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Comparative Analysis of Strategic-Shifting in Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf: Exploring Consistent Tactics Across Varied Contexts

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Comparative Analysis of Strategic-Shifting in Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf: Exploring Consistent Tactics Across Varied Contexts.



(The Guardian Nigeria News, “The danger of ISWAP in Nigeria,” July 15, 2022)

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1. Introduction

The 23rd of May 2017 marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Philippines and the Southeast Asian region, as it witnessed the commencement of the battle of Marawi—a conflict that would go on to become the longest-lasting urban battle in Philippine history (Gunaratna 2017; Inquirer.net 2017). Lasting five months, this siege saw the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) reclaiming the city from Abu Sayyaf and other Islamist terrorist groups (The Jackdaw Post 2020). The protracted nature of this battle sent shockwaves throughout the region, particularly considering Abu Sayyaf's traditional activities primarily in the jungles of the southern Philippines (Gunaratna 2017). The question arises: how could Abu Sayyaf, previously recognized for kidnappings and smaller criminal activities, besiege a major city?

Just two months earlier, on the 22nd of March 2017, Boko Haram launched a major operation in Maiduguri, Nigeria, as part of an extended conflict with the Nigerian Army for control of the city (Azama 2017). While the group had previously conducted minor operations in other cities, most of their attacks had occurred in remote areas. The engagement in an urban battle within a densely populated city like Maiduguri was unexpected (Curiel, Walther, and O'Clery 2020). This event, alongside similar incidents, prompts inquiry into the strategic shifts and adaptations of these groups over time.

When considering these cases, it becomes imperative to examine the empirical dynamics of Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram to understand the relevance of the theoretical puzzle. The 2014 Boko Haram abduction of female students and the 2014 Abu Sayyaf abduction of foreigners represent potential instances of strategic shifting or substantial alterations in strategy (Curiel, Walther, and O'Clery 2020; Gunaratna 2017). However, a thorough discussion of the patterns of continuity and change over time is necessary to provide compelling empirical characterization. This entails analyzing key events, tactics shifts, and strategic objectives changes leading up to and following these incidents.

To address these issues, this thesis introduces the concept of 'strategic-shifting' to understand how terrorist groups adapt their approaches to achieve overarching strategic objectives. By examining the historical trajectory of Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram, including tactical changes, formations or cessations of partnerships, and shifts in geographic focus, we aim to unravel the nuanced dimensions of strategic-shifting and its implications on the actions and outcomes of these groups.

The ultimate objective of this thesis is to examine the extent to which both Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf have employed strategic-shifting in their conflicts and how they have implemented it. Investigating this issue is crucial for comprehending how these groups manage to survive and outmanoeuvre official state militaries. Insights into the practices of these groups can contribute to making more informed decisions regarding specific counter-terrorism measures. Strategic-shifting, defined as the capability of armed groups to adapt their approaches to achieve overarching strategic objectives, emphasizing proactive and deliberate adjustments of tactics and strategies irrespective of external stimuli, encompasses both proactive and reactive adjustments. It involves intentional changes made by the groups, as well as reactive or ad hoc responses to evolving circumstances (Ashour 2021; Engelhardt 1992; Kilcullen 2010; Tse-Tung 2012). Understanding the nuanced nature of strategic-shifting is essential for developing effective counter-terrorism strategies that account for extremist organizations' dynamic and adaptive behavior.

In crafting the structure of this thesis, this introductory chapter has aimed to delineate the purpose and significance of this research. The subsequent chapters will delve deeper into the literature review, methodology, case studies, empirical analysis, and conclusion, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research question posed in this thesis: To what extent did Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram in their violent campaigns give witness to strategic-shifting between 2000 and 2020?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Guideline of the Literature Review

This chapter embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the literature pertinent to strategic-shifting dynamics within armed groups. Through a systematic review, this chapter aims to delineate key terms and concepts essential for understanding the subsequent analysis. It offers an overview of existing insights, which can be used to study and appreciate the case studies in this thesis, particularly focusing on the adaptive capacity of belligerents to modify their strategies or tactics to be able to achieve their overarching strategic objectives.

The initial segment of this literature review will provide a rigorous definitional and conceptual delimitation. Central to this exploration is the elucidations of 'strategy', 'tactics', and 'strategic shifting'. Moreover, this section will illuminate the interconnectedness of tactics, alliances, and geography, demonstrating how these three factors exhaustively cover all features of strategic shifting within the thesis's framework. Drawing upon available literature, this segment will make a case for the chosen definitions and their applicability to the study of armed groups.

Following the definitional and conceptual elucidation, the literature review will transition to an examination of the current state of affairs regarding strategic shifting in the academic realm. This segment will encompass a comprehensive survey of existing scholarly works, elucidating the evolution, drivers, and manifestations of strategic shifting dynamics within the context of armed non-state actors. By synthesizing recent scholarship, this review aims to discern prevailing trends, emerging patterns, and unresolved questions on strategic adaptation among these armed groups.

2.2 Conceptual delimitation

2.2.1 Strategies and Tactics

In the context of this thesis, it is vital to establish precise definitions of “strategy” and “tactics” to facilitate a coherent analysis. Within this thesis, strategy denotes the overarching long-term objectives and plans devised by armed non-state actors (ANSAs) to attain their

desired outcomes. It encompasses the comprehensive vision and goals that guide the actions and decisions of these groups over extended periods (Horwath 2006; Parrott 2014; Stone 2011). The chosen definition accentuates the strategic nature of armed groups' actions and emphasizes the deliberate and calculated manner in which they pursue their interests. This definition is specifically selected to align with the thesis's focus on understanding how armed groups strategically adapt and shift their approaches to achieve their overarching strategic objectives (Biddle 2010; Biddle 2021).

Conversely, tactics refer to the specific actions, manoeuvres, and operational methods employed by non-state armed groups to execute their strategic objectives. Tactics represent the immediate, often short-term measures taken by these groups to achieve specific goals within the broader strategic framework (Parrott 2014). The chosen definition underscores the dynamic and adaptive nature of armed groups' behavior, emphasizing their capacity to employ a diverse range of tactics tailored to the context and objectives at hand, including ambushes, bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations. This definition is pertinent to the thesis's examination of how armed groups strategically shift their tactics in response to evolving threats, opportunities, and operational constraints to be able to achieve their overarching strategic objectives.

The selected definitions of strategy and tactics serve as foundational concepts for this thesis, providing a clear conceptual framework for analyzing the strategic-shifting dynamics of non-state armed groups. By elucidating these key concepts, this subsection establishes the groundwork for the subsequent exploration of strategic-shifting among armed groups.

2.2.2 Strategic-shifting

In the scholarly discourse on armed conflict and strategic dynamics, the term "strategic-shifting" encompasses a spectrum of interpretations, reflecting diverse perspectives on its nature and implications (Ashour 2021; Biddle 2021; Hu and Hafsi 2010; Walter 2017). At its core, strategic-shifting denotes the adaptive capacity of belligerents to modify their strategies or tactics in response to changing circumstances. This definition underscores the imperative of strategic flexibility amidst the fluid and unpredictable nature of warfare, as exemplified by scholarly works emphasizing the necessity for military entities to adapt their

approaches to address evolving situations (Biddle 2021; Kilcullen 2009; Kilcullen 2011; Knox 2012; Walter 2017).

Strategic-shifting can be conceptualized as both an explanation and a pragmatic response to resource constraints, wherein belligerents alternate between different modes of fighting based on available resources. This perspective situates strategic-shifting within the realm of survival strategies, highlighting its role in enabling armed groups to navigate challenges posed by limited resources, geopolitical volatility, and shifting political contexts (Arreguín-Toft 2005; Ashour 2021; Engelhardt 1992; Jones 2016). By examining how belligerents adjust their tactics and strategies in response to fluctuating resource availability and evolving political landscapes, scholars gain insights into the adaptive behaviours and operational dynamics of armed actors in conflict environments.

Within this thesis, strategic-shifting is defined as the capability of armed groups to adapt their approaches to achieve overarching strategic objectives, emphasizing proactive and deliberate adjustments of tactics and strategies irrespective of external stimuli, and encompasses both proactive and reactive adjustments. It involves intentional changes made by the groups, as well as reactive or ad hoc responses to evolving circumstances (Ashour 2021; Engelhardt 1992; Kilcullen 2010; Tse-Tung 2012). This definition is particularly suitable for the case studies of Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram, operating within complex conflict environments marked by fluid socio-political dynamics and resource constraints. By framing strategic-shifting as an endeavour to achieve long-term goals such as local regime change or secession, the thesis aims to elucidate the ideological motivations and strategic decision-making processes of these insurgent movements.

