UNTANGLING SMALL ARMS AND TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME: EVIDENCE FROM ABU SAYYAF IN THE PHILIPPINES 2014–2017

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ABSTRACT
This article examines Abu Sayyaf's small arms and light weapons (SALW)-related activities in the southern Philippines during 2014–2017 through Phil Williams and Roy Godson's Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) anticipation model. Existing studies have widely discussed Abu Sayyaf in relation to terrorism, maritime violence, kidnapping for ransom, and jihadist transformation, yet less attention has been given to analyzing the group through an integrated TOC framework. This study asks how the TOC anticipation model can explain Abu Sayyaf's persistence during this period. Using a qualitative single case study design, the article relies on desk review and thematic analysis of academic works, policy reports, legal documents, and security studies. The findings show that Abu Sayyaf's activities were sustained by the interaction of three

dimensions. First, the economic model explains the role of illicit arms access, ransom-based financing, and maritime opportunity. Second, the political model highlights weak state capacity, porous borders, regulatory weakness, and local patronage networks. Third, the risk management model shows how Abu Sayyaf adapted through mobility, dispersal, and decentralized networks. The article concludes that Abu Sayyaf is best understood as a transnational organized criminal actor sustained by enabling conditions and adaptive operational practices.
Keywords: Abu Sayyaf; small arms and light weapons; transnational organized crime; Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The security landscape of the twenty-first century has increasingly shifted from conventional interstate military threats toward non-traditional threats involving non-state actors, illicit networks, and cross-border forms of violence (Adewoyin & David, 2019). Within this changing environment, the illicit circulation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has become a major security concern because these weapons are relatively cheap, portable, durable, and easy to conceal and transport through illegal channels (D. H. Capie, 2002). In Southeast Asia, illicit SALW flows have long been linked to human insecurity and state insecurity, especially where weak law enforcement and porous borders allow weapons to move across jurisdictions and support terrorism, insurgency, piracy, trafficking, and other forms of transnational organized violence (Kramer, 2001; Prayuda, Munir, Admiral, Syafrinaldi, & Suyastri, 2025). The result is a regional security environment in which the circulation of arms in one state can quickly destabilize neighboring states (Edwards & Bradford, 2023).

This issue becomes even more important when placed in the maritime setting of Southeast Asia. The region lies across major sea lanes and contains dense patterns of legal and illegal mobility. Its maritime environment is therefore both strategically valuable and highly vulnerable. Banlaoi's (2005) study of maritime security in Southeast Asia has shown that the region has long faced serious risks from piracy and maritime terrorism, and that the overlap among piracy, terrorism, and transnational crime has made the sea a critical operational space for violent non-state actors (Smith, 2005). In this context, the Sulu-Sulawesi zone is especially important because it connects the southern Philippines to Malaysia and Indonesia through a maritime corridor that is difficult to monitor and frequently used for smuggling, cross-border movement, and armed operations (Dollah, Omar, Nor Ahmad, Jafar, & Dino, 2025; Triwulandari & Antari, 2021).

The Philippines provides a particularly relevant empirical setting for examining this problem. Southern Philippine provinces such as Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi are directly linked to the wider Sulu-Sulawesi maritime space and have long served as sites of conflict, armed mobility, and illicit exchange (Capie, 2005; Edwards & Bradford, 2023). At the same time, the Philippines is not only a conflict setting but also a permissive environment for SALW circulation. Existing studies point to the continued importance of leakage from government arsenals, porous borders, a thriving domestic craft industry, and a lax regulatory regime in sustaining gun ownership and gun violence in the country (Jr et al., 2010; Katagiri, 2019). These conditions make the southern Philippines a setting

where illicit arms circulation can support both local armed actors and wider regional criminal networks (Makarenko, 2005).

Within this broader setting, Abu Sayyaf is a particularly important case. The group is relevant because its activities combine multiple forms of violence, including terrorism, kidnapping for ransom, maritime violence, and cross-border criminal operations (Fellman, 2011; Gerdes, Ringler, & Autin, 2014). This article focuses on the period 2014 to 2017 because it captures a renewed intensification of Abu Sayyaf's organized criminal violence. The period saw rising levels of incidents and casualties associated with the group, a visible increase in kidnapping for ransom in the maritime borderlands, and a later connection to the pro-ISIS landscape that culminated in the 2017 Marawi siege. This makes the period from 2014 to 2017 a useful time frame for examining how illicit SALW circulation contributed to sustaining Abu Sayyaf's coercive capacity and operational continuity.

However, despite the wide body of literature on Abu Sayyaf, most existing studies only examine the group through the lenses of terrorism, insurgency, maritime violence, jihadist transformation, kidnapping for ransom, or the broader crime-terror nexus (Banlaoi, 2005; Dollah et al., 2025; Gerdes et al., 2014; Singh & Singh, 2019; Thayer, 2005). Furthermore, some works have analyzed Abu Sayyaf's maritime capabilities, its violent evolution, and its embeddedness in local political and military networks (Ugarte, 2010; Ugarte & Turner, 2011). Yet less attention has been given to analyzing Abu Sayyaf through the Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) anticipation model developed by Phil Williams and Roy Godson. As a result, there remains limited scholarship that systematically connects the enabling conditions of Abu Sayyaf's activities with the operational logic that allowed those activities to persist in one integrated analytical framework.

