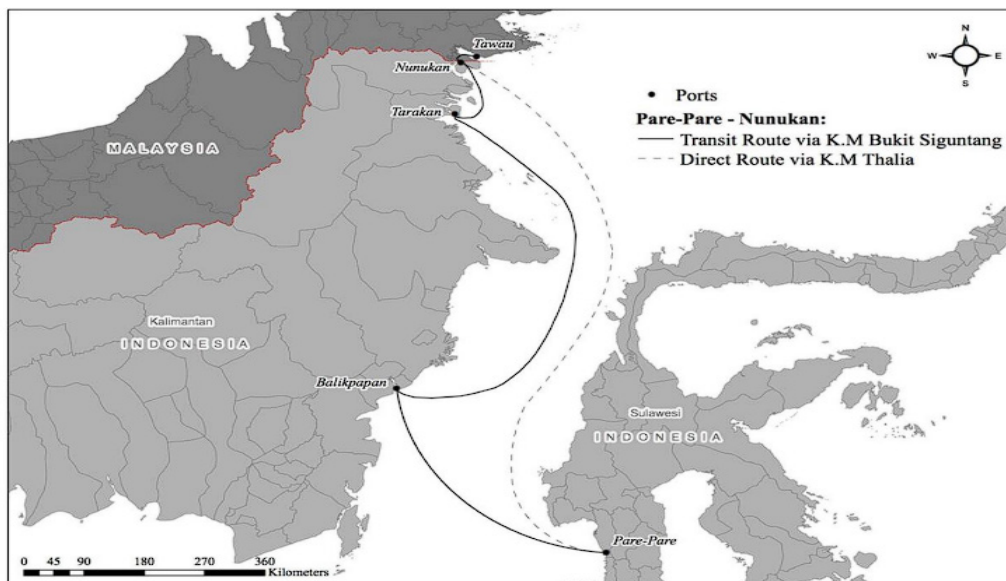
Migration and Statelessness

Consistent with the prior analysis of border permeability, governance deficits, and the securitisation of identity in Sabah, migration and statelessness emerge as core structural conditions shaping vulnerability and insecurity in the state. Stateless persons are defined as individuals who are not considered nationals under the laws of any state, rendering them legally invisible in both domestic and international legal systems.⁴⁸ Closely related but analytically distinct are undocumented or irregular migrants, who reside and work without formal authorisation and are typically concentrated in informal, low wage sectors. In Sabah, these categories frequently overlap, producing layered forms of exclusion that are legal, social, and economic.

Understanding Violent Extremism in Sabah's Borderlands

The Sabah southern Philippines eastern Indonesia borderland has historically functioned as a zone of mobility rather than a fixed territorial boundary for maritime communities such as the Bajau Laut patterns of movement across the Sulu Celebes Seas long predate the consolidation of modern nation states. Living primarily on boats and maintaining fluid settlement practices, the Bajau Laut have weak attachment to land based political authority and formal citizenship regimes. As a result, many are effectively stateless in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, lacking birth registration, identity documents, and access to state institutions.⁴⁹ This condition reflects not criminal intent, but a fundamental misalignment between mobile lifeways and the modern statist assumption that identity, territory, and sovereignty must be territorially fixed.

Migration flows from the southern Philippines into Sabah extend back several centuries and intensified through successive political disruptions. Displacement under Spanish colonial rule, followed by prolonged conflict in Mindanao, produced repeated waves of migration that gradually formed a demographically entangled borderland characterised by kinship ties, intermarriage, and shared religious identities. A third primary migration wave occurred after 1978, amid developments linked to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) peace process. Despite its political origins, this movement was reclassified by Malaysian authorities as “illegal,” marking a shift from historical accommodation toward securitised migration governance. This reclassification entrenched large populations in legal limbo, unable to regularise their status despite long-term residence.



Map 2: Ferry Routes from Pare-pare, South Sulawesi to Nunukan.

