

# Why Have there Been no Jihadist Civil Wars in Southeast Asia?

**Daniel Finnbogason and Isak Svensson**

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**Why there has been a global surge in armed conflicts involving jihadists, Southeast Asia stands out by not having experienced a single jihadist civil war since 1975.**

Southeast Asia has not had a single jihadist civil war since 1975. This is surprising because while jihadist civil wars have become the dominant form of major political violence in the world, Southeast Asia has seen none. Whereas there have been several armed conflicts at lower levels of intensity with jihadist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and violent terrorist attacks by, notably, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), these have never escalated to civil war.

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Moreover, the region's conflicts with nationalist-Islamist groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM), the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Patani insurgents of southern Thailand, have not undergone major ideological escalation from nationalist-Islamism to (trans-)jihadism. In this sense, Southeast Asia stands out as a region – not because it has prevented violence by self-defined Islamist groups, but because it has contained such violence to a higher degree than in other parts of the world. The absence of jihadist civil war in Southeast Asia thus differentiates the region from how Islamist violence has unfolded elsewhere over the last decades.

Map of Southeast Asia. Available online at [Wikimedia Commons](#).

### **What are 'jihadist civil wars'?**

By 'jihadist civil wars' we refer to armed conflicts that result in at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a year and that pit governments against Sunni Muslim groups adhering to a Salafi-jihadi ideology and using armed force to achieve self-defined Islamist political ambitions, which constitute their main demand at the onset of conflict. The fatality threshold for 'war' derives from the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program](#) (UCDP) and is the standard measurement for distinguishing major from minor armed conflict.

### **Why would we expect jihadist civil wars in Southeast Asia?**

There are at least four reasons for expecting jihadist civil wars in Southeast Asia. First, Muslim minorities in the region have long held significant grievances vis-à-vis their governments. Bangkok's efforts to impose Thai language and

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traditions in the southern Malay-Muslim provinces has been and remains a main driver of the conflict there. Muslim grievances in Mindanao, southern Philippines, have a long history and extend to this day, not least since the region has the nation's lowest score on several key human development indicators. The current situation for the Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine state can hardly be described as anything else than one of outright exclusion and persecution, which continues to worsen. And in Aceh, Indonesia, locals have long perceived themselves marginalized by the central government.

Second, international terrorism experts and country-specialists have long predicted Southeast Asia to become a focal point of international jihadism; an arena for jihadist groups and violent conflicts. After 9/11 and Bali 2002, many argued that Southeast Asia would emerge as the second front in the global war on violent jihadist networks.

Third, Southeast Asia has seen rising support for Islamism and radical interpretations of Islam. This has manifested itself in an increase in religious commitments among populations; in more explicit public expressions of Islam; and in more religiously anchored political aspirations.

Fourth, external actors have made attempts to escalate ongoing conflicts and draw them into a global pan-jihadist confrontation. Al-Qaeda has tried to establish ties with Islamist groups in the region, including JI, MILF, and ASG. In current times, the Islamic State (IS) is working to gain a foothold in the region, with the recent fighting in Marawi, Philippines, serving as an example. IS has created an [East Asia Division](#) in Mindanao and appointed former ASG leader Isnilon Hapilon as its leader. In this capacity, Hapilon, named Emir of IS in East Asia in 2016, has created a united front of pro-IS militant factions. Looking, possibly, to pave the way for the establishment of a province of the caliphate in

the southern Philippines, they have stepped up attacks and recruitment efforts. The latter are fine-tuned to link local grievances to IS's global jihadist narrative where Muslims are under attack by crusaders and oppressors and need to fight back.

The IS threat in Southeast Asia should not be overstated at this point. But if the organization succeeds in building a base in Mindanao – a strategically important location between the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia where government control is weak – and manages to reach out to and empower larger Muslim armed groups in the Philippines and beyond, there is an obvious risk for radicalization and violent escalation of local armed conflicts in the region.

### **Reasons for the absence**

We suggest an explanation based on three components. Whereas some of these three exist in other regions as well, the combination of them is relatively unique for Southeast Asia: 1) the lack of internationalization of Islamist conflicts; 2) available political channels for Islamist aspirations; and 3) regional counterterrorism collaboration. Together they have prevented jihadist civil wars from breaking out and contained ongoing minor conflicts from escalating in terms of both intensity and ideology.

First, unlike in other conflict zones, Southeast Asia has not seen increasing internationalization of intrastate conflicts. By 'internationalized' we mean conflicts where external states intervene with troops to support the warring parties. Southeast Asian governments have largely retained domestic control over their counterinsurgency operations, and despite internal and external efforts to link Islamist conflicts in the region to transnational jihadist networks, Southeast Asian Islamist rebels have remained focused on their local contexts

and resisted attempts of 'trans-jihadization'. Internationalized conflicts tend to be **more severe**. Stopping minor conflicts from internationalizing may therefore prevent them from escalating to civil war.