Against that background, this article asks: How can Phil Williams and Roy Godson's TOC anticipation model be used to analyze Abu Sayyaf's SALW-related activities in the Philippines during 2014 to 2017? This article argues that Abu Sayyaf's operations during this period can be best understood as a form of transnational organized crime sustained through several TOC models at once. Its activities were enabled by an economic model rooted in illicit arms markets, ransom-based financing, and maritime opportunity. They were also enabled by a political model rooted in weak state capacity, porous borders, regulatory weakness, and local patronage networks. At the operational level, Abu Sayyaf's persistence reflected a risk management model through which the group adapted to state pressure by relying on mobility, dispersal, decentralized networks, and flexible use of maritime and territorial space. To develop this argument, the article first explains the Williams and Godson framework and how it is operationalized in the study. It then presents the research method, followed by the results and discussion on Abu Sayyaf's activities from 2014 to 2017. The final section concludes by answering the research question, outlining the article's implications, and acknowledging its limitations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The TOC Anticipation Framework

This article uses the framework developed by Phil Williams and Roy Godson (2002) to analyze transnational organized crime as both a product of enabling conditions

and a set of adaptive operational practices. The framework is useful because it does not treat organized crime as an isolated criminal event. Instead, it asks two connected questions: under what conditions does organized crime emerge, and how does it continue operating under pressure (Anzoom, Nagi, & Vogiatzis, 2021). This distinction is particularly relevant for Abu Sayyaf, whose activities during 2014 to 2017 combined illicit arms circulation, kidnapping for ransom, maritime violence, and cross-border mobility.

Williams and Godson distinguish between models of conditions and models of operation (see Figure 1). Models of conditions explain the broader environment that allows organized crime to grow, including political and economic circumstances that create opportunities and incentives. Models of operation explain how criminal actors survive, adapt and protect their activities once they are already active. This article uses two models from the first category, namely the economic model and the political model, and one model from the second category, namely the risk management model.

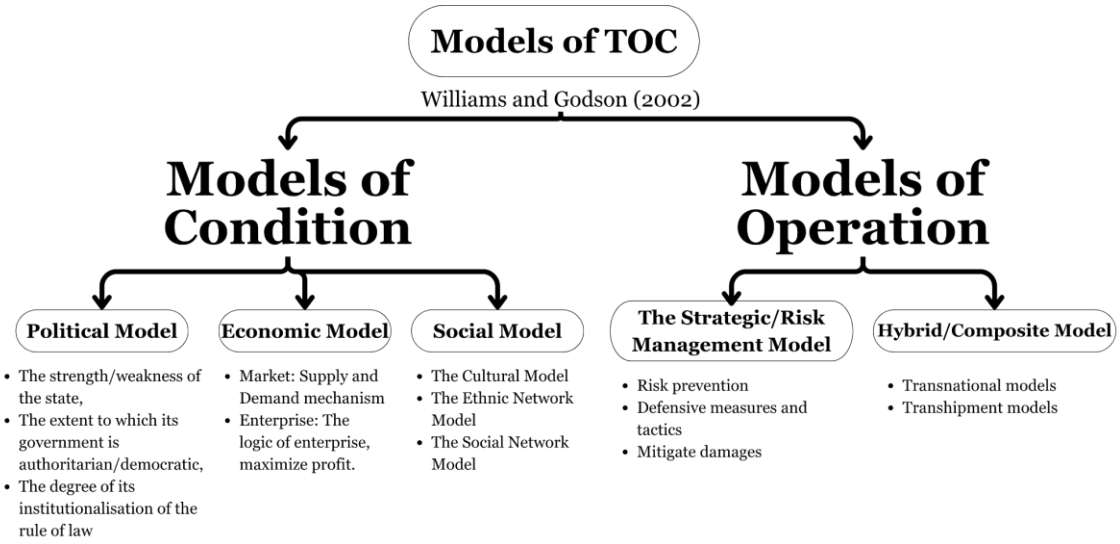

Figure 1. William and Godson's Framework of Models of TOC
Source: Author's Creation

The economic model views organized crime through the logic of illicit markets and enterprise. It assumes that organized crime develops where there is demand for illegal goods or services, a supply capable of meeting that demand, and actors willing to exploit this relationship for profit (Campbell, 2013). In this sense, criminal organizations operate like illicit enterprises that adapt to opportunity, expand revenue sources, and protect profitable activities (Levi & Maguire, 2004). In the case of Abu Sayyaf, the economic model helps explain how the group's activities from 2014 to 2017 were sustained by illicit access to arms, ransom-based financing, and maritime opportunities. SALW circulation was closely tied to the group's need to maintain coercive capacity, while kidnapping for ransom functioned as a key source of income. The economic model, therefore, helps show that Abu Sayyaf's violence was supported by a broader illicit economy rather than by ideology alone.