Focusing on the alignment of tactical adjustments with strategic objectives offers insights into the operational dynamics of Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram, highlighting their strategic acumen and capacity for adaptation amidst conflict complexities. By emphasizing proactive strategic behavior beyond reactive responses, the thesis aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of armed conflict dynamics and insurgency strategies, ultimately shedding light on the strategic behavior of insurgent groups within complex conflict environments (Arreguín-Toft 2005; Ashour 2021; Jones 2016; Tse-Tung 2012; Zambrano and Zuleta 2017). Last but not least, it is important to notice that all three

approaches to strategic-shifting, that have been mentioned, can overlap with each other in practice (Murray 2011).

2.2.3 Tactics, Alliances, and Geography

In elucidating the conceptual delimitation of strategic-shifting, it is imperative to delve into its constituent elements that encapsulate the adaptive nature of armed groups within conflict dynamics. Tactical changes, the formation or cessation of alliances, and geographic focus, as exhaustively defined by Zenn and Weiss (2021), collectively constitute the essence of strategic-shifting, encapsulating the multifaceted dimensions of armed group adaptation within conflict contexts. These features offer a holistic framework for analyzing the dynamic responses of belligerents to evolving circumstances, encompassing both operational manoeuvres and broader strategic recalibrations (Abubakar 2017; Jones and Johnston 2012; Mason 1996; Murray 2011). In the context of this thesis, which focuses on insurgent movements like Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram, these features are particularly pertinent due to the fluid and multifaceted nature of their operational environments, where tactical agility, alliance dynamics, and geographic considerations profoundly shape strategic behavior (Abubakar 2017; Jones and Johnston 2012).

Tactical changes refer to the adaptive adjustments in armed groups' methods, manoeuvres, and operational practices in response to situational exigencies or strategic imperatives. These adaptations may include shifts in combat tactics, weaponry utilization, or operational methodologies, reflecting the dynamic nature of armed conflict. Within the framework of strategic-shifting, tactical changes signify the operational manifestation of adaptive strategies, enabling armed groups to optimize their effectiveness in achieving strategic objectives amidst changing circumstances (Abubakar 2017).

The formation or cessation of alliances denotes the strategic engagement or disengagement of armed groups with external actors, including other armed factions, state actors, or non-state actors. Alliances serve as strategic force multipliers, facilitating resource sharing, operational collaboration, and ideological alignment, while their cessation may signal shifts in strategic priorities or recalibrations of group objectives (Staniland 2012). In the context of strategic-shifting, alliances represent a dynamic aspect of adaptive behavior,

wherein armed groups leverage external partnerships to enhance their operational capabilities or realign strategic imperatives in response to changing contexts (Manwaring 2012; Staniland 2012; Walter 2017).

Geographic focus pertains to the spatial orientation and operational priorities of armed groups within conflict environments, encompassing considerations of terrain, population centres, logistical routes, and strategic objectives. Shifts in geographic focus may reflect changes in operational priorities, resource dynamics, or strategic imperatives, influencing the spatial distribution of armed group activities and the allocation of resources (Diehl 1991; Lieberman 2012; Raphaeli 2003). Within the framework of strategic-shifting, geographic focus embodies the strategic adaptation of armed groups to exploit operational opportunities, mitigate vulnerabilities, and pursue strategic objectives across diverse terrain and environments (Diehl 1991).

In summary, the inclusion of tactical changes, formation or cessation of alliances, and geographic focus within the conceptual delimitation of strategic-shifting offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the adaptive behavior of armed groups within conflict contexts. These features not only elucidate the operational dynamics of armed conflict but also provide insights into the strategic decision-making processes and adaptive strategies of insurgent movements like Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram within the scope of this thesis.

2.3 Contextualization of Strategic-shifting

2.3.1 Armed Non-State Actors and Strategic-shifting

The study of Armed Non-State Actors (ANSAs) and their military effectiveness has undergone a nuanced evolution, gaining substantial attention in the post-Cold War era (Ashour 2021). The scholarly discourse surrounding ANSAs delves into multifaceted factors influencing their military outcomes, sparking debates on the relative importance of these determinants (Biddle 2007; Biddle 2010; Mello 2017). Notably, armed non-state actors like Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf have become focal points of investigation, stirring disagreements over the primary drivers shaping their military effectiveness.

Within this intricate landscape, the dynamics of armed non-state actors' military effectiveness extend beyond traditional factors. Ideology, external support, local grievances, and organizational structure are recognized as pivotal elements shaping these groups' capabilities and impact (Ashour 2021; Biddle 2010; Mello 2017). Scholars have diligently explored these facets to unravel how groups like Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf navigate challenges and sustain operations. The examination of armed groups' evolving strategies beyond their initial contexts provides valuable insights into the diverse and complex global landscape of non-state armed actors. This comprehensive perspective is paramount for devising effective counterterrorism policies and responses.

This thesis now meticulously focuses on strategic-shifting as a central facet within armed non-state actors' military strategies, acknowledging its significant contribution to effectiveness. Recent scholarly works underscore the importance of strategic-shifting in influencing the military capabilities of these groups. Scholars define strategic-shifting within armed conflicts as the adaptive capacity of these groups, involving transitions between conventional, guerrilla, and terrorist strategies to achieve overarching strategic objectives (Ashour 2021; Biddle 2010; Cragin 2017; Mello 2017).

To offer a profound survey of the current state of affairs in the academic literature on strategic-shifting, it is imperative to explore recent trends, emerging patterns, and unresolved questions concerning strategic adaptation among armed non-state actors. The literature reflects an increasing recognition of the dynamic nature of armed conflicts, necessitating adaptability. Strategic-shifting emerges as a linchpin in responding to evolving situations, enabling armed non-state actors to navigate complex and fluid landscapes effectively.

Methodologically, scholars employ diverse approaches to study strategic-shifting dynamics. Case studies and empirical findings serve as illuminating examples, illustrating instances where armed non-state actors strategically adapt to challenges. This empirical grounding enriches the discourse, offering tangible insights into the practical manifestations of strategic-shifting (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013).

Ongoing debates within the academic community emphasize the need for further research and analysis to understand the intricate interplay between strategic-shifting and other factors influencing military effectiveness. While ideology, external support, local

grievances, and organizational structure remain integral elements in this complex equation, this thesis focuses solely on tactical changes, formation or cessation of alliances, and geographic focus as the primary factors of strategic-shifting. The reason for not treating these factors in this thesis is due to their indirect connection to the three main factors chosen for investigation. While these factors are essential and contribute to armed group behavior, they were not selected for examination within this specific research. This synthesis of recent scholarship aims to discern prevailing trends, emerging patterns, and unresolved questions, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the versatile and resilient nature of armed non-state actors (Ashour 2021; Biddle 2007; Biddle 2010; Cragin 2017; Mello 2017).

2.3.2 Antecedents of military effectiveness

In examining the factors influencing the military effectiveness of ANSAs various factors that contribute to the nuanced nature of ANSAs' capabilities can be recognized. Robust local backing bolsters an ANSA's manpower, a critical component for success in battles (Ashour 2021; DeVore and Stahli 2015; Petrova 2019). This local support becomes especially pronounced in countries marked by corruption, oppression, and brutality, where fighting incumbents becomes a means of opposition. Conversely, in democracies, ANSAs may face challenges due to weak or non-existent incentives for local support. However, this is not always the case since multiple ANSAs have emerged within democracies throughout history due to other present factors (Asal, Deloughery, and Sin 2016).

External support stands as a pivotal and multifaceted factor that significantly shapes the capabilities of ANSAs, exerting influence across various dimensions. Ranging from financial aid to the provision of arms and intelligence, external backing ranks among the most impactful elements driving ANSAs' military effectiveness. Historical instances vividly illustrate how ANSAs, armed with external assistance, have achieved favourable outcomes or negotiated settlements with formidable adversaries, underscoring the critical role played by foreign support in determining the course of conflicts (Asal, Deloughery, and Sin 2016; Ashour 2021; Petrova 2019).

Moreover, the geographical landscape emerges as a crucial determinant in the realm of irregular or revolutionary warfare, wielding a profound impact on the survival and

resistance strategies of ANSAs. The strategic selection of battlegrounds, particularly in challenging terrains, affords ANSAs distinct advantages that contribute to prolonged resistance efforts (Ashour 2021; Martin 2016). Concepts such as the Loss of Strength Gradient and the Loss of Accuracy Gradient underscore the significance of geography in shaping the dynamics of insurgency (Ashour 2021; Jones 2016). The intricate interplay between the physical environment and insurgent tactics reveals how to strategically leverage topographical features to enhance their operational capabilities, highlighting the complex nature of conflicts influenced by both external and geographical factors (Ashour 2021; Martin 2016). This intricate web of considerations underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted influences shaping the military effectiveness of ANSAs.

War tactics are both contentious and crucial factors that significantly influence combat outcomes. In particular, irregular warfare tactics, such as suicide attacks, guerrilla strategies, piracy, and hit-and-run tactics, play a pivotal role in enhancing ANSAs' effectiveness, posing unique challenges to incumbents (Ashour 2021; Feldman and Pape 2010; Jones 2016; Pape 2006). However, the correlation between specific tactics and overall ANSA effectiveness remains a subject of debate among scholars, reflecting the intricate nature of the relationship between tactical choices and strategic success (Ashour 2021; Jones 2016; Lyall and Wilson III 2009).

