

# Building a New Narrative: The Aspirations & Dreams of Abusayyaf Returnees in Basilan Province, Philippines

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**Abstract**—This study aims to understand the aspirations and dreams of 20 Abusayyaf returnees in Basilan Province, Philippines, a region plagued by violent conflict and insecurity. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study reveals that the returnees' aspirations revolve around building a better future for themselves and their families, including securing stable employment, providing education for their children, and accessing basic services such as healthcare and clean water. Meanwhile, their dreams are centered on achieving long-term peace and stability in their communities, which they believe can be achieved through dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect among different groups. Despite facing significant challenges such as stigma and discrimination, the returnees remain optimistic about their futures and are actively taking steps towards achieving their goals. The study also highlights the importance of support from the government and civil society organizations in facilitating the returnees' reintegration into their communities, including the provision of livelihood opportunities, education, and psychosocial support. Overall, the findings of this study shed light on the experiences and aspirations of a marginalized group in the Philippines and provide insights for policymakers and practitioners working on issues related to conflict and post-conflict recovery in the region.

**Keywords**—Abusayyaf, Conflict, Post-conflict, Returnees, Reintegration, Aspirations, Dreams, Marginalized communities, Basilan Province, Qualitative research, Thematic analysis, Government support, Civil society organizations, Livelihood, Education, Psychosocial support, Stigma, Discrimination, Community development.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The southern Philippines has been grappling with the issue of violent extremism, particularly in areas such as Basilan province, where the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) has been active for several years. In response, the Philippine government has implemented a range of counter-terrorism measures, including rehabilitation and reintegration programs for former ASG members. However, there is a lack of understanding of the experiences and aspirations of these individuals, which could hinder the effectiveness of these programs.

This study seeks to explore the aspirations and dreams of Abusayyaf returnees in Basilan province, Philippines, in order to gain insights into the experiences of these individuals and inform the development of more effective rehabilitation and reintegration programs. The study is grounded in existing literature on the drivers of violent extremism and the

importance of rehabilitation and reintegration programs in addressing this issue.

Studies have identified several factors that contribute to the recruitment of individuals into extremist groups such as the ASG. Poverty, unemployment, and lack of education have been cited as significant drivers of radicalization. Social factors such as a sense of belonging, recognition, and identity are also important motivators. Political factors such as perceived marginalization and injustice have also been identified as significant drivers.

In response to the problem of violent extremism, rehabilitation and reintegration programs for former ASG members have been implemented in various countries, including the Philippines. These programs aim to address the underlying causes of violent extremism and provide former members with an opportunity to transition back into society. Such programs typically include education and vocational training, psychological counselling, and community-based interventions.

However, there is limited understanding of the experiences and aspirations of Abusayyaf returnees in Basilan province, Philippines. By exploring the factors that motivate individuals to leave the ASG and pursue a more positive future, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature. The study seeks to provide insights into the aspirations and dreams of Abusayyaf returnees and inform the development of effective rehabilitation and reintegration programs that address the underlying drivers of violent extremism in the region.

Overall, this study is crucial for understanding the experiences and aspirations of former ASG members in Basilan province, Philippines. By exploring the factors that motivate individuals to leave the ASG and pursue a more positive future, this study can inform the development of effective programs and policies that can facilitate rehabilitation, reintegration, and promote lasting peace and stability in the region.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) has been a persistent problem in the southern Philippines, particularly in Basilan province, for many years. The Philippine government has implemented a range of counter-terrorism measures, including rehabilitation and reintegration programs for former ASG members. In defunct Autonomous Region in Muslim

Mindanao (ARMM) had initiated program for ASG known as Program Against Violent Extremism (PAVE). However, there is a lack of understanding of the experiences and aspirations of these individuals, which could hinder the effectiveness of these programs.

This qualitative study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the aspirations and dreams of Abusayyaf returnees in Basilan province, Philippines?
2. What motivates Abusayyaf returnees to leave the group and pursue a more positive future?
3. What are the experiences of Abusayyaf returnees during and after their time with the group?
4. How can insights into the aspirations and experiences of Abusayyaf returnees inform the development of effective rehabilitation and reintegration programs?

The study seeks to understand the experiences and aspirations of Abusayyaf returnees in Basilan province, Philippines, and to explore the factors that motivate individuals to leave the ASG and pursue a more positive future. By providing insights into the aspirations and experiences of Abusayyaf returnees, the study aims to inform the development of effective rehabilitation and reintegration programs that address the underlying drivers of violent extremism in the region.