Furthermore, the political model emphasizes the role of the state and political institutions. Organized crime tends to flourish where the state has weak territorial control, poor law enforcement capacity, weak regulatory systems, and limited ability to

enforce the rule of law (Idler, 2020). It is also relevant in settings where local patronage, corruption, and informal protection networks reduce the effectiveness of formal authority (Coutinho, Diviák, Bright, & Koskinen, 2020). In this article, the political model is used to explain how Abu Sayyaf benefited from permissive political conditions in the southern Philippines. These conditions included weak state capacity in Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi; porous maritime borders; weak firearms regulation; arms leakage; poor intelligence coordination; and local protection networks. Through this lens, Abu Sayyaf's SALW-related activities are understood as being enabled not only by market opportunity but also by institutional weakness and fragmented authority.

Moreover, the risk management model explains how organized criminal actors survive under pressure. It focuses on strategies of risk prevention, defensive adaptation, and damage mitigation (Lavorgna, 2023). In practice, this means protecting leadership, personnel, networks, routes and key assets so that operations can continue even when enforcement pressure increases (Williams & Godson, 2002). In the Abu Sayyaf case, the risk management model helps explain how the group remained active during 2014 to 2017 despite counterterrorism pressure. Abu Sayyaf reduced risk through maritime mobility, dispersal into smaller units, decentralized networks and tactical flexibility across islands and border spaces. Taken together, these three models provide the analytical basis of this article. The economic model explains illicit incentives, the political model explains permissive conditions, and the risk management model explains adaptive survival. Combined, they offer a more complete explanation of Abu Sayyaf's SALW-related activities than a narrow terrorism lens alone.

Moving on, to translate the TOC anticipation framework into a case-based analytical tool, each selected model will be operationalized through observable dynamics in Abu Sayyaf's SALW-related activities during 2014 to 2017. In this respect, the analysis distinguishes between the conditions that enabled the group's activities and the operational practices that allowed those activities to persist under pressure. Accordingly, the economic and political models are used to identify enabling conditions, while the risk management model is used to explain adaptive operational survival.

Table 1. Operationalization of William and Godson's TOC Model

Model	Operational Focus	Indicators Used in the Study
Political Model	State and institutional weakness in the southern Philippines	Weak territorial control in Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi; porous maritime borders; weak firearms regulation; intelligence fragmentation; local patronage and collusive networks
Economic Model	Demand and supply dynamics in the illicit arms environment	Demand side: kidnapping for ransom, maritime violence, armed confrontation, and the continuing need for SALW as instruments of coercion and organizational survival. Supply side: leakage from state stockpiles, black markets, domestic craft production, and other informal arms channels
Risk Management Model	Adaptive survival under military and law enforcement pressure	Mobility across island and maritime spaces; dispersal into smaller units; decentralized and factionalized organization; tactical flexibility; use of difficult terrain and maritime routes to reduce exposure to state disruption

Source: Author's Creation

Hereby, the political model is operationalized (see Table 1) through indicators related to state and institutional weakness in the southern Philippines. These indicators include weak territorial control in Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, porous maritime borders, weak firearms regulation, intelligence fragmentation, and local patronage or collusive networks that reduced the effectiveness of formal law enforcement. Through these indicators, the article examines how political and institutional conditions created a permissive environment for Abu Sayyaf's SALW-related activities. The economic model, meanwhile, is operationalized through indicators related to both demand and supply in the illicit arms environment. On the demand side, the article examines how kidnapping for ransom, maritime violence, and armed confrontation created a continuing need for SALW as instruments of coercion and organizational survival. On the supply side, it examines the availability of weapons through leakage from state stockpiles, black markets, domestic craft production and other informal channels that made firearms accessible to armed non-state actors.

Next up, the risk management model is operationalized through indicators that capture how Abu Sayyaf adapted to military and law enforcement pressure. These indicators include mobility across island and maritime spaces, dispersal into smaller units, decentralized and factionalized organization, tactical flexibility, and the use of difficult terrain and maritime routes to reduce exposure to state disruption. In this sense, the model is used to analyze how Abu Sayyaf managed risk by protecting its personnel, networks, and operational assets rather than relying on a rigid hierarchical structure.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative single case study design. This approach is appropriate because the article seeks to explain how one specific case, namely Abu Sayyaf's SALW-related activities in the Philippines during 2014 to 2017, can be understood through Phil Williams and Roy Godson's TOC anticipation framework (Yin, 2015, 2018). In this respect, the study is concerned with process, context, and patterned relationships rather than with measurement across a large number of cases. A case study design is also suitable because it is commonly used when research asks explanatory questions about a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world setting and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are closely intertwined.