The connection between war strategies and strategic objectives is equally pivotal in understanding ANSA dynamics. Strategic objectives, ranging from replacing incumbents to secession and anti-occupation efforts, serve as guiding principles for ANSAs in formulating their tactics. Scholars emphasize that the "anti-occupation" objective often garners significant support, driven by its compelling national-liberation narrative. Concurrently, the strategic choices made by ANSAs are influenced by strong incentives for local populations to join their cause. This complex interplay between war strategies and strategic objectives underscores the multifaceted nature of conflicts, where tactical decisions are intricately linked to overarching goals, contributing to the overall effectiveness of ANSAs in their pursuit of varied and complex objectives (Ashour 2021; Jones 2016; Lyall and Wilson III 2009; Martin 2016; Pape 2006).

The evolution of war strategies becomes apparent when examining the utilization of conventional, guerrilla, and terrorism strategies by ANSAs. While the majority of these

groups once adhered to a single strategy, a notable shift is observed, with strong ANSAs adeptly combining conventional, guerrilla, and terrorism strategies on different fronts against diverse adversaries. This strategic amalgamation reflects a dynamic response to the complexities of contemporary conflicts. Concurrently, smaller ANSAs strategically oppose their adversaries or flexibly shift strategies, not only to compensate for resource limitations but also to adapt to changing circumstances, showcasing the adaptability inherent in their operational approaches (Ashour 2021; Biddle 2007; Biddle 2010).

The focal point of this discussion is on strategic-shifting, denoting the fluid transition between conventional, guerrilla, and terrorism strategies based on resource availability and operational considerations. This adaptive approach is particularly effective when ANSAs are engaged on multiple fronts, allowing for the tailoring of strategies in various operational areas. The significance of strategic-shifting lies in its capacity to integrate various factors influencing ANSAs' military effectiveness, including the dynamic nature of war tactics, the correlation between strategies and objectives, and the nuanced utilization of resources (Biddle 2010; Mello 2017).

Strategic-shifting, therefore, emerges as a critical and comprehensive dimension within the broader context of ANSAs' war strategies, playing a pivotal role in their military effectiveness. By acknowledging the interplay between conventional, guerrilla, and terrorism strategies and the strategic choices driven by the major strategic objectives, this adaptive phenomenon encapsulates the evolving nature of conflicts.

2.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review systematically explores strategic shifting within ANSAs. Clear definitions of "strategy" and "tactics" provide a foundational understanding, while the contextualization within the broader landscape identifies key antecedents influencing ANSAs' military effectiveness, such as ideology, external support, local grievances, organizational structure, and geographical considerations.

The review highlights the dynamic evolution of war strategies, with ANSAs strategically combining conventional, guerrilla, and terrorism tactics on various fronts. This

adaptive approach reflects the groups' resilience in addressing contemporary challenges, showcasing their operational flexibility.

Central to the discussion is the concept of strategic-shifting, defined as armed groups' adaptive capacity to adjust tactics and strategies for overarching strategic objectives, including conventional, guerrilla, and terrorism strategies. The inclusion of tactical changes, formation or cessation of alliances, and geographic focus provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of adaptive behavior within conflict contexts. The subsequent sections of the thesis will delve into case studies and empirical findings, aiming to contribute further insights into armed conflict dynamics and insurgency strategies, ultimately fostering a nuanced understanding of strategic-shifting and its implications for ANSAs.

3. Methodology

In the opening section of this chapter, a comprehensive exploration of the research aim and purpose driving this thesis will be provided. Subsequently, the research design and methodology chosen for this study will be presented. After that, the operationalization of this thesis will be discussed. Delving further, an elucidation of the strategies employed in the collection of information essential to the topics under consideration in this thesis will be given. Concluding this examination, the limitations encountered during the research process will be conscientiously addressed, offering insights into the challenges faced in the pursuit of this endeavour.

3.1 Research Aim and Purpose

Boko Haram, initially recognized primarily within Nigeria, catapulted into international prominence in April 2014 following the high-profile abduction of 276 young female students in northern Nigeria (Maiangwa and Agbibo 2014). Concurrently, Abu Sayyaf, a relatively obscure terrorist group from the Philippines, gained global attention the same month by kidnapping two German tourists and securing a substantial ransom (East 2018). In subsequent years, both groups escalated their activities, engaging in larger and more violent attacks with significantly increased casualties. These deliberate actions were not arbitrary; each attack was driven by specific goals and strategic intentions. Consequently, this thesis seeks to investigate the extent to which both groups possess the capacity to adapt their approaches to achieve strategic objectives.

The research aims to provide insight into whether two distinct Islamist terrorist groups, originating from vastly different geographic regions and possessing disparate capacities, share a common capability in altering their combat strategies to attain ultimate objectives. By delving into this inquiry, the study contributes to the existing literature by elucidating the nuanced similarities in strategic adaptability between seemingly disparate extremist groups.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Rationale for Case Selection

The decision to investigate Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram as case studies is driven by strategic considerations aimed at enriching the research's depth and relevance. The selection of these two armed non-state actors is deliberate, primarily based on their distinct geographical locations and the ensuing comparative dimension it introduces. Abu Sayyaf operates in the Philippines, while Boko Haram is active in Nigeria, offering an opportunity to explore strategic-shifting in different contexts.

Additionally, both groups gained international attention through high-profile incidents such as the abduction of students by Boko Haram and the kidnapping of German tourists by Abu Sayyaf. These incidents serve as crucial moments for studying strategic-shifting, marking pivotal developments in each group's tactics and objectives. Despite operating in diverse regions, both Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram have been implicated in acts of strategic-shifting, involving changes in tactics, alliances, and geographic focus. This targeted focus allows the research to uncover potential commonalities in adaptive strategies.

The comparative analysis of these two case studies provides a nuanced understanding of strategic-shifting, contributing to a broader perspective on non-state armed groups' adaptive strategies. By avoiding the limitations of a single-case study, this approach enhances the generalizability of findings and strengthens the research's capacity to offer valuable insights into the broader literature on non-state armed groups and their strategic adaptations (Gustafsson 2017).

3.2.2 Design

In the research design of this thesis, a two-case study approach is employed, specifically adopting a comparative case study design. Comparative case study design involves the examination of two or more case studies to investigate the same phenomenon, in this case, strategic-shifting (Alqahtani and Qu 2019; Gustafsson 2017).

The choice of a two-case study design allows for a nuanced comparison, enabling the drawing of more robust conclusions about the phenomenon under investigation. This

approach contrasts with a single-case study, as it provides a broader perspective and enhances the generalizability of findings (Gustafsson 2017). Through this design, the intention is not only to contribute to the understanding of strategic-shifting within these specific groups but also to add valuable insights to the broader literature on terrorist organizations and their adaptive strategies.

3.3 Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this thesis involves qualitative inquiry through the lens of comparative case studies. Specifically, methods such as causality analysis, process tracing, and historical examination will be utilized. This research approach entails a comprehensive analysis of diverse case material to uncover similarities, differences, and specific patterns both within and between them. The qualitative nature of this methodology allows for an exploration of a specific phenomenon, namely the strategic-shifting employed by Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf between 2000 and 2020, and an examination of its presence across multiple case studies (Do Amaral 2022).

By employing causality analysis, the aim is to discern the causal relationships underlying strategic shifts within each case (Warner 2017). Process tracing will be instrumental in unraveling the intricate processes involved in these shifts, providing a detailed understanding of how and why changes occurred (Collier 2011). Additionally, a historical analysis will offer a temporal perspective, enabling the situating of strategic-shifting within the broader historical context of each group (Blakeslee, Breuer, Cole, and Palmer 2022).

The key advantage of this research methodology lies in its capacity to generate generalizations based on the analysis of several case studies instead of focusing on solely a single case study. This qualitative research design aligns seamlessly with the exploratory nature of the inquiry into the adaptive strategies of Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf (Do Amaral 2022).

3.4 Operationalization

3.4.1 Implementations of Research Methodology

Regarding the implementation of the research methodology within this thesis, a more detailed explanation is warranted. The focus, as previously mentioned, spans the period between 2000 and 2020, as this is when the violent campaigns of both case studies began, and when both rose to the forefront of global attention. Having already provided a brief overview of the initial phases in the history of both case studies, the analysis will extend to encompass subsequent phases. During this analysis, an examination of how both groups conducted their operations throughout these different phases will be provided. Through a comparative examination of these phases, the aim is to test the theoretical presumptions as found in the literature review regarding strategic-shifting. The thesis aims to test how and when the strategic shifts occurred in the campaigns of these two ANSAs, based on the criteria which will be outlined below.

To operationalize this concept, specific criteria for identifying and measuring instances of strategic-shifting will be established. This involves a meticulous examination of shifts in tactics, alliances, and geographic focus. By employing a systematic approach to these factors, the aim is to discover patterns and changes that align with the definition of strategic-shifting. It is imperative to note that the operationalization will be guided by a set of predefined indicators, allowing for a precise and consistent evaluation of strategic adaptations within each group.

