

Assuming the Worst:  
Narratives and their Impacts  
on Violent Extremism  
*in South-East Asia*



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THE  
WORLD  
IS  
RUNNING  
TO  
GET



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**LIST OF ACRONYMS**

<b>AQ</b>	Al-Qaida
<b>ARSA</b>	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>BIFF</b>	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (Philippines)
<b>CVE</b>	countering violent extremism
<b>CT</b>	counter-terrorism
<b>FTF</b>	foreign terrorist fighter
<b>IS</b>	Islamic State
<b>JI</b>	Jemaah Islamiyah
<b>MILF</b>	Moro Islamic Liberation Front (Philippines)
<b>PVE</b>	preventing violent extremism
<b>PULO</b>	Patani United Liberation Organisation (Thailand)
<b>UNSG</b>	United Nations Secretary General

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### **Reports can be downloaded at**

[www.entryandexitpoints.asia-pacific.undp.org](http://www.entryandexitpoints.asia-pacific.undp.org).



PEOPLE ARE DRIVEN  
TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM  
THROUGH A **COMPLEX**  
**AND DYNAMIC** PROCESS  
THAT INCLUDES STRUCTURAL FACTORS AS WELL AS  
**PSYCHOLOGICAL ONES.**

*Boys playing basketball in Barangay Rangayen, the Philippines.*

*© UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Alecs Ongcal*



Responses to violent extremism are arguably underpinned by assumptions and narratives about the scale and nature of the threat to societies, and by an ever-evolving calculus of risk and opportunity. In South-East Asia, governments, the media and expert commentary have focused on the risks posed by the Islamic State (IS) and, to a lesser degree, Al-Qaida (AQ), with an emphasis on the risks presented by fighters returning from the Middle East.

The assumptions that frame and justify counter-terrorism (CT), countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) policies often go unexamined, and include the following:

- *South-East Asia faces an ever-worsening threat from extremism.*
- *IS and local extremist networks represent the greatest violent threats to the region.*
- *Foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) returning from the Middle East amplify the threat.*
- *Violent extremism is an import, the result of outside influences and ideologies.*
- *Counter-narrative programming is an effective challenge to the spread of violent extremism.*

Empirical evidence shows that, outside of Mindanao in the southern Philippines, violent extremists are not a major threat to states or populations in South-East Asia. South-East Asia is in fact relatively safe from extremist violence. The region's long history of ethnonationalist movements, as well as the evolution in the positions of its so-called jihadist groups regarding violence make it difficult for IS to tap into existing networks of groups that use violence. In addition, social approval for IS and its actions is low in most areas. Returning foreign terrorist fighters, too, will find it difficult to gain a foothold given these factors.

People are driven to violent extremism through a complex and dynamic process that includes structural factors as well as psychological ones; however, it would be a mistake to minimize the influence of IS. Its actual and potential impact are poorly understood. Rather than taking the form of financial support, training and covert networks, the influence of IS could hinge on indirect impacts: providing people with a narrative framework for their desires; inspiring local individuals or groups to violence; or changing the

nature and aims of violent action. The social, economic and religious possibilities offered by the Caliphate are one aspect of the appeal of IS. But the group also offers a new kind of inspiration for violent extremist acts through the example of its success, and its adoption of extreme performative violence. These factors cannot be understood strictly through an analysis of how and why groups in the region have typically mobilized for violent extremist acts.

Changes in domestic political contexts in much of South-East Asia also influence the spread of violent extremism. Majoritarian politics and exclusionary aims are increasingly mainstream. This development potentially creates a greater tolerance for extremist views and actions, and marks a major change in the sociopolitical contexts of some of the states in question which necessitates close attention.

It can be challenging to change existing P/CVE policies. These policies are often in response to domestic and geopolitical calculations; the goal of preventing violent extremism may be only one of many factors that influence states to adopt them. Civic debate on appropriate policies may be limited by a fear of criticism, and governments are wary of being accused of dropping the ball on security. Violent extremism is viewed as a matter of national security, which can affect critical assessments. Without impartial assessments, central governments might be out of touch with developments on the ground. In responding to extremists, states can choose to shift powers towards executive and security forces and away from legislative and legal checks and balances. State violence and disrespect for human rights, in turn, can create conditions that increase the appeal of violent extremism.

States and donors need to assess clearly the impact of P/CVE policies so far and, based on lessons learned, build a more holistic and up-to-date framework for research to guide policy revision. More immediately, states should strongly consider supporting the return of foreign terrorist fighters in a manner that allows most of them to go back to communities that do not support violent extremism, and where they can be reintegrated. These communities must be supported socially and financially. Counter-narrative programming should be limited but not abandoned; and must be clearly supplemented by offline programming that addresses some of the social drivers for violent extremism, such as perceptions of inequality.