More specifically, the article treats Abu Sayyaf in the southern Philippines from 2014 to 2017 as a bounded case. The temporal boundary is important because the selected period captures the renewed intensification of the group's organized criminal violence, including kidnapping for ransom, maritime operations, cross-border activity, and its later connection to the Marawi crisis. The case is, therefore, not defined simply as "Abu Sayyaf" in a broad historical sense, but as a specific empirical configuration of SALW circulation, illicit finance, weak governance, and organizational adaptation within a clearly delimited time frame. This bounded design helps maintain analytical focus while still allowing close attention to the wider political, economic, and maritime context in which the case unfolded.

The study relies on desk review as its main data collection strategy (Barbieri et al., 2025). This approach is appropriate because the Abu Sayyaf case is documented

across academic literature, policy reports, security analyses, legal and institutional documents, government statements, and regional or international policy materials that are often dispersed across different repositories rather than concentrated in a single academic database. In line with Barbieri et al. (2025), the desk review was conducted as a structured but iterative process designed to ensure rigor, transparency, and adaptability. The process began by defining the research objective and specifying the thematic focus of the review, which in this study centered on Abu Sayyaf, illicit SALW circulation, kidnapping for ransom, maritime insecurity, state weakness in the southern Philippines, and relevant national, regional, and global responses.

Following this logic, data collection proceeded through several interrelated stages (see Figure 2). The first stage involved an exploratory search to map the documentary landscape of the case and identify key themes, actors, institutions, and source clusters relevant to Abu Sayyaf and SALW-related violence in the Philippines. The second stage involved a more targeted search using recurring keywords across journal articles, books, edited volumes, policy reports, legal and institutional documents, and security studies. The third stage involved review and screening, in which the collected materials were assessed more closely for their relevance to the research question, while additional sources were incorporated through cross-referencing, and less pertinent materials were excluded after closer reading. This process also strengthened source triangulation by combining official and institutional documents with scholarly and analytical sources.

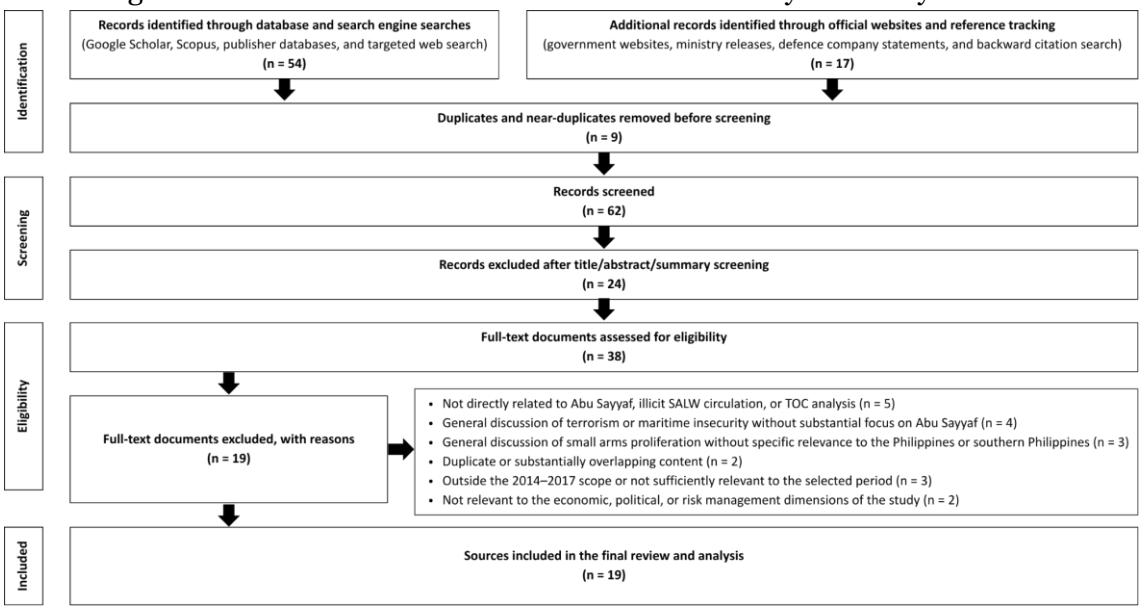

Figure 2. Desk Review Process
Source: Processed by Author

For data analysis, the study uses thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. This method is appropriate because the article seeks to identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning across a body of documentary material rather than test a formal hypothesis through numerical indicators (Ahmed et al., 2025). Thematic analysis is especially useful because it provides a theoretically flexible yet methodologically rigorous way to organize qualitative evidence into meaningful analytical categories. In this article, the analysis is primarily theory-informed, as the Williams and Godson framework guided attention toward politically and analytically

relevant patterns, while remaining open to new emphases emerging from the documents themselves.