Upon identifying instances where strategic-shifting is deemed applicable, the subsequent step in the analysis will be a detailed investigation into how this phenomenon became visible in the practices of both groups. This refined approach seeks to enhance the precision and rigor of our examination, ensuring that conclusions can be drawn regarding strategic-shifting which are based on clear, measurable, and replicable criteria.

3.4.2 Indicators for Strategic-Shifting

Defining indicators for strategic-shifting involves specifying measurable elements that illuminate changes in tactics, alliances, and geographic focus within the contexts of Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf between 2000 and 2020.

For tactical changes, a thorough examination will be conducted to discern shifts in *modus operandi*. This includes evaluating the frequency and nature of alterations in attack methods and operational tactics employed by both groups during various phases of their existence (Clancy and Crossett 2007).

The formation or cessation of partnerships will be assessed through an analysis of alliances or hostilities with other groups or entities. The focus is on identifying new affiliations formed or breakdowns in existing partnerships, shedding light on the strategic alliances formed by Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf (Schram 2019). Regarding geographical focus, the study will scrutinize changes in areas of operation or territorial control. This examination aims to identify shifts in geographic priorities, such as transitions from rural to urban areas or alterations in targeted regions, providing insights into the evolving strategic considerations of both groups (Lohman and Flint 2010). Collectively, these indicators aim to offer a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of strategic-shifting dynamics within the studied terrorist groups.

3.5 Data Collection and Limitations

All data and information for this thesis were gathered from secondary sources, encompassing academic journals, book chapters, and academic websites from various institutions.

Additionally, non-academic sources, including news outlets such as Al Jazeera, the BBC, and the Guardian, were consulted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Despite the wealth of both academic and non-academic sources at our disposal, our data collection process revealed a significant research limitation. The reliance solely on secondary sources highlights the unavailability of reliable primary sources, particularly those owned by the belligerents under discussion. Accessibility issues further compounded this

limitation, as many primary sources were not openly accessible, hindering our ability to delve into firsthand accounts.

Moreover, a considerable challenge arose due to the prevalence of sources written in local languages without accessible translations. This language barrier significantly restricted the pool of reliable sources available for our analysis. Lastly, it is essential to acknowledge the dynamic nature of our thesis subject. The ongoing development of the topic implies that any conclusions drawn are part of an evolving discourse. The evolving nature of the subject underscores the need for a cautious interpretation of findings, recognizing the ongoing debate and potential changes in the understanding of the phenomena discussed.

4. Case Studies

In this chapter, we delve into the development of Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf from 2000 to 2020, focusing on three key aspects: tactical changes, partnership dynamics, and shifts in geographical focus. Beginning with brief background information on both groups, we explore their origins and early operations. The chapter aims to provide a clear understanding of their initial modus operandi, setting the stage for a detailed analysis of how tactical shifts, partnership dynamics, and geographical changes have influenced their trajectories over the specified period. This exploration contributes valuable insights to the broader discussion on counterterrorism strategies.

4.1 Background History of Boko Haram

Boko Haram, initially established as Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, emerged in 2002 within the complex socio-political landscape of Borno, Nigeria (Iyekekpolo 2016; Matfess 2017). This northeastern state, grappling with multifaceted challenges, provided fertile ground for the group's inception. Economically, Borno faced widespread poverty and high unemployment rates, exacerbated by historical neglect from the government. The region, primarily agrarian with a predominantly impoverished farming population, lacked significant government investment or attention. Decades of marginalization fuelled deep-seated grievances among the populace, contributing to a pervasive sense of discontent (Johnson 2017; Lacey 2012; Lawal, Imam, Bukar, and Shettima 2017; Matfess 2017; Mbah, Nwangwu, and Edeh 2017).

Moreover, Borno's demographic composition, with a Muslim-majority population primarily of Kanuri ethnicity but also comprising various minority groups, added to the region's complexities. Religious and ethnic tensions, historically simmering beneath the surface, occasionally erupted into conflicts, particularly as different groups vied for resources and accused each other of receiving preferential treatment from the government. Over time, religious identities began to overshadow ethnic affiliations, further polarizing the region (Agbibo and Maiangwa 2013; Onah 2014; Pieri and Zenn 2017).

Governance failures exacerbated the situation in Borno, as in much of Nigeria during the early 2000s. Corruption, mismanagement, and a perceived bias towards certain regions left neglected states like Borno struggling for basic services and representation. Local crises often went unresolved, fostering widespread disillusionment with the government (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Ibrahim and Mukhtar 2017; Oviasogie 2013). This discontent created an environment ripe for the emergence of extremist groups, exploiting local grievances to recruit followers and challenge the status quo (Issah, Olatunji, and Babatunde 2015; Tonwe and Eke 2013).

Boko Haram's origins are intertwined with the socio-political dynamics of Borno. While scholarly debate persists regarding its founding figure, Mohammed Yusuf, Abubakar Lawan, and Mohammed Ali all played significant roles in the group's formation (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Comoli 2015; Pech and Slade 2006). Initially conceived as a sect opposed to the secular government, Boko Haram underwent ideological shifts under Lawan's temporary leadership, aligning itself against the Nigerian state. Mohammed Ali's Islamic community, merging with Yusuf's organization, provided a crucial foundation for Boko Haram's growth (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Comoli 2015; Loimeier 2012; Pech and Slade 2006; Walker 2016).

During its formative years, Boko Haram adopted a non-violent approach, focusing on building local support and establishing Shariah governance in Maiduguri (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Kafa and Habib 2018; Oftedal 2013). Connections with Salafi groups expanded their influence beyond Nigeria's borders, contributing to their popularity in the wider northern region (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Loimeier 2012). However, clashes with Nigerian forces marked a turning point, leading to Yusuf's arrest and subsequent controversial death. This event signaled a shift towards violence and marked the end of Boko Haram's relatively peaceful phase, setting the stage for its transformation into one of the most notorious terrorist groups globally (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Oftedal 2013; Onuoha 2012; Kafa and Habib 2018).

4.2 Boko Haram's Strategic-Shifting

4.2.1 Tactical Changes

Boko Haram, initially a relatively non-violent group, saw a significant shift just before the arrest of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf. Following Yusuf's death in custody, the group transformed into a violent insurgent force (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Comoli 2015; Loimeier 2012). This marked the inception of specific tactics, with the primary strategic objective evolving to advocate for local regime change throughout Nigeria, extending beyond the northern region. Post-Yusuf's demise, Boko Haram consistently employed unconventional warfare, maintaining this approach throughout its existence (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Mahmood and Ani 2018; Oftedal 2013).

Boko Haram's unconventional tactics evolved. In the early 2000s, guerrilla warfare tactics, including hit-and-run attacks and ambushes, were predominant. However, after Yusuf died in the mid-2000s, there was a notable escalation in the scale and sophistication of their attacks (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Oftedal 2013). Initially, following Yusuf's death, the group continued utilizing guerrilla tactics such as hit-and-run operations and assassinations, focusing on low-profile attacks targeting local security forces.

As Nigerian forces increased engagement in the northern regions from 2009, Boko Haram shifted to high-lethality tactics (HLTs), including suicide bombings and terroristic attacks (Azama 2017; Oftedal 2013; Pricopi 2016). Starting in 2009, the group focused on using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), targeting Nigerian forces, civilians cooperating with them, Christians, and foreign companies involved in government projects (Adeakin and Gray 2015).

Between 2009 and 2011, a significant portion of Boko Haram's attacks involved suicide bombings aimed at both Christian civilians and security forces. From 2012 to 2013, the group conducted major bombing campaigns, not limited to suicide bombings, in larger cities, targeting both Nigerian forces and Christian communities (Falode 2016; Okemi 2013; Walker 2016).

From 2014 onwards, the group's tactical evolution included a shift towards more coordinated and complex assaults, such as coordinated bombings and large-scale kidnappings. Notably, the abduction of schoolgirls in Chibok in 2014 exemplified a strategic

shift in tactics, garnering widespread international attention. Additionally, Boko Haram demonstrated adaptability by incorporating female-led suicide bombings as a prominent feature of its attacks, further indicating a tactical evolution over the years (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Galehan 2019).

From 2014 to 2015, Boko Haram extensively employed large-scale kidnappings and bombing campaigns before pledging allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Oftedal 2013). This allegiance marked a significant shift, aligning Boko Haram with a global Islamist movement aspiring to establish a global caliphate. Between 2015 and 2020, the group's tactics predominantly involved raids and ambushes on Christian communities, army installations, and individuals accused of collaborating with Nigerian forces. Infrastructure raids became integral to Boko Haram's new approach, with a notable decrease in suicide bombings and kidnappings during this period. Towards 2020, major bombing campaigns resurged as the group intensified attacks against Christian communities, coinciding with the group's takeover of entire regions from local governments (Abubakar 2016; Ben-Edet 2022; Ekhomu 2019).