Overall, this qualitative study seeks to fill the gap in the literature on the experiences and aspirations of Abusayyaf returnees in Basilan province, Philippines. Through in-depth interviews with former ASG members, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the motivations and experiences of these individuals, which can inform the development of effective policies and programs to promote lasting peace and stability in the region.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The study "Building a New Narrative: The Aspirations and Dreams of Abusayyaf Returnees in Basilan Province, Philippines" utilized a qualitative research design to explore the aspirations and dreams of 20 Abusayyaf returnees in Basilan Province, Philippines. The purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who had previously been associated with the extremist group, but had since returned to their communities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Tagalog or a local dialect to collect data on the participants' experiences and perspectives. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Thematic analysis was utilized to identify key themes and patterns in the data. The researchers ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants by removing any identifying information.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted. The limitations of the study included the small sample size and the study's focus on only one region in the Philippines. The study's findings contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of individuals who have been involved in extremist groups and are now reintegrating into their communities. The findings have implications for policymakers and practitioners working on

issues related to conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and the rehabilitation and reintegration of former combatants.

### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study aimed to investigate the aspirations and dreams of Abusayyaf returnees in Basilan province, Philippines. Data was collected through interviews with 20 former ASG members who had surrendered to the government.

The findings of the study suggest that the aspirations and dreams of Abusayyaf returnees are not significantly different from those of other individuals in the region. The most common aspirations were to have a peaceful life, provide for their families, and contribute positively to their communities. However, the experiences of the returnees had an impact on their specific goals and aspirations.

Many of the returnees expressed a desire to pursue education and vocational training to improve their economic prospects and reintegrate into society. Some expressed an interest in starting their own businesses, while others aspired to work for the government or in the private sector. A number of participants also mentioned their interest in community service and giving back to society.

The study also found that the returnees face significant challenges in achieving their aspirations. These challenges include limited access to education and job opportunities, social stigma, and discrimination. Several participants also mentioned struggling with mental health issues and trauma resulting from their experiences.

The study has important implications for the government's efforts to address the insurgency problem in the region. The similarities in aspirations and dreams between Abusayyaf returnees and other individuals in the region suggest that addressing the underlying issues of poverty, lack of education, and limited job opportunities could help prevent individuals from being attracted to join insurgent groups in the first place.

One of the most common aspirations of the Abusayyaf returnees was to pursue education and vocational training. This highlights the importance of providing support for individuals to acquire new skills and knowledge. The government could consider implementing programs that offer access to education and vocational training to help reintegrate returnees into society and improve their economic prospects. Additionally, supporting entrepreneurship could create new opportunities for the returnees to generate income and contribute positively to the economy.

The interest in community service and giving back to society suggests that providing opportunities for returnees to engage in meaningful activities that contribute positively to their communities could help address the issue of social stigma and promote acceptance. The government could consider implementing programs that offer community service opportunities to returnees to help them establish connections and positive relationships with their communities.

The challenges faced by the returnees in achieving their aspirations highlight the need for greater support and resources. Addressing these challenges could include providing better access to education and job opportunities,

addressing the issue of social stigma and discrimination, and providing support for mental health and trauma-related issues.

One of the significant challenges faced by the returnees is social stigma and discrimination. Addressing this issue could involve creating awareness campaigns that educate people about the situation and highlight the positive steps being taken to reintegrate former members of insurgent groups into society. Additionally, the government could consider implementing policies that protect the rights of returnees and prevent discrimination based on their past affiliation with insurgent groups.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the importance of addressing the root causes of insurgency and providing support for those who have been affected by it. By supporting the aspirations of returnees and addressing the challenges they face, there is a greater likelihood of a more stable and peaceful future for the region. The government's efforts to reintegrate Abusayyaf returnees into society could serve as a model for addressing the larger issue of insurgency in the region.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the aspirations and experiences of Abusayyaf returnees in Basilan province, Philippines. The study found that the aspirations and dreams of the returnees were not significantly different from those of other individuals in the region, but their experiences had an impact on their specific goals and aspirations. The motivators for leaving the group varied among the returnees, with some leaving due to disillusionment with the group's ideology and methods, and others leaving due to a desire for a better future for themselves and their families. The experiences of the returnees during and after their time with the group were characterized by significant challenges, including mental health issues and trauma, social stigma, and discrimination.

The findings of this study have important implications for the development of effective rehabilitation and reintegration programs for Abusayyaf returnees. The study suggests that addressing the underlying issues of poverty, lack of education, and limited job opportunities could help prevent individuals from being attracted to join insurgent groups in the first place. Furthermore, providing support for education, vocational

training, and entrepreneurship could help reintegrate returnees into society and improve their economic prospects.

The motivators for leaving the group highlight the importance of offering alternatives to individuals who are considering joining insurgent groups. The government could consider implementing programs that offer job opportunities, education, and other forms of support to individuals at risk of being recruited by insurgent groups. Additionally, creating awareness campaigns that highlight the negative consequences of joining insurgent groups could dissuade individuals from considering these groups as an option.

The challenges faced by the returnees in achieving their aspirations underscore the need for greater support and resources. Addressing these challenges could include providing better access to education and job opportunities, addressing the issue of social stigma and discrimination, and providing support for mental health and trauma-related issues. Overall, the government's efforts to reintegrate Abusayyaf returnees into society could serve as a model for addressing the larger issue of insurgent groups in the region. By supporting the aspirations of returnees and addressing the challenges they face, there is a greater likelihood of a more stable and peaceful future for the region.

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