In practical terms, the analysis followed Braun and Clarke's recursive six-phase process from Byrne (2021). First, the collected materials were read and reread to build deep familiarity with the dataset. Second, initial codes were generated across the documents with attention to patterns relevant to the research question. Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes. Fourth, these themes were reviewed against the dataset as a whole to assess their coherence and distinction. Fifth, the themes were refined, defined, and named. Finally, the findings were written up as an interpretive account of the case. Coding and theme development were treated as active, interpretive processes in which the researcher played a central role in producing knowledge rather than merely passively discovering themes embedded in the data.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

Abu Sayyaf From the Lens of the TOC Model

The period from 2014 to 2017 marked a renewed escalation in Abu Sayyaf's violence and regional relevance. By 2014, the group had moved beyond its earlier image as a fragmented bandit organization and emerged as the center of pro-Islamic State jihadism in Southeast Asia under Isnilon Hapilon, who was later recognized as the Islamic State's Amir for Southeast Asia (Katagiri, 2019). This shift did not eliminate Abu Sayyaf's criminal character. Instead, it deepened the overlap between ideological violence, organized criminal activity, and cross-border insecurity.

This escalation was especially visible in the maritime borderlands between the southern Philippines and Sabah. Dollah et al. (2025) study on kidnapping for ransom in Sabah shows that Abu Sayyaf remained the main actor behind maritime abductions and that the group's activities became a major non-traditional security concern for Malaysia (see Table 2). It also records four kidnapping incidents in Sabah in 2014, one in 2015, and then a sharp rise to ten cases involving twenty-three victims in 2016 (Dollah et al., 2025). These figures are important because they show that the selected period was not just another phase in Abu Sayyaf's history. It was a period in which the group's activities visibly intensified and acquired stronger cross-border effects.

Table 2. Reported KFR Incidents Attributed to Abu Sayyaf in Sabah Waters, 2016-2020

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
5	27 Sept. 2016	Gaya Island, Semporna	1 Malaysian	Released
6	5 Nov. 2016	Kretam waters, Kinabatangan	1 Indonesian	Released
7	5 Nov. 2016	Kretam waters, Kinabatangan	1 Indonesian	Released
8	18 Nov. 2016	Merabung waters, Lahad Datu	2 Indonesians	Released
9	8 Dec. 2016	Bekapit waters, Lahad Datu	1 Filipino	Released

10	8 Dec. 2016	Pom-Pom Island, Semporna	1 Indonesian	Released
11	11 Sept. 2018	Gaya Island, Semporna	2 Indonesians	Released
12	5 Nov. 2018	Pegasus Reef waters, Kinabatangan	1 Malaysian; 2 Indonesians	2 released; 1 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: Dollah et al. (2025)

The period culminated in the Marawi siege from May to October 2017. Singh and Singh (2019) describe this episode as the most violent moment in Abu Sayyaf's recent trajectory. They note that Marawi lasted for five months, involved a broader coalition of pro-Islamic State fighters, and left more than one thousand people dead. They also argue that Marawi should be understood as the clearest turning point in Abu Sayyaf's transformation into a more explicitly religion-driven and regionally significant violent actor. In empirical terms, therefore, the 2014–2017 period captures Abu Sayyaf at the intersection of organized criminal violence, cross-border maritime activity, and wider jihadist alignment.

Furthermore, viewed through the economic model, Abu Sayyaf operated within an illicit environment in which access to weapons, revenue generation, and maritime opportunity were mutually reinforcing. The Philippines has long been described as a setting with widespread arms availability, including a large stock of loose firearms. One study on armed groups in the Philippines notes that at least 1.2 million firearms may be classified as loose, while the broader small arms environment is sustained by leakage from government arsenals, porous borders, domestic craft production, and weak regulation (Jr et al., 2010). These conditions meant that Abu Sayyaf did not operate in an isolated war zone. It operated inside a broader illicit economy in which weapons could circulate through both formal and informal channels.

Within that environment, Abu Sayyaf had a strong and continuing demand for SALW. Its activities required coercive capacity for kidnapping, armed intimidation, maritime attacks, and direct confrontation with security forces. Katagiri (2019) describes the group as having access to pistols, rifles, grenade launchers, machine guns, RPGs, and mortars, which indicates that SALW were central to maintaining both its operational flexibility and its threat value. In this respect, weapons were not only tools of violence. They were also assets that made Abu Sayyaf's criminal enterprise viable, especially in coercive activities where intimidation and mobility were essential.

The revenue side of this model is equally clear. The Dollah et al. (2025) study shows that kidnapping for ransom became one of the most visible and persistent features of Abu Sayyaf-linked activity in the maritime borderlands. It also argues that the persistence of KFR is explained partly by the lucrative nature of the crime itself. In other words, kidnapping was not only a tactic of terror. It was also a financing mechanism that supported continued operations. This finding aligns closely with the economic model, because it shows how violence could be converted into revenue and then reproduced as organizational capacity.