4.2.2 Formation or Cessation of Partnerships

Before delving into Boko Haram's alliances, it's crucial to address speculation about collaborations. The group has faced accusations of working with various local and global terrorist organizations (Oftedal 2013). Due to significant ambiguity, this section focuses only on confirmed alliances or breakdowns, excluding speculative associations for a more accurate analysis.

In its initial phase (2002-2004), Boko Haram operated independently, with no acknowledged collaborative engagements (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Oftedal 2013). The first significant shift occurred in 2005 when the group collaborated with Salafi communities in neighboring countries without specifying identities or nature (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Loimeier 2012).

Boko Haram expanded its influence into neighboring countries, collaborating with foreign communities in 2005, identified by the US government as al-Qaeda cells in Mali (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Oftedal 2013; U.S. Government 2011). Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the

Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) served as an active local branch, facilitating Boko Haram's cooperation due to shared ideology and available resources (Ofstedal 2013; Perry 2011; Tanchum 2012). This alliance was vital as clashes with Nigerian forces intensified, and Boko Haram lacked the materials and trained fighters to defend itself effectively (Azama 2017; Ofstedal 2013).

Following Muhammad Yusuf's death, Boko Haram's alliance with AQIM was revealed. In 2009, Abubakar Shekau officially declared the partnership, granting al-Qaeda access to Nigeria (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Vanguard 2009). This declaration led to increased AQIM support, confirmed in a 2010 statement where AQIM pledged full support to Boko Haram (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Maiangwa and Uzodike 2012; Ofstedal 2013). Under Shekau's leadership, both organizations established a formal partnership, yet Boko Haram didn't become an official al-Qaeda branch. This explains why a faction, comprising former Boko Haram members, joined AQIM to form Ansaru (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Zenn and Weiss 2021).

Through collaboration with al-Qaeda, Boko Haram established alliances with various Islamist groups, many affiliated with al-Qaeda's global network. Partnerships were formed with Al-Shabab (Somali Islamist organization allied with al-Qaeda), Ansar Dine (Malian Islamist organization), and MOJWA (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, active in North Africa and the Sahel). These alliances developed during Boko Haram's involvement in the northern Mali crisis (2012-2013), where they supported al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, receiving training in return (Adegbulu 2013; Karmon 2014; Ofstedal 2013; Zenn and Weiss 2021).

The connection with Al-Shabab appears to have originated because al-Shabab is al-Qaeda's most significant and influential affiliate in East Africa. Establishing a link between the western and eastern parts of the continent not only expanded al-Qaeda's influence in Africa but also provided Boko Haram with more significant resources. The partnership with al-Qaeda enabled Boko Haram to extend its network beyond Africa (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Ofstedal 2013; U.S. Government 2011). Between 2012 and 2014, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen, facilitated through their earlier connection with al-Shabab in the Horn of Africa (Ofstedal 2013).

In 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the IS, terminating its collaboration with both local and global affiliates of al-Qaeda, given the rivalry between IS and al-Qaeda at that time. This shift led to the group's transformation, resulting in the renaming to the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and its official designation as a province of the global Islamic State 'caliphate.' Abubakar Shekau assumed the role of a local governor under IS, restructuring the organization. Despite losing partnerships with multiple al-Qaeda affiliates, Boko Haram gained new allies recognized as IS provinces in other regions of Africa (Abubakar 2016; Antwi-Boateng 2017; Pham 2016).

Internal conflicts arose within the ISWAP alliance with IS. Disagreements between Shekau and IS leadership led to his removal as the local governor. Shekau and followers split, returning to Boko Haram. ISWAP members, loyal to IS, viewed Shekau's faction as a local adversary (Antwi-Boateng 2017; Mahmood and Ani 2018; Pham 2016). Despite coexistence without clashes in 2016-2017, confrontations occurred in 2019 after cooperation in a hostage release in 2018. Their relationship deteriorated over time (Omenma, Abada, and Omenma 2023).

4.2.3 Geographic Focus

Initially, Boko Haram centered its efforts on Maiduguri, its founding city, and base where leaders resided. During the first two years, recruiting in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, was a priority to establish a crucial stronghold (Adeakin and Gray 2015). Simultaneously, a faction moved to Yobe State, aiming to establish a community, with a shift from an urban to rural recruitment focus (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Comoli 2015; Walker 2016).

Following clashes between Muslims and Christians in central Nigeria in 2004, Boko Haram exploited the situation to enhance recruitment efforts in northern regions, including states like Kano and Jigawa (Adeakin and Gray 2015). Confronted in 2004, the group regrouped in Borno State, focusing on both recruitment and combat within the region. From 2004 to 2009, Boko Haram re-established its presence in the entire northern region through collaboration with AQIM, emphasizing gaining control over rural areas due to the limited armed forces control over the northern periphery (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Antwi-Boateng 2017).

In 2009, Boko Haram expanded its operations to twelve states, designating them as "Islamic states." This marked a shift from its initial focus on northern Nigeria to include central, western, and eastern regions. Despite this change, the strategic shift proved unsuccessful, leading to the death of Muhammad Yusuf and Boko Haram's subsequent relocation to neighboring countries like Niger, Mali, and Chad (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Dowd 2018).

Boko Haram reorganized in Sahel countries with AQIM's assistance, expanding its focus to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria. The group transitioned from rural to urban warfare, targeting state capitals and urban centres nationwide. By 2010, Boko Haram extended its attacks to the entire Sahel region, transforming from a national to a regional threat, targeting both urban and rural areas in other countries (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Dowd 2018; Oftedal 2013).

Since 2015, Boko Haram, after pledging allegiance to IS, maintained its geographic focus. However, following the emergence of the splinter group ISWAP, Shekau's faction shifted to the Lake Chad Basin, eventually focusing exclusively on Borno State after Shekau's death. Meanwhile, ISWAP expanded into Cameroon, Nigeria, and other Sahel countries. From 2020, ISWAP extended its focus beyond the Sahel region, conducting attacks in countries like Ghana, Togo, and Benin, aligning with IS' global caliphate project. In the Sahel, the emphasis remained on combat in both urban and rural areas, while in other West African countries, the focus shifted to rural areas inhabited by Muslims (Araziua 2023).

Boko Haram underwent significant strategic shifts from 2000 to 2020, evolving from a non-violent group to a violent insurgent force advocating for regime change in Nigeria. It formed partnerships with AQIM and later IS, expanding its influence beyond Nigeria's borders. Geographically, it shifted focus from northern Nigeria to the wider Sahel region. Internal conflicts within ISWAP and the death of Abubakar Shekau further altered operational areas, with ISWAP extending its focus beyond the Sahel.

4.3 Background History of Abu Sayyaf

Abu Sayyaf, originally established as Jama'at Abu Sayyaf, emerged as a complex and enigmatic terrorist group in the Philippines (Banlaoi 2006). This chapter seeks to unravel the

intricate historical circumstances in the southern Philippines that paved the way for the rise of Abu Sayyaf, providing a comprehensive understanding of its foundational phase.

The genesis of Abu Sayyaf in 1991 in the southern Philippines is intertwined with the region's rich and tumultuous history (Ugarte and Turner 2011). The southern Philippines, predominantly inhabited by the Moro people, has been a hotspot of resistance against various occupying forces over centuries. Despite vehement opposition to Spanish colonizers and extended battles against the American occupation, the Moro people found themselves politically disenfranchised after the loss of control over their lands and resources (Choiroh 2023; Gutierrez and Borrás 2004; Montiel, Rodil, and de Guzman 2012; San Juan Jr. 2006).

Post-independence dynamics in the southern Philippines were further complicated by government-led migration initiatives from the northern regions, particularly to resource-rich areas like Mindanao. While these settlement incentives were introduced, they also brought about policies that contradicted longstanding Moro rules, leading to heightened tensions between the incoming Christian settlers and the indigenous Muslim Moro population (Aquino 2009; Buendia 2005; Quimpo 2016).

This complex socio-political landscape resulted in three significant consequences for the Moro people: political marginalization, socio-economic inequality, and influence from foreign terrorist movements (Harper 2022; Liow 2006). Political exclusion, rooted in the historical disenfranchisement dating back to American occupation, escalated after Philippine independence. The Moro people found themselves excluded from both national and local political landscapes, limiting their access to government resources (Perez 2020; Ragandang III 2018).

Economically, despite the southern region's wealth in natural resources, underdevelopment persisted compared to its wealthier northern counterparts. This paradoxical situation extended to intra-regional disparities, with Muslim-majority areas remaining underdeveloped compared to regions where Christian settlers had established themselves. These disparities, coupled with political exclusion, fostered a deep-seated sense of discontent among the Moro population (Buendia 2005; Harper 2022; Imbong 2018; Liow 2006; McDoom 2019).