Source: Carruthers, Andrews M. 2017. “Clandestine Movement in the Indonesia–Malaysia Migration Corridor: Roots, Routes, and Realities,” *ISEAS Perspective*. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/ clandestine-movement-in-the-indonesiamalaysia-migration-corridor-roots-routes-and-realities/>.

Migration from eastern Indonesia further compounds this dynamic. The district of Tawau has increasingly been recognised as a Bugis enclave, reflecting sustained inflows from South Sulawesi. As illustrated in Map 2, the only officially authorised route for Bugis migrants to enter Sabah legally is via the ferry corridor from Pare-Pare in South Sulawesi to Nunukan, located along the Malaysia–Indonesia border.⁵⁰ While this route provides a formal pathway for mobility, its limited capacity and administrative constraints mean that many migrants rely instead on informal maritime crossings. These crossings are often facilitated by family members or informal migration brokers and are embedded

within long standing social and economic networks rather than organised criminal syndicates alone. The persistence of such routes underscores the structural gap between regulatory frameworks and lived mobility practices in the region.

Statelessness in Sabah is therefore not merely a legal classification but a lived condition of systemic exclusion. Stateless and undocumented populations are routinely denied access to education, healthcare, and legal employment, pushing them into informal economies and precarious livelihoods. Security measures implemented under the ESSZONE, including prolonged maritime curfews, have further constrained the mobility of sea based communities and disrupted traditional livelihoods such as fishing. While intended to curb cross border threats, these measures have unintentionally reinforced cycles of poverty, alienation, and distrust toward state institutions.

As demonstrated throughout this paper, migration and statelessness in Sabah should not be treated as peripheral demographic issues but as central governance challenges with direct security implications. Legal invisibility, economic exclusion, and identity insecurity collectively generate enabling environments that criminal and extremist actors can exploit. Addressing violent extremism in Sabah, therefore, requires confronting the structural roots of statelessness and irregular migration alongside security enforcement, rather than relying on securitisation alone.

Identity, Belonging, and Radicalisation

Building directly on the previous discussion of migration and statelessness as structural governance challenges, we argue that legal invisibility and exclusion shape identity formation and, in turn, vulnerability to radicalisation in Sabah. Drawing on Hobbesian notions of the social contract, this paper further argues that the absence of state protection erodes political legitimacy and pushes marginalised communities toward alternative, non-state forms of security and belonging.⁵¹ For Hobbes, the state emerges as a rights protecting institution through collective political agreement, replacing any presumption of natural order with an artificial but stabilising political authority. When such authority fails to recognise or protect particular populations, the social contract fractures, leaving affected groups outside the moral and institutional boundaries of the state.⁵²

While contemporary states and nativist actors often justify punitive measures against irregular migrants on grounds of sovereignty and legality, classical liberal theory offers a more ambivalent position. Locke's conception of federative power recognises the state's authority to regulate non-citizens within its territory, yet constrains this authority through universal natural rights to life, liberty, and property.⁵³ Allegiance, in this formulation, is reciprocal and conditional upon protection and recognition. Historically, Malaya (before the formation of Malaysia) granted citizenship through naturalisation to large numbers of Chinese and Indian migrants, despite their foreign origins. Viewed through this lens, the continued exclusion of long-settled stateless populations in Sabah many with deep social, cultural, and economic ties to the territory is difficult to justify on normative grounds.⁵⁴ Routine criminalisation of immigration violations in such context's risks undermining political legitimacy rather than reinforcing it.

Under Malaysian law, migrants are formally categorised into only two groups: documented ("legal") and undocumented ("illegal"). This rigid binary obscures the complex realities of long term residence, mixed ancestry, and de facto belonging that characterise Sabah's borderland society.⁵⁵ State society relations surrounding migrants, therefore, involve the active reproduction of illegality as a social condition experienced not only by displaced persons but also by enforcement agencies, bureaucrats, and citizens. High-profile operations to remove "illegal migrants" from markets, plantations, construction sites, and kampung settlements are routinely mobilised nationwide. These practices normalise surveillance and stigma, reinforcing longstanding prejudices

and producing a form of forced invisibility that follows stateless populations across everyday spaces.