Maritime space further strengthened this illicit economy. Banlaoi (2005) shows that Abu Sayyaf developed significant maritime capability, including experience in day and night maritime operations and the use of high-speed watercraft and communications equipment. He also notes that the group became increasingly maritime in orientation, partly to evade land-based military responses. This is important because maritime space served Abu Sayyaf at once as an operational route, a logistical corridor, and an economic arena. In the 2014–2017 period, the sea was therefore not simply a setting in which crime occurred. It was part of the economic infrastructure that allowed Abu Sayyaf to connect arms access, cross-border mobility, and ransom extraction.

Seen through the political model, Abu Sayyaf benefited from a permissive political and institutional environment in the southern Philippines. The broader literature on armed groups in the Philippines repeatedly emphasizes that small arms availability is sustained by leakage from government arsenals, porous borders, domestic craft production, and a lax regulatory regime (Singh & Singh, 2019; Ugarte, 2010; Ugarte & Turner, 2011). These are not simply background conditions. They reflect weak state capacity and incomplete control over violence, especially in peripheral areas such as Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. In this context, Abu Sayyaf's SALW-related activities were enabled by an institutional setting in which weapons control remained fragmented and uneven.

The maritime borderlands further illustrate this weakness. Dollah et al.'s (2025) study shows that cross-border crime flourished where the central government was weak, law enforcement was ineffective, and maritime borders remained poorly regulated. It also notes that prior to the tightening of border controls in 2013, Sabah experienced a large influx of irregular cross-border movement that facilitated coordination between KFR actors and Abu Sayyaf operatives. Even after that, the 2014–2017 period still witnessed repeated kidnappings and continuing cross-border insecurity. This suggests that porous maritime borders were not incidental to Abu Sayyaf's activities. They were part of the political environment that made those activities sustainable.

A further element of the political model is the weakness of the rule of law within the Philippine state itself. Banlaoi (2005) reports that Philippine military officials acknowledged a weak intelligence network and complained about a culture of withholding rather than sharing information across intelligence units. He also notes allegations that military and provincial authorities had been coddling Abu Sayyaf. In parallel, studies of the Philippine small arms environment point to leakage from state stockpiles and the weak ability of regulatory agencies to mark, trace, and control firearms effectively (Jr et al., 2010). Taken together, these findings show that Abu Sayyaf operated not only because of external illicit markets, but also because of internal failures in law enforcement, intelligence coordination, and state oversight (Arugay & Keith, 2023).

The political model also helps explain the role of local social and patronage structures. One account in *Primed and Purposeful* notes that communities in some areas benefited from ransom income and, in some cases, helped hide Abu Sayyaf's firearms (Ugarte & Turner, 2011). This does not mean that local support was uniform or ideologically stable. It does suggest, however, that Abu Sayyaf could survive partly because it was embedded in local environments where violence, livelihood, and protection could become intertwined. In this sense, permissive conditions were produced

not only by weak state institutions but also by local relations that reduced the cost of survival for the group.

Through the risk management model, Abu Sayyaf appears as an actor that survived by actively reducing exposure, adapting under pressure, and absorbing losses without organizational collapse. Banlaoi's (2005) analysis is especially useful here. He describes Abu Sayyaf's operations as emphasizing high mobility, guerrilla tactics, dispersal into small groups, and the use of separate negotiating teams in kidnapping-for-ransom operations. He also notes that the group possessed deep knowledge of the maritime domain and developed increasingly maritime methods partly to evade land-based counterterrorism responses. These features show that Abu Sayyaf did not merely endure state pressure. It managed that pressure through tactical and organizational adaptation.

The group's survival was also linked to its decentralized structure. Banlaoi (2005) describes Abu Sayyaf as factionalized, while later interpretations characterize it as a loose and shifting network rather than a rigid unified organization. This mattered because decentralized and semi-autonomous structures made full dismantlement more difficult. When military pressure intensified in one place, parts of the network could disperse, relocate, or continue operating through other nodes. Consequently, the group had thus shown a form of resilience that is based less on organizational coherence than on flexibility and fragmentation.

This logic became especially clear in the transition from maritime kidnapping operations to the wider armed confrontation in Marawi. Singh and Singh (2019) show that the 2017 siege emerged from changing alignments since 2014 and from the growing consolidation of pro-Islamic State forces under Hapilon. They also argue that the siege exposed major failures of Philippine intelligence and security agencies, which underestimated both the preparation and the staying power of the group and its affiliates. From a risk management perspective, this indicates that Abu Sayyaf was capable of transforming pressure into opportunity. Rather than simply retreating under threat, it could shift scale and form, moving from small-group maritime violence into a broader coalition-based urban confrontation when conditions allowed.