As these grievances accumulated, the Moro people, feeling their survival as a distinct community was endangered, turned to violence as a solution. Prolonged combat against the formal Philippine army seemed insurmountable, leading Moro insurgent groups to seek support from both foreign states and terrorist organizations. This globalized dimension transformed the conflict into something far more extensive than a localized insurgency, laying the groundwork for the emergence of groups like Abu Sayyaf (Germann, Hartunian, Polen, and Mortela 2012; Santos Jr. 2010).

Turning our attention to the emergence of Abu Sayyaf, the dire circumstances in the southern Philippines pushed the Moro people towards violence. The Jabidah massacre, marked by the killing of Moro recruits within the Philippine army, catalyzed the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) (Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao 2021; Gloria and Vitug 2018). After years of conflict, the Philippine state granted semi-autonomy to the Moro people in the 1990s (Galeriana and Ragandang 2018; Malan and Solomon 2012).

However, a faction within the MNLF disagreed with this settlement, leading to the creation of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (Bertrand 2000; Galeriana and Ragandang 2018). From the MILF, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) emerged as a breakaway faction opposing negotiations with the Philippine state. ASG aimed to establish an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines, setting the stage for its distinctive trajectory (Banlaoi 2006; Galeriana and Ragandang 2018).

4.4 Abu Sayyaf's Strategic-Shifting

4.4.1 Tactical Changes

Between 2000 and 2005, Abu Sayyaf, following Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani's death in 1998, shifted from centralization to two factions with individual leaders, persisting in a decentralized structure until 2005 (Hutchison 2009). During this period, the group extensively engaged in unconventional warfare, emphasizing kidnap-for-ransom operations and piracy, including hijackings, targeting non-Filipino tourists, journalists, and Christian missionaries, with notable kidnappings in 2000 and 2001. These incidents, marked by prolonged durations, were a characteristic tactic (Amadar and Tuttle 2018; Hutchison 2009).

Simultaneously, Abu Sayyaf targeted Filipinos through assassinations, predominantly using beheadings, with victims being journalists, Christian villagers, or missionaries. Despite frequent attacks, many remained unclaimed by Abu Sayyaf, except for a notable bombing in 2004, the deadliest terrorist attack in the Philippines' history (Hammerberg, Faber, and Powell 2009; Ugarte 2011). In 2005, the group returned to a centralized structure under the leadership of Khadaffy Janjalani (Hutchison 2009).

From 2005 to 2013, Abu Sayyaf shifted its focus from maritime activities to urban terrorism, employing methods like kidnappings, assassinations, urban bombings using IEDs, and suicide bombings. The targets included everyday civilians, with an increased focus on Christians. Drive-by shootings became prevalent in southern regions, and kidnappings targeted both local and foreign sailors, along with tourists, journalists, and individuals associated with international NGOs (Amadar and Tuttle 2018; Fabe 2013).

From 2014 to 2020, Abu Sayyaf continued its established methods, including kidnap-for-ransom, bombings, maritime terrorism, and urban terrorism, targeting the same groups. Notably, the group shifted focus by increasingly employing ambushes against armed forces and other rebel groups in the southern region. Frequent hit-and-run operations, particularly targeting army bases, and the use of Blitzkrieg tactics marked this period of intense violence with substantial weaponry and personnel engagement (Ahmad and Rosli 2023; Schuck 2021).

4.4.2 Formation or Cessation of Partnerships

Between 2000 and 2005, Abu Sayyaf experienced a dynamic period of forming partnerships. Despite initial differences, the group resumed cooperation with the MILF, previously split in the 1990s. Simultaneously, Abu Sayyaf partnered with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an al-Qaeda ally in Southeast Asia. The interconnected nature of these terrorist organizations facilitated Abu Sayyaf's simultaneous engagement with both groups. Seeking strength after its leader's death, internal fragmentation, and with support from former allies like al-Qaeda, Abu Sayyaf also initiated a partnership with the Rajah Soleiman Movement (RSM), securing internal resources and manpower (Hutchison 2009; Ugarte 2011). This complex web of partnerships reflected Abu Sayyaf's strategic manoeuvring and pragmatic pursuit of alliances to overcome internal weaknesses and achieve objectives.

Between 2005 and 2013, the southern Philippines witnessed significant rebel dynamics. The MILF's pursuit of a ceasefire and autonomy deal led to internal discord, giving rise to factions like BIFF and the Maute group. Responding to these changes, Abu Sayyaf severed ties with the MILF, aligning with new groups such as BIFF and the Maute group to intensify the quest for southern independence. Concurrently, Abu Sayyaf maintained cooperation with JI and the RSM, leading to heightened extremism. The aftermath of the MILF agreement spawned splinter groups (AK, AKP, JIP, and KIM) composed of dissatisfied former MILF and MNLF fighters, along with foreign elements, forming a complex network aimed at achieving full independence in the southern Philippines. Assertions were also made about collaboration between the communist CPP-NPA-NDF, aligned with JI, and Abu Sayyaf in pursuing southern independence (Amadar and Tuttle 2018; Hutchison 2009).

Between 2014 and 2020, Abu Sayyaf redefined its alliances and goals by targeting the MILF and MNLF as apostates and pro-government militias. Pledging allegiance to the IS in 2014, Abu Sayyaf became the East Asia Province (ISEAP), severing ties with al-Qaeda affiliates like Jemaah Islamiyah. Other rebel groups, previously mentioned, also pledged allegiance to IS, consolidating under the ISEAP umbrella. Concurrently, partnerships with communist groups ceased, as IS emphasized collaboration only with like-minded sympathizers. Beyond aspirations for an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines, Abu Sayyaf aimed to be part of a global Islamic caliphate, extending its influence throughout Southeast Asia. This period marked a significant shift in Abu Sayyaf's alliances and strategic objectives, aligning itself with the broader global jihadist agenda (Ahmad and Rosli 2023; Kalicharan 2019; Schuck 2021).

4.4.3 Geographic Focus

Between 2000 and 2005, Abu Sayyaf strategically headquartered its operations in the southern Sulu archipelago, centered in Jolo. The group's influence in this region was reinforced by leaders with local ties, leveraging existing connections. The geographical distance from southern army bases provided Abu Sayyaf with a relatively secure haven, making the Sulu archipelago the epicentre of its activities. Kidnappings, even those initiated elsewhere, often culminated in Jolo or other archipelago locations (Amadar and Tuttle 2018;

GMA News 2007). Notably, a significant attack in Sabah, Malaysia, was conducted due to its proximity to Sulu, and the region's geography favored maritime terrorism, aligning with Abu Sayyaf's strategic objectives. The combination of a strategic headquarters, established connections, and geographical advantages underscored the group's concentrated focus on the Sulu archipelago and its surroundings (Hutchison 2009).

Between 2005 and 2013, Abu Sayyaf, while consolidating power in Jolo and Basilan, underwent a significant shift by expanding its operations beyond the Sulu archipelago. The group extended its focus to Mindanao, reaching distant regions and even attacking Luzon and Manila. This broader scope was enabled by alliances with sympathetic rebel groups, targeting urban centres in the Philippines. Abu Sayyaf also shifted attention to the eastern islands of Malaysia, marking a strategic evolution by extending influence beyond traditional strongholds and collaborating with allied groups for attacks in various regions (Amadar and Tuttle 2018; Hammerberg, Faber, and Powell 2017).

Between 2014 and 2016, Abu Sayyaf intensified attacks in the Sulu archipelago, expanded to Malaysian cities, and escalated activities in Mindanao, targeting urban centres and rural villages concurrently. Post the Marawi assault, Abu Sayyaf regrouped in the Sulu archipelago, shifting focus to nearby rural regions in Malaysia and Western Mindanao from 2017 to 2020. This strategic evolution showcased the group's adaptive approach to geographic focus and operational priorities during this period (Ahmad and Rosli 2023; Schuck 2021).

Abu Sayyaf underwent notable strategic changes from 2000 to 2020, seen in shifts in tactics, partnerships, and geographic focus. Evolving from maritime activities to urban terrorism, the group formed diverse alliances with rebel groups and terrorist organizations while expanding beyond its traditional strongholds. These shifts demonstrate Abu Sayyaf's adaptability and strategic maneuvering, reflecting its pragmatic pursuit of alliances and operational priorities amidst changing circumstances and challenges.

4.5 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the case studies of Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf reveal dynamic strategic shifts from their origins to 2020. Boko Haram, initially focused on northern Nigeria, evolved

tactically from guerrilla warfare to high-lethality tactics, forming alliances with al-Qaeda affiliates and later pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. Geographically, its focus extended from northern Nigeria to the Sahel region, adapting its tactics accordingly. Abu Sayyaf, rooted in the Sulu archipelago, transitioned from piracy to urban attacks, forming alliances with local rebel groups and pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. Its geographic scope expanded from the Sulu archipelago to Mindanao, Malaysia, and beyond. These nuanced trajectories lay the groundwork for the subsequent analysis, shedding light on the adaptive nature of these terrorist groups.