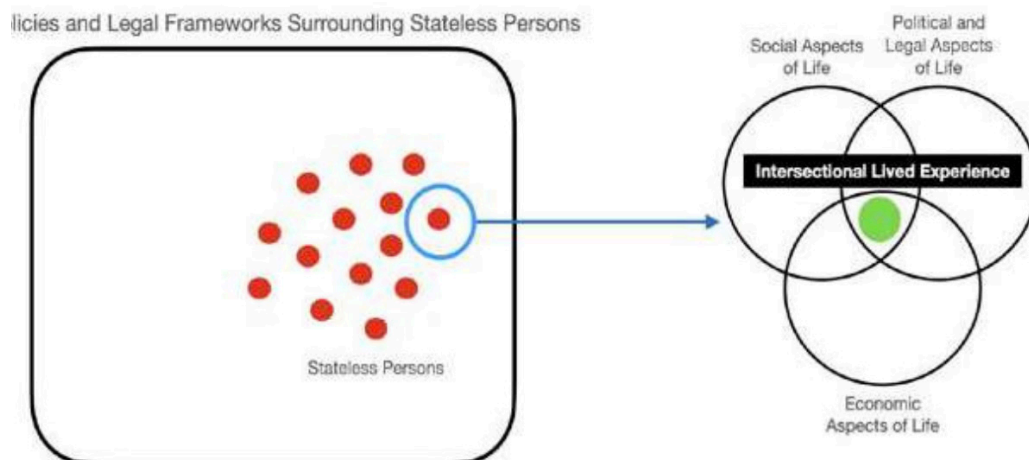


Figure 3: Intersectional lived experience of stateless people.

Source: Tangit, Trixie. 2018. "Broader Identities in the Sabahan Ethnic Landscape: 'Indigenous' and 'Sabahan'." *Borneo Research Bulletin* 49: 241-272.

Figure 3 conceptualises statelessness as an intersectional lived experience shaped by overlapping social, political, legal, and economic exclusions. Denial of documentation restricts access to formal education, healthcare, lawful employment, and legal recourse. At the same time, political non-recognition excludes individuals from participation in decision-making processes that directly affect their lives.⁵⁶ These intersecting deprivations are mutually reinforcing, generating persistent marginalisation that frequently extends across generations. Stateless populations are thus embedded within society yet systematically denied full membership.

The state, through legal interpretation and bureaucratic discretion, ultimately defines who constitutes a Malaysian subject. In Sabah, the treatment of third-generation migrants from Indonesia and the Philippines contrasts sharply with the historical naturalisation of Chinese and Indian communities in Peninsular Malaysia.⁵⁷ This asymmetry is further complicated by the presence of internally displaced persons and children born into legal ambiguity. Drawing on qualitative research involving case law, legal practitioners, and civil society organisations, six principal categories of stateless persons in Sabah are identified, including long-settled pre-independence residents, undocumented individuals, foundlings, children of mixed or unregistered marriages, indigenous persons, and refugees or children of migrant workers.⁵⁸ These categories demonstrate that statelessness is produced not solely through cross-border migration, but also through institutional gaps in civil registration, family law, and administrative practice.

Within Malaysia's federal system, migration governance and citizenship determination remain firmly under federal jurisdiction, limiting Sabah's capacity to tailor responses to its unique maritime and demographic realities.⁵⁹ Sabahan identity rooted in kinship networks across the Sulu archipelago and the broader Bornean cultural continuum often sits uneasily with federal narratives of Malaysian nationhood.⁶⁰ Perceived inequities in resource distribution, long standing grievances over federal neglect, and controversies surrounding "Project IC" have deepened distrust toward central authorities.⁶¹ Political elites and media actors play a central role in socialising the securitisation of stateless persons, framing them as threats to security, resources, and identity.