The results show that Abu Sayyaf's SALW-related activities in 2014–2017 can be explained through the interaction of three dimensions. The economic model captures the group's reliance on illicit arms access, ransom finance, and maritime opportunity. The political model explains how weak governance, porous borders, intelligence failures, arms leakage, and local protection structures created permissive conditions for violence. The risk management model explains how Abu Sayyaf remained resilient through mobility, dispersal, decentralization, and strategic adaptation under pressure. Taken together, these findings support the view that Abu Sayyaf should be understood not only as a terrorist organization, but also as a transnational organized criminal actor whose violence was enabled by conditions and sustained by adaptive operational practices.

What the Abu Sayyaf Tells Us About TOC

To start the discussion, the authors wanted to note that the findings suggest that Abu Sayyaf should not be read only through a narrow terrorism lens. From 2014 to 2017, the group combined ideological violence with kidnapping for ransom, illicit arms access, maritime mobility, and cross-border criminal activity (Ugarte & Turner, 2011; Yusoph &

Katayanagi, 2025). In the article's analytical terms, these activities were sustained through the interaction of illicit markets, permissive political conditions and adaptive organizational practices. This pattern supports a broader reading of Abu Sayyaf as a form of transnational organized crime that also deploys terrorism rather than as an exclusively ideological terrorist organization.

More importantly, the empirical findings show that the three selected models reinforce one another. The economic model explains how Abu Sayyaf maintained coercive capacity through access to SALW, ransom-based financing and maritime opportunity. The political model explains how weak territorial control, porous borders, firearms leakage and fragmented institutions created a permissive environment for those activities. The risk management model explains how the group then adapted to military and law enforcement pressure through mobility, dispersal and decentralized organization. Therefore, when read together, these findings show that Abu Sayyaf's persistence during 2014 to 2017 rested on the interaction between material resources, weak governance, and organizational flexibility.

This point becomes clearer when the empirical record is viewed as a whole. Abu Sayyaf's maritime activity and kidnapping operations were closely tied to economic gain, while its SALW access depended on broader illicit circulation and institutional leakage (Nsia-Pepra & Pearson, 2009). At the same time, the group operated across a maritime space already marked by piracy, smuggling, and weak territorial oversight. This resonates with Banlaoi's (2005) analysis that also situates Abu Sayyaf within a broader maritime security environment in which piracy and terrorism overlap and maritime routes create operational opportunities for armed non-state actors. In this context, terrorism, organized crime, illicit arms circulation and maritime insecurity should be understood as overlapping dynamics rather than separate categories.

Seen in a longer historical perspective, Abu Sayyaf's 2014 to 2017 escalation did not emerge in an institutional vacuum. The southern Philippines has long been shaped by overlapping insurgency, weak state penetration, illicit maritime exchange and localized protection structures (Ugarte, 2010; Ugarte & Turner, 2011). This historical setting matters because Abu Sayyaf's violence during the period under study reflected both continuity and transformation. It continued older patterns of smuggling, informal protection and cross-border armed mobility in the Sulu-Sulawesi corridor, while also transforming them through kidnapping for ransom, decentralized adaptation, and pro-ISIS alignment. Accordingly, Abu Sayyaf should be understood as part of a wider political economy of violence in which organized crime, insurgency and maritime insecurity repeatedly intersect.

A further implication follows from the debate over what "Abu Sayyaf" actually represents. Ugarte and Turner (2011) argue that the label often simplifies a more fluid reality and can obscure the dark networks and temporary coalitions behind violence in the southern Philippines. This means that analysis weakens when the group is treated as a fixed, coherent organization in every instance. For this article, that insight matters because the TOC framework shifts attention from the label itself toward the enabling conditions and operating logic that sustain violence over time.

The findings here related to the Abu Sayyaf case also carry wider implications for the management of transnational organized crime. Firstly, it suggests that coercive disruption on its own is unlikely to produce durable results. Military pressure can kill

leaders, reduce territorial concentration and interrupt operations. The evidence reviewed in this article, however, shows that Abu Sayyaf repeatedly adapted to such pressure by dispersing, employing maritime maneuver, maintaining decentralized networks and forming flexible alliances (Gerdes et al., 2014). The group's resilience, therefore, reflects more than tactical endurance in an operating environment in which disruption at one point does not necessarily destroy the wider system that supports armed violence.

Next up, the case indicates that short-term suppression strategies remain limited when illicit incentives persist. Abu Sayyaf could continue to draw on ransom financing, maritime opportunities and access to SALW through mixed channels, including black markets, local intermediaries, and leakage from state-linked sources (Gerdes et al., 2014). When these channels remain available, enforcement can raise costs without eliminating the basis of reproduction. This is why the group could survive even amid sustained counterterrorism operations. From a TOC perspective, then, suppression strategies may be necessary, but they are insufficient when the economic and political structures that support criminal violence continue to function.

The case further implies that TOC management should pay greater attention to the relationship between local and regional space. Abu Sayyaf's persistence was not confined to remote strongholds in Basilan or Sulu. It depended on a broader maritime environment that linked the southern Philippines to Sabah and nearby border zones (Dollah et al., 2025). This matters because management strategies that focus solely on internal territorial clearance overlook the fact that cross-border routes, coastal mobility and informal maritime exchange are part of the group's broader opportunity structure. Accordingly, a meaningful TOC response requires coordination across levels of governance and across territorial jurisdictions.