Second, Southeast Asian governments have maintained institutional openness for civil society and political organizations to raise Islamist aspirations, most notably in Indonesia and Malaysia. This has created peaceful channels to pursue political ambitions, helped to moderate demands, and given Islamist political actors incentives to challenge very radical interpretations of Islam. Moreover, the governments as well as the main Islamist rebel organizations in the Philippines and Thailand have been open to explore dialogue and negotiations in order to try to resolve armed conflicts, albeit not without challenges and obstacles. In 2014 the Philippine government and MILF signed a peace agreement to end their conflict. The peace process helped reduce levels of violence in the conflict. The Thai government has not, yet, had the same negotiated success with Islamist rebels in the country's south. But the parties agreed to a formal peace process dialogue in 2013 and further negotiations are currently underway.

The third leg of our explanatory model is effective regional counterterrorism collaboration against jihadist terrorist groups, most notably JI. JI was Southeast Asia most potent jihadist terrorist group in the 2000s. It had strong ties to Al-Qaeda, a proven capacity for high-casualty attacks, a regional presence to back up its vision of a transnational caliphate, and the resources to tap into local Islamist militant struggles and use them to suit its own agenda and that of the global jihadist movement.

Yet, after Bali 2002, Southeast Asian law enforcement arrested hundreds of JI members (including key leaders) uncovered hideouts, and disrupted finances,

communications, and regional travel. The group was severely weakened and began a shift away from militancy. This was the result of, among other factors, effective counterterrorism collaboration between Southeast Asian states, which dissolved the JI network and undermined its operational capacity. Governments in the region made concerted efforts to unveil the structures, networks, recruitment methods, etc. of JI and other radical Islamist groups. This increased their ability to track down terrorist suspects across Southeast Asia.

### **What can we learn from the Southeast Asian experience?**

The Southeast Asian experience may hold important lessons for managing jihadist threats elsewhere. Judging by developments in the region, refraining from internationalizing Islamist conflicts may reduce the risk for escalation into civil war. Without the inflow of extra resources, parties may be incapable of prolonging or intensifying conflict. And without the presence of foreign troops in 'Muslim lands', conflict 'entrepreneurs' will have a harder time framing local struggles as part of a global jihadi war. This may prevent rebel demands from escalating and keep local conflicts local. Southeast Asia has been spared from the forms of transnational violent jihadism witnessed in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, where external states have often intervened with troops in Islamist conflicts.

Available political channels to Islamist political actors in Indonesia and Malaysia illustrate how the existence of non-violent alternatives for exerting political influence weakens support for actors who promote the use of violence. Allowing Islamist parties to participate in the political process – not banning and persecuting them – can thus be part of a strategy to limit the lure of violent jihadist groups, as potential supporters are more likely to back non-violent groups if they can influence politics. Yet, giving room to political Islamism is not

unproblematic from other perspectives, such as LGBT rights and gender issues. But in entering the processes of negotiation and compromise that is politics, Islamist parties may have to moderate and modernize their policies.

The Philippine experience best illustrates how peace negotiations can contribute to reduce levels of violence in conflict, reveal crucial information about the other's interests, and moderate parties' demands. Ideally, talks produce peace agreements and governments win new partners. Should the 2014 peace deal between MILF and the Philippine government be implemented, their peace process could be an inspiration for handling other similar conflicts.

Regional counterterrorism cooperation against JI was effective also because it was largely conducted with respect for the rule of law. Mindful that a key motivation for terrorists can be anger at coercive government policies, governments tried suspects in open legal proceedings. Counterterrorism was treated primarily as a matter for the criminal justice system, not the military. Failure to comply with these values in dealing with suspected terrorists may instead undermine support for the state and boost the extremists and their cause.

**Authors' Note:** *This text is based on our article “The Missing Jihad. Why have there been no jihadist civil wars in Southeast Asia”, published online in The Pacific Review in May this year. The article was written within the framework of the international research project “Resolving Jihadist Conflicts? Religion, Civil War, and Prospects for Peace”, which explores the prospects for conflict resolution in armed conflicts with militant Islamist groups.*

Image credit: Wikimedia.

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**Daniel Finnbogason received his MA degree in social sciences, specializing in peace and conflict studies, at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research (DPCR), Uppsala University, in Summer 2015. His research interests include religion and violence, terrorism studies, conflict resolution. He currently works as a research assistant in ‘Resolving Jihadist Conflicts? Religion, Civil War, and Prospects for Peace’, led by Professor Isak Svensson at the DPCR.**

**Isak Svensson is a professor at the DPCR, Uppsala University, Sweden. His research focuses on international mediation, nonviolent conflict, religion and conflict. He has published in journals such as the Journal of Conflict Resolution, Journal of Peace Research, International Negotiation, and European Journal of International Relations. He is author of International Mediation Bias and Peacemaking: Taking Sides in Civil Wars (2015), Ending Holy Wars: Religion and Conflict Resolution in Civil Wars (2012), The Go-Between: Jan Eliasson and the Styles of Mediation (2010) with Peter Wallensteen, and co-editor of International Relations and Religion, Vol. I–IV (2016) with Ron E. Hassner. He is the project leader of the international research project ‘Resolving Jihadist Conflicts? Religion, Civil War, and Prospects for Peace’.**

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