As Frounfelker observes, structural violence manifested through discrimination, surveillance, and exclusion generates resentment that extremist and criminal networks can exploit.⁶² Emerging studies in Sabah confirm that recruitment into violent extremist organisations or associated criminal activities is often instrumental rather than ideological, driven by economic deprivation, social alienation, and the search for recognition and protection. Radicalisation in this context is best understood as a process rooted in fractured belonging rather than doctrinal commitment. Addressing it, therefore, requires inclusive governance reforms that recognise the interdependence of security, citizenship, and identity moving beyond enforcement toward a reconstructed social contract capable of restoring legitimacy and belonging in Sabah's borderland society.

Peace in the BARMM and Its Effects on Sabah

Building on the earlier discussion of identity, exclusion, and radicalisation, developments in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) constitute a critical external variable shaping Sabah's security and migration environment. Although Sabah's vulnerabilities are rooted primarily in domestic governance and citizenship deficits, they are simultaneously influenced by the trajectory of peace, governance, and development in neighbouring southern Philippines. Since its establishment, BARMM has recorded notable macroeconomic gains, including a rise in its contribution to the Philippine GDP and one of the country's highest regional growth rates by 2021.⁶³ Yet these aggregate indicators obscure enduring structural challenges that continue to generate instability and pressure for outward migration.

World Bank assessments indicate that violence in Bangsamoro is driven less by ideological extremism than by entrenched social exclusion, historical injustice, and the marginalisation of Muslim and indigenous communities from customary institutions and economic opportunities.⁶⁴ Long-standing land tenure disputes, electoral violence, governance weaknesses, uneven policy implementation, and persistent poverty remain unresolved.⁶⁵ These conditions have limited the peace dividend expected from the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, weakening public confidence in the autonomous arrangement and sustaining grievances among local populations.

A central constraint on BARMM's effectiveness is the ambiguous division of authority among the autonomous government, the Philippine national government, and local government units. While BARMM enjoys formal autonomy, many legislative and regulatory initiatives require alignment with national legal frameworks, constraining meaningful self-governance.⁶⁶ These tensions are compounded by the continued marginalisation of Lumad indigenous peoples, who face bureaucratic neglect, political domination by Moro elites, settler-favouring state policies, and legal exclusion—particularly with respect to land rights. Rather than resolving historical grievances, these dynamics risk reproducing them within the new institutional order.

Elite capture further undermines governance credibility. As observed by Lara, conspicuous consumption by segments of the political elite contrasts sharply with persistent mass poverty, fuelling resentment and eroding trust in the autonomous government.⁶⁷ Political competition remains dominated by clan-based and personality driven actors, limiting institutional accountability. The repeated postponement of the Bangsamoro parliamentary elections now expected in May 2026 has reinforced perceptions of democratic stagnation. Meanwhile, the continued presence of dozens of private armed groups linked to political clans sustains insecurity. At the same time, factionalism within the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) weakens efforts to consolidate a cohesive governing authority.⁶⁸

These governance and security deficits in BARMM have direct implications for Sabah. Persistent instability sustains irregular migration across the Sulu–Celebes Seas, reinforcing the structural conditions discussed earlier.⁶⁹ In response, Malaysia has increasingly relied on regional development initiatives most notably the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) to address the transnational dimensions of migration and insecurity.⁷⁰ By positioning Sabah as a logistics and economic hub, BIMP-EAGA seeks to transform migration pressures into regulated labour mobility through infrastructure development, financial integration, and cross-border cooperation.

However, BIMP-EAGA's development-centric approach has apparent limitations. Its emphasis on trade and investment lacks robust mechanisms to address security risks associated with irregular migration.⁷¹ Expanded maritime connectivity may complicate surveillance and enforcement, while uneven development risks intensifying migration flows toward Sabah without addressing underlying conflict, poverty, and governance failures in source regions such as Bangsamoro. This reinforces the paper's core argument: sustainable security outcomes in Sabah depend not only on domestic reform but also on the fragile and uneven peace trajectory in southern Philippines.