For that reason, a more effective response requires sustained efforts to reduce the conditions that enable Abu Sayyaf's activities in the first place. On the economic side, the findings show the importance of restricting illicit access to arms and disrupting the financial logic of kidnapping for ransom. As long as SALW remain available through leakage, informal markets and cross-border circulation, and as long as ransom extraction continues to yield substantial returns, Abu Sayyaf and similar actors will retain coercive and organizational capacity. Economic disruption, therefore, should focus on constraining both the material supply of weapons and the revenue streams that turn violence into a durable enterprise.

On the political side, the findings point to the need to reduce permissive institutional conditions. Weak territorial control, porous maritime borders, regulatory gaps, weak intelligence coordination, and collusive local structures all lowered Abu Sayyaf's cost of survival (Arugay & Keith, 2023; Banlaoi, 2005; Jr et al., 2010). The group benefited from operating in a setting where authority was uneven, arms governance was fragile, and formal institutions did not fully control the means of violence. Under these conditions, organized violence can persist even when armed actors suffer repeated tactical setbacks. A more durable response, therefore, depends on improving rule enforcement, strengthening control over state stockpiles, narrowing regulatory loopholes, and reducing the protection networks that allow armed groups to remain embedded in local political space.

Therefore, at the tip of this discussion, we wanted to recall the core claim that Abu Sayyaf's persistence from 2014 to 2017 cannot be understood through coercion-centered analysis alone. Operational disruption matters, and in some contexts it is unavoidable. However, its effects will remain temporary as long as the economic and political conditions identified by the TOC anticipation framework continue to sustain illicit arms access, criminal financing and adaptive violent networks. In that sense, the Abu Sayyaf case suggests that effective TOC management requires a longer-term strategy aimed at reducing the conditions that produce resilience, not only the visible operations that emerge from them.

CONCLUSION

This article asked how Phil Williams and Roy Godson's TOC anticipation model can be used to analyze Abu Sayyaf's SALW-related activities in the Philippines during 2014 to 2017. The findings show that the framework is useful because it captures both the enabling conditions and the adaptive operational logic behind Abu Sayyaf's persistence during this period. Rather than treating the group only as a terrorist actor, the analysis shows that its activities can be better understood through the interaction of an economic model, a political model, and a risk management model. In this sense, Abu Sayyaf's resilience was produced by the mutually reinforcing relationship between illicit resources, permissive political conditions and adaptive organizational practices.

From the perspective of the economic model, Abu Sayyaf operated within an illicit environment in which SALW access, kidnapping for ransom and maritime opportunity were closely linked. Weapons were essential for maintaining coercive capacity, while ransom extraction generated income that helped sustain the group's operations. In this sense, the flow of SALW can be understood as a part of a wider illicit economy that connected armed coercion, mobility and organizational continuity. From the perspective of the political model, Abu Sayyaf benefited from permissive institutional and territorial conditions in the southern Philippines. Weak state capacity, porous maritime borders, weak firearms regulation, arms leakage, poor intelligence coordination and local patronage structures all reduced the cost of survival for the group. Hence, it suggests that Abu Sayyaf's SALW-related activities were enabled by market opportunity and also by weaknesses in governance and rule enforcement.

From the perspective of the risk management model, Abu Sayyaf remained resilient because it managed risk through dispersal, mobility, decentralized networks and tactical flexibility. These strategies allowed the group to reduce exposure, absorb losses and continue operating despite military pressure. The shift from repeated maritime kidnapping operations to wider confrontation in Marawi in 2017 further showed that Abu Sayyaf could alter the scale and form of its violence in response to changing pressures and opportunities. Taken together, it shows that Abu Sayyaf's persistence during 2014 to 2017 is best understood through the interaction of material capacity, weak governance and organizational adaptation.

These findings have three implications. Conceptually, they show the value of applying a TOC anticipation framework to a case often treated mainly through a terrorism lens. Empirically, they show that SALW circulation should be analyzed as part of a broader system linking arms access, criminal finance, maritime mobility, institutional weakness and adaptive organizational survival. Practically, they suggest

that coercive disruption alone is not enough, because more durable responses require reducing the economic and political conditions that sustain organized violence over time. More broadly, the Abu Sayyaf case also indicates that such violence should be understood within the longer political economy of insecurity in the southern Philippines, where organized crime, insurgency and maritime insecurity have repeatedly intersected. Last but not least, of course, this study has several limitations. It is limited by its focus on a single case, a specific time period, and secondary documentary sources. Therefore, future research can build on this article by doing such a comparison of Abu Sayyaf with other violent non-state actors in Southeast Asia or by examining more closely how TOC frameworks intersect with terrorism, insurgency and maritime security approaches.

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