5. Analysis

This section analyses Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf's strategic shifts in warfare from 2000 to 2020, focusing on tactical changes, partnership dynamics, and geographic focus. It explores similarities, differences, and trends between the groups while considering external factors and their potential implications for armed non-state entities. The goal is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced dynamics shaping the strategic shifts of these extremist organizations.

5.1 Similarities

5.1.1 Tactical Changes

In examining the tactical changes of both Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf between 2000 and 2020, distinct similarities emerge, revealing nuanced patterns in their strategic evolution. Boko Haram, initially a non-violent group, underwent a marked transformation into a violent insurgent force following the arrest and death of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Comoli 2015; Kafa and Habib 2018; Oftedal 2013; Pech and Slade 2006). The group consistently employed unconventional warfare tactics, featuring guerrilla tactics, hit-and-run operations, and assassinations during the early 2000s. This shift was rooted in the group's strategic objective of advocating for local regime change throughout Nigeria, extending beyond the northern region (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Mahmood and Ani 2018; Oftedal 2013).

Similarly, Abu Sayyaf, between 2000 and 2005, transitioned from centralization to decentralized structures, engaging extensively in unconventional warfare. This phase emphasized kidnap-for-ransom operations and piracy, serving the strategic objective of instilling fear and exerting control (Amadar and Tuttle 2018; Hammerberg, Faber, and Powell 2009; Hutchinson 2009; Ugarte 2011). While the circumstances surrounding the leadership change differ from those of Boko Haram, the shift to decentralized structures allowed for greater operational flexibility and resilience against counterinsurgency efforts. However, it is essential to note that the transition to decentralization may not necessarily follow the same

pattern in every case, and the impact on the group's tactics can vary depending on various factors.

As both groups encountered changing circumstances, including increased engagement from security forces and shifting geopolitical dynamics, a common trend emerged in their adaptation of high-lethality tactics. Boko Haram, facing intensified pressure from Nigerian forces in 2009, adopted high-lethality methods, including suicide bombings and terroristic attacks. The use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) became prevalent, targeting Nigerian forces, cooperating civilians, Christians, and foreign entities involved in government projects. This tactical evolution was intricately tied to Boko Haram's overarching strategic goals, adapting its methods to achieve greater impact on both military and civilian targets (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Azama 2017; Oftedal 2013; Pricopi 2016). Similarly, Abu Sayyaf, from 2005 to 2013, shifted its focus from piracy to urban terrorism, employing tactics such as kidnappings, assassinations, urban bombings using IEDs, and suicide bombings. These tactical adaptations aligned with Abu Sayyaf's strategic objective of exerting influence and creating instability, particularly by targeting civilians, and Christians (Amadar and Tuttle 2018; Hammerberg, Faber, and Powell 2009; Hutchinson 2009; Ugarte 2011). While the specific circumstances leading to these tactical shifts may vary, the overarching similarity lies in both groups' responses to opposition, escalating their tactics to maintain relevance and achieve their strategic objectives.

In essence, both Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf shared a tactical trajectory marked by a transition from unconventional to high-lethality warfare, adaptability in response to changing circumstances, and strategic use of terrorism as a tool to achieve overarching objectives. These tactical changes were deeply rooted in the pursuit of their strategic goals, highlighting the dynamic and interconnected nature of their strategic evolution over the specified time frame.

5.1.2 Formation or Cessation of Partnerships

Examining the partnerships of both Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf between 2000 and 2020 reveals intriguing parallels and divergences in their strategic approaches. In the early 2000s,

both groups operated independently, with Boko Haram collaborating with Salafi communities in neighboring countries and Abu Sayyaf forming alliances with groups like MILF and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Hutchison 2009; Loimeier 2012; Ugarte 2011). The shared trend during this period was the initiation of partnerships to enhance their capabilities and further their respective causes.

A significant shift occurred when both groups expanded their networks beyond their immediate regions. Boko Haram, aligning with AQIM, aimed to address resource shortages and ideological alignment, while Abu Sayyaf, entering partnerships with BIFF and the Maute group, sought to intensify the pursuit of southern independence (Amadar and Tuttle 2018; Hutchison 2009; Oftedal 2013; Perry 2011; Tanchum 2012). The trend here was a strategic extension of alliances to achieve broader objectives.

The subsequent affiliations with Al-Shabab, Ansar Dine, and MOJWA for Boko Haram, and the severance of ties with MILF and MRLF while pledging allegiance to IS for Abu Sayyaf, highlight a shared inclination towards global jihadist movements. Both groups strategically adapted their partnerships based on their overarching objectives, showcasing a trend of aligning with organizations sharing similar ideological and global aspirations (Adegbulu 2013; Karmon 2014; Oftedal 2013; Zenn and Weiss 2021).

Furthermore, the termination of collaborations with al-Qaeda affiliates by both groups, Boko Haram shifting allegiance to IS and Abu Sayyaf aligning with IS under the East Asia Province, demonstrates a shared trajectory of transitioning towards a global jihadist agenda (Ahmad and Rosli 2023; Kalicharan 2019). The cessation and transformation of partnerships were pivotal moments, reflecting a strategic alignment with broader terrorist networks, indicative of a trend in their evolution.

In summary, the similarities in the formation and cessation of partnerships between Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf during 2000-2020 revolve around their shared initial independent operations, regional expansions with alliances to address local concerns, and subsequent global alignments with jihadist movements. The shifts were intricately tied to their overarching objectives, marking a trend of strategic adaptation to further their respective ideological and global aspirations.

5.1.3 Geographic Focus

Examining the geographic focus of both Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf between 2000 and 2020 reveals notable similarities and trends driven by their overarching objectives. Boko Haram initially concentrated its efforts in Maiduguri, gradually expanding to northern regions such as Kano and Jigawa. The group's strategic shift in 2009 marked an expansion to twelve states, designating them as "Islamic states." However, this broader focus proved unsuccessful, leading to relocation to neighboring countries. With assistance from AQIM, Boko Haram reorganized in Sahel countries, transitioning from rural to urban warfare. After pledging allegiance to IS in 2015, the group maintained its geographic focus, and following internal conflicts, ISWAP shifted to the Lake Chad Basin, focusing on Borno State (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Comoli 2015; Dowd 2018; Walker 2016).

Similarly, Abu Sayyaf strategically headquartered its operations in the southern Sulu archipelago, particularly Jolo, leveraging existing connections and geographical advantages. Between 2005 and 2013, Abu Sayyaf expanded its operations beyond the Sulu archipelago, reaching Mindanao and attacking Luzon and Manila. The group intensified attacks in the Sulu archipelago from 2014 to 2016 and, post-Marawi assault, regrouped in the region, shifting focus to nearby rural regions in Malaysia and Western Mindanao (Ahmad and Rosli 2023; Amadar and Tuttle 2018; Hammerberg, Faber, and Powell 2017; Hutchison 2009; Schuck 2021).

The overarching objectives of both groups influenced their geographic shifts. Boko Haram's expansion beyond Nigeria aligned with its transformation into a regional and global jihadist movement, while Abu Sayyaf's strategic evolution reflected adaptive approaches to operational priorities, expanding influence beyond traditional strongholds, and collaborating with allied groups. In both cases, the groups' geographic focus aligned with their broader strategic objectives and demonstrated adaptive responses to changing circumstances.

5.2 Differences

5.2.1 Tactical Changes

Examining the tactical metamorphosis of Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf between 2000 and 2020 reveals distinct differences reflective of their strategic objectives and regional contexts. Boko Haram's tactical evolution commenced with a significant shift following the arrest and subsequent death of leader Mohammed Yusuf. The group's initial reliance on guerrilla tactics, hit-and-run attacks, and assassinations transformed into a more sophisticated approach post-2009. The escalation included the adoption of high-lethality tactics, such as suicide bombings and terroristic attacks, especially targeting Nigerian forces, civilians, Christians, and foreign entities. Notably, the period between 2014 and 2015 saw a shift towards coordinated assaults, large-scale kidnappings, and a strategic alignment with the IS. The subsequent years witnessed a shift to raids, ambushes on Christian communities, and infrastructure raids, reflecting a diversified tactical portfolio. The resurgence of major bombing campaigns around 2020 coincided with territorial takeovers, indicating a strategic emphasis on intensifying attacks against Christian communities (Adeakin and Gray 2015; Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Azama 2017; Comoli 2015; Kafa and Habib 2018; Oftedal 2013; Pech and Slade 2006; Schuck 2021).

In contrast, Abu Sayyaf's tactical trajectory unfolded amidst structural changes, transitioning from centralization to decentralized factions between 2000 and 2005. During this period, unconventional warfare, specifically kidnap-for-ransom operations, and piracy, dominated the group's tactics. Notable incidents, marked by prolonged kidnappings and targeted assassinations, characterized this phase. A shift towards urban terrorism from 2005 to 2013 included methods like kidnappings, assassinations, urban bombings, and suicide bombings, with an increased focus on Christians. From 2014 to 2020, Abu Sayyaf maintained established methods, but a notable shift occurred as the group increasingly employed ambushes against armed forces and rebel groups in the southern region. Frequent hit-and-run operations and Blitzkrieg tactics marked this period, indicating a strategic pivot toward direct engagements with military and rebel targets (Ahmad and Rosli 2023; Amadar and Tuttle 2018; Hammerberg, Faber, and Powell 2009; Hutchinson 2009; Ugarte 2011).