Illegal Migrant Workers in Sabah

Building on the preceding discussion of peace deficits in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, migration governance failures, and identity based exclusion, the presence of illegal migrant workers in Sabah constitutes a key mechanism through which regional instability, economic asymmetries, and governance gaps translate into everyday insecurity. Irregular migration into Sabah is not episodic or purely individual. It is sustained by dense recruitment, facilitation, and settlement networks operating across the Celebes Sea and deeply embedded in Sabah's local political economy, transforming cross-border mobility into a structural feature of the state's labour market and social landscape.

Illegal migration from Indonesia often facilitated by calos (labour brokers) and taikongs (boat operators) has evolved into an organised system supplying workers for so called DDD (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) employment.⁷² These workers are concentrated in plantation agriculture, construction, fisheries, logging, and low end services, particularly in districts such as Tawau. Over time, recruitment networks have become increasingly sophisticated. Advances in maritime transport, mobile communication, and informal remittance systems allow brokers to coordinate movements efficiently, transmit instructions in real time, and adapt routes in response to enforcement pressure. Migrants are frequently equipped with counterfeit, recycled, or borrowed documents and channelled directly to employers willing to accept undocumented labour. As a result, irregular flows persist despite intensified maritime surveillance, immigration raids, and enforcement campaigns.

For Indonesian workers, migration to Sabah is driven by influential push factors. Chronic unemployment, rural underdevelopment, limited access to land, and persistent wage differentials between Indonesia and Malaysia frame migration as a rational household strategy rather than a high-risk individual choice. These incentives routinely outweigh the known risks of irregular status. Upon arrival, however, undocumented workers face systematic xenophobia, workplace discrimination, and exploitative labour practices. Employers often leverage migrants' legal vulnerability to suppress wages, deny protections, and evade regulatory oversight. Fear of detention and deportation discourages reporting of abuse, reinforcing cycles of dependency and precarity.

This legal vulnerability generates cascading social consequences beyond the workplace. A particularly significant outcome is the prevalence of *kahwin kampung* (unregistered village marriages) between undocumented migrants and local or other migrant partners.⁷³ Because such unions lack legal recognition, children born to them frequently do not receive birth certificates and cannot acquire

citizenship in either Indonesia or Malaysia. These stateless children inherit their parents' legal invisibility, excluding them from formal education, healthcare, and lawful employment. As discussed earlier, this exclusion erodes trust in state institutions and weakens affective attachment to the political community, creating long-term governance and security risks.

Irregular migration has also reshaped Sabah's rural political economy and land-use patterns. In areas surrounding Kinabalu Park, tourism-driven conservation displaced indigenous Dusun communities from ancestral lands, undermining traditional livelihoods. As younger generations migrated to urban centres, Indonesian migrants predominantly Christian communities from eastern Indonesia moved into vacated rural spaces, cultivating smallholdings and sustaining informal agricultural economies alongside Sabah's formal tourism sector. While these arrangements contribute to food production, they intensify perceptions of demographic replacement and resource competition. These dynamics reflect more profound contradictions in Sabah's development model. The state remains dependent on cheap migrant labour to sustain key economic sectors, while development strategies simultaneously erode indigenous livelihoods and accelerate demographic transformation. Migrant communities thus become semi-permanent, forming families and economic niches while remaining formally excluded from the polity.

From a security perspective, such embeddedness limits the effectiveness of enforcement-centric approaches. Established networks reduce the costs of irregular entry and facilitate continuous inflows into informal settlements and labour markets.⁷⁴ Arrest and deport strategies tend to displace rather than resolve irregularity, reproducing cycles of illegality and insecurity.