While both groups exhibited adaptability, Boko Haram's evolution involved a broader spectrum of tactics, with a notable shift towards coordinated and complex assaults. Abu Sayyaf, on the other hand, maintained a relatively consistent set of methods, emphasizing kidnap-for-ransom, bombings, and urban terrorism throughout the analyzed period. The differences in tactical changes between Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf reflect the nuanced intersections between their strategic goals, organizational structures, and responses to evolving regional contexts. Both groups' tactical changes were deeply rooted in their respective strategic objectives, guiding their adaptations over the examined timeframe.

5.2.2 Formation or Cessation of Partnerships

Examining the differences in the formation and cessation of partnerships by Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf between 2000 and 2020 reveals distinct trends influenced by their overarching objectives. Boko Haram, in its early phase, operated independently, shifting in 2005 to collaborate with Salafi communities in neighboring countries and later expanding its alliances with AQIM and other Islamist groups. The partnerships were driven by shared ideologies and the need for resources to address clashes with Nigerian forces. The subsequent affiliation with al-Qaeda affiliates and later IS marked a strategic evolution aligned with broader jihadist movements. The internal conflicts within ISWAP underscored the complexity of their partnerships and the impact of ideological differences (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Hutchison 2009; Loimeier 2012; Ugarte 2011).

On the other hand, Abu Sayyaf's partnerships evolved dynamically. In the early 2000s, it resumed cooperation with the MILF and engaged with Jemaah Islamiyah and the Rajah Soleiman Movement. The partnerships were strategic moves to strengthen internal capabilities and pursue objectives like Southern independence. The period between 2005 and 2013 saw shifts in alliances as Abu Sayyaf severed ties with MILF, aligned with new groups, and maintained cooperation with JI and RSM. Pledging allegiance to IS in 2014 marked a significant shift, emphasizing a global jihadist agenda and a departure from al-Qaeda affiliates (Hutchison 2009; Schuck 2021; Ugarte 2011).

Both groups demonstrated strategic manoeuvring based on their overarching objectives. Boko Haram's alliances aligned with its transformation from a regional insurgency to a global jihadist movement. Abu Sayyaf's shifts, including targeting 'apostates' and pro-government militias, reflected an alignment with the broader global jihadist agenda under IS. The cessation or transformation of partnerships by both groups indicated a strategic adaptation to achieve their ideological and global aspirations.

5.2.3 Geographic Focus

Analyzing the geographic focus of Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf between 2000 and 2020 reveals distinct differences shaped by their overarching objectives. Boko Haram initially centered its efforts on Maiduguri, gradually expanding to northern regions and collaborating with AQIM to gain control over rural areas. In 2009, the group shifted to designate twelve states as "Islamic states," but this proved unsuccessful, leading to relocations to neighboring countries. With AQIM's assistance, Boko Haram reorganized in Sahel countries, transitioning from rural to urban warfare. After pledging allegiance to IS in 2015, the focus shifted, with ISWAP concentrating on the Lake Chad Basin and Boko Haram extending into West African countries beyond the Sahel region (Afolabi and Yusuf 2019; Araziua 2023; Hutchison 2009; Loimeier 2012).

In contrast, Abu Sayyaf strategically headquartered its operations in the southern Sulu archipelago, particularly Jolo. The group's focus remained on this region from 2000 to 2005, leveraging local ties, established connections, and geographical advantages. Between 2005 and 2013, Abu Sayyaf underwent a significant shift, expanding operations to Mindanao, Luzon, Manila, and even the eastern islands of Malaysia. Post-Marawi assault, the group regrouped in the Sulu archipelago, shifting focus to nearby rural regions in Malaysia and Western Mindanao from 2017 to 2020 (Ahmad and Rosli 2023; Kalicharan 2019).

These differences highlight Boko Haram's broader regional aspirations and global jihadist connections, leading to shifts in focus and tactics. In contrast, Abu Sayyaf demonstrated an adaptive approach, expanding influence beyond its traditional strongholds

while maintaining a strategic emphasis on key regions, showcasing their distinctive geographic evolution based on operational priorities and overarching objectives.

5.3 Other Factors

Internal dynamics significantly contribute to the strategic-shifting observed in armed non-state entities. Leadership changes, power struggles, or the emergence of influential figures can alter the group's strategic direction, as seen in the succession and split within Boko Haram (Ashour 2021; Horwath 2006; Parrott 2014). However, it is noteworthy that, for the scope of this thesis, factors such as leadership changes and internal power struggles were not explicitly chosen for analysis, as they often indirectly connect to the three main considerations of tactical changes, formation or cessation of partnerships, and geographic focus.

Similarly, advancements in weaponry, technological capabilities, and shifts in guerrilla tactics prompt strategic adjustments aligned with the groups' overarching strategic goals. Resource management, encompassing human and material resources, influences strategic choices. The ability to secure funding, recruit new members, and manage existing resources dictates whether armed non-state entities expand, contract, or alter their operational focus in alignment with their overarching strategic objectives. Additionally, the effectiveness of counterterrorism measures prompts internal adaptations. Changes in response to security crackdowns, international cooperation against terrorism, or successful military operations lead to internal restructuring and strategic shifts, all shaped by the broader strategic objectives of the group (Adegbulu 2013; Arreguín-Toft 2005; Ashour 2021; Jones 2016).

In conclusion, armed non-state entities navigate strategic shifts based on a myriad of forces also including intricate internal factors, including leadership dynamics, operational capabilities, intra-group dynamics, resource management, and adaptation to counterterrorism measures. While these factors were not chosen explicitly for analysis in this thesis, it is essential to recognize their indirect connections to the three main factors and the complex interplay between internal dynamics and broader strategic goals.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research question aimed to assess the extent to which Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram applied strategic-shifting in their insurgencies between 2000 and 2020. The analysis revealed that both groups demonstrated significant strategic-shifting, adapting their tactics, forming and ceasing partnerships, and changing geographic focuses to achieve their overarching objectives. Boko Haram, evolving from a non-violent group to a violent insurgent force, showcased a notable shift in tactics and geographic focus, especially after pledging allegiance to IS. Abu Sayyaf, characterized by transitions in organizational structure and geographic expansion, demonstrated strategic flexibility throughout the studied period. The implementation of strategic-shifting by both groups was substantial, reflecting their dynamic responses to internal and external challenges.

Reflecting on the answer to the research question, it is evident that both Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram applied strategic-shifting to a great extent during the specified period. Their tactical adaptations, partnership dynamics, and shifts in geographic focus were integral to achieving their overarching goals. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of extremist organizations' strategic behavior, shedding light on the interconnected nature of tactical changes, partnership formations or cessations, and shifts in geographic focus.

The study's contribution lies in unraveling the shared and distinct patterns between Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram, offering insights into the complexities of their strategic evolution while adding to the existing literature on armed non-state actors' strategic-shifting dynamics. By synthesizing recent scholarship and delineating key terms and concepts essential for understanding the subsequent analysis, this study builds upon the foundation laid out in the literature review. Specifically, it advances the understanding of strategic-shifting by providing a focused examination of tactical changes, formation or cessation of alliances, and geographic focus within the context of Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram. This targeted analysis not only reinforces the conceptual framework established in the literature review but also extends it by offering empirical insights into the adaptive behavior of these armed groups. Therefore, the findings of this study not only contribute to academic discourse but also provide actionable insights for policymakers and security experts in enhancing counterterrorism strategies.

However, this research has its shortcomings. While it acknowledges the challenges posed by the language barrier, the notoriously difficult nature of studying these groups, and the lack of access to individual decision-makers, it primarily relies on open-source information. This reliance may have limitations in capturing the complete scope of these groups' activities. Additionally, the dynamic nature of insurgencies and the evolving strategies of these groups make it challenging to provide a comprehensive and up-to-date analysis. Therefore, while this study contributes valuable insights, its reliance on open-source information necessitates cautious interpretation and further validation from alternative sources where possible.

Looking ahead, future research could delve deeper into the external factors influencing strategic-shifting, exploring the role of regional dynamics, global geopolitical shifts, and socioeconomic conditions. Comparative studies involving a broader range of insurgent groups could offer a more comprehensive understanding of strategic behavior. Furthermore, a longitudinal analysis could track the continued evolution of Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram, providing valuable insights into their resilience and adaptability over time.

In summary, this research contributes valuable insights into the strategic-shifting of Abu Sayyaf and Boko Haram, highlighting their adaptive responses to internal and external pressures. While acknowledging its limitations, the study sets the stage for further exploration of the complex dynamics within insurgencies and offers a foundation for refining counterterrorism approaches in the future.

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