As argued throughout this paper, illegal migrant labour in Sabah is not a marginal or temporary problem but a structural outcome of regional inequality, uneven development, and fragmented governance. Sustainable security requires moving beyond enforcement toward coordinated labour regulation, accessible documentation pathways, protection against exploitation, and sustained regional cooperation.⁷⁵ Only by aligning migration governance with economic realities and social inclusion can Sabah move toward a more stable borderland order.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that violent extremism and insecurity in Sabah cannot be adequately understood through conventional counter-terrorism or border-control frameworks alone. Instead, they must be situated within a broader political economy of statelessness, migration, identity, and governance deficits embedded in a historically fluid borderland. The central argument is that prevailing approaches to statelessness in Sabah rely excessively on rigid Hobbesian binaries of legality and illegality, and of citizenship and non-citizenship. While such frameworks prioritise order and control, they fail to capture the lived realities of belonging in a region shaped by long-standing mobility, intermarriage, and informal integration. This study, therefore, advances a more flexible, Lockean interpretation of citizenship grounded in reciprocity, protection, and mutual obligation which better reflects the historical and social embeddedness of Sabah's long-settled yet legally invisible populations. Persistent exclusionary legal categories not only marginalise these communities but also reproduce the very insecurities that securitisation policies seek to contain.

The findings further underscore Sabah's disproportionate influence on Malaysia's national security calculus. Defence expenditure, border enforcement, and counter-terrorism strategies are shaped primarily by Sabah's precarious geography, porous maritime borders, and strategic natural resource endowments. Historically, Sabah's socio-cultural, economic, and kinship linkages have been more closely aligned with the southern Philippines and eastern Indonesia than with Peninsular Malaysia. These transborder affinities were further complicated by past political interventions most notably the

selective naturalisation of Muslim migrants from the southern Philippines which altered demographic balances and generated expectations of similar treatment among later migrant communities. These legacies continue to shape contemporary debates over loyalty, legitimacy, and national belonging in Sabah.

This study illustrates how exclusionary governance transforms socio-economic vulnerability into a security concern. Denied access to education, healthcare, and lawful employment, marginalised migrant communities are frequently absorbed into informal economies operating beyond regulatory oversight. In some instances, this precarious positioning facilitates their instrumental use as informants or logistical intermediaries for criminal and extremist networks. Crucially, the study finds that radicalisation in Sabah is rarely ideological. Instead, it is predominantly instrumental rooted in economic deprivation, legal invisibility, and fractured identity rather than doctrinal commitment. Extremism thus emerges not as an external import, but as a by-product of structural exclusion.

The analysis also highlights the transnational dimensions of Sabah's insecurity. Persistent instability and uneven peace dividends in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao continue to generate outward migration pressures that intersect directly with Sabah's governance and citizenship gaps. In this context, unilateral enforcement measures are insufficient. Regional and subregional cooperation is indispensable. While ASEAN's consensus-based architecture remains constrained in addressing sensitive issues of migration and internal security, more flexible minilateral arrangements such as the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) offer pragmatic platforms to address shared challenges of irregular migration, labour mobility, and underdevelopment across the tri-border region. However, development led solutions must be accompanied by safeguards to address security risks and prevent the deepening of socio-economic inequalities that may inadvertently intensify migration and insecurity.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. This study relies exclusively on secondary data and does not incorporate interviews or surveys with affected communities, which may constrain empirical depth. Moreover, while the paper argues for more inclusive documentation and citizenship pathways, it recognises that naturalisation and regularisation policies carry political and social risks. In sum, Sabah's experience illustrates how historical legacies, governance failures, and identity politics converge to produce chronic insecurity. Although Malaysia's counter-terrorism architecture through ESSCOM, ESSZONE, and trilateral patrols has strengthened enforcement capacity, the persistence of statelessness and socio-economic exclusion continues to undermine long-term stability. Addressing violent extremism in Sabah, therefore, requires a multidimensional strategy that integrates embedding inclusive development within security planning are not peripheral considerations but essential foundations for durable peace and stability in northern Borneo.

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