VIOLENT EXTREMISM IS VIEWED  
AS A MATTER OF  
**NATIONAL SECURITY,**  
WHICH CAN HAVE A **CHILLING** EFFECT ON  
**CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS.**

*A densely populated residential area in  
Medan, Northern Sumatra, Indonesia.*

*© UNDP Asia-Pacific/Jefri Tarigan*

A growing consensus of concern has emerged among researchers and analysts about the outcomes of assumptions behind policies that address violent extremism, including CT, CVE and PVE, since the events of 9/11.<sup>1</sup> As the 2016 United Nations Secretary General's (UNSG) Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism notes: "Short-sighted policies, failed leadership, heavy-handed approaches, a single-minded focus only on security measures and an utter disregard for human rights have often made things worse."<sup>2</sup>

This paper defines extremism as "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group."<sup>3</sup> Extremism occurs in all societies and in the name of all faiths, ideologies and beliefs based around religion, ethnicity, class or race. Violent extremism is a complex phenomenon that has structural and psychological elements.<sup>4</sup> In the research conducted for this paper in South-East Asian countries, key informants affirmed that there are two forms of forms of extremism that are most prevalent: one based on Buddhist identity in Myanmar and the other inspired by Salafi-Jihadism that believes Islam must return to the practices and beliefs believed to have been followed by the Prophet and his immediate followers, and that violent enforcement is legitimate.<sup>5</sup>

Terrorism, as used in this paper, refers to the use of indiscriminate violence, likely targeting civilians. It refers only to a behaviour or an act; it does not indicate the nature of the group or individuals responsible.

In South-East Asia, state policies on preventing or countering violent extremism (VE) are often based on analyst predictions that the region is likely to become an IS base or the site of renewed Al-Qaida (AQ) activity, with levels of extremist violence that could represent a threat to the survival of states and even the region.<sup>6</sup> Yet, only one of the ten states of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) is among the top 10 countries globally most afflicted by terrorism.<sup>7</sup> Three of the four other countries covered here are not even in the top 20.

This paper assesses the accuracy and utility of influential assumptions and narratives about violent extremism, referring specifically to IS and the groups and individuals it inspires. It asks whether empirical and historical evidence supports the assertions of escalating threat, the assessments of the strength and organizational capability of IS and regional affiliates, and the claims of risks posed by foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). It then situates these claims in the context of South-East Asia's extremist groups and movements, and the ways that radicalization—a complex phenomenon described as the precursor to violent extremism<sup>8</sup>—has historically occurred in the region.

South-East Asian states are particularly invested in the narrative of outside threats, insisting that Salafi-Jihadist extremism is an imported ideology. This is partially true, but the framing leaves out other factors critical to the evolution of violent extremism, including the role of states themselves and of changing socio-economic and political conditions.

Finally, to illustrate the negative impact of unchallenged assumptions about VE on policy, the paper examines counter-narrative programming, a popular policy option adopted by many states.

CT, CVE and PVE policies are shaped by many forces, not least perceptions of risk and a sense that governments must respond robustly to any threats, and by the attitude of states towards insurgency, extremism and terrorism. These responses are underpinned by domestic political contexts, international trends and geopolitical calculations. Public opinion on the effectiveness of CT, CVE and PVE policies is influenced by state-endorsed narratives about violent extremism. Governments may use policies to shield themselves against criticisms of inaction and unpreparedness, while stressing the need for vigilance and action going forward. Government policies are also affected by the few attacks that have occurred, and how their scale, nature, and suddenness have engendered fear and trauma. As a result, even if some in civil society or the political opposition raise questions, governments may choose to respond defensively, wary of being seen as weak or naïve in the face of danger, or of having let down their citizens.

Analysis of the impact of CT, CVE and PVE policies is also constrained as these issues are framed in terms of national security. National security debates inevitably occur in an arena of information asymmetry. Challenges to received wisdom are not always welcomed, and access to data and detainees is often restricted, thus making independent research difficult. National analysis in turn feeds regional and international debate, potentially skewing several layers of understanding. Without alternate research capacity, conventional security-focused models will continue to dominate.

A significant omission in this paper is an examination of the gendered nature of the assumptions that frame and inform state policies on P/CVE. Violent extremism is often seen as a problem of men, in particular young men. This limited perspective ignores the attempts of women to migrate to IS-held territory, often with their children. Rather than framing women primarily as instruments in P/CVE programming, states and donors that support such programming should ensure that new research takes a more nuanced approach to the role of women and examines its own gendered assumptions.<sup>9</sup>

*This paper is based primarily on an extensive literature review of primary and secondary sources on P/CVE policies and programming. It has also been informed by the other papers in this series and supplemented with some key informant interviews.*

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**ANALYSIS OF  
THE IMPACT OF CT, CVE  
AND PVE POLICIES  
IS ALSO CONSTRAINED AS THESE  
ISSUES ARE FRAMED IN TERMS  
OF NATIONAL SECURITY.**



*Children shelter from the sun in Lanao del Sur, the Philippines.*

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**EXAMINATION OF THE ACTIVITIES OF SOUTHEAST  
ASIAN EXTREMIST GROUPS ... SUGGESTS THAT**

**WHILE THE REGION DOES FACE SOME  
CHALLENGES**

**FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

**IT MAY NOT BE FACING  
THE DIRE THREATS**

**ANALYSTS SUGGEST**

*A flooded street in Pagatin, the Philippines.  
© UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Alecs Ongcal*



### South-East Asia faces a serious threat from extremism

Since 2001, analysts have insisted that the extremist threat to South-East Asia is high. This threat, previously linked to Al-Qaida, is now attached to IS. Although the number of attacks has been low and the prominence of Salafi-Jihadist extremist groups has risen and fallen, observers maintain that there is an ever-worsening threat.<sup>10</sup> Very little evidence is put forward for these assessments beyond reference to polemics from the IS leadership that the region is important to them. These assessments are repeated each time there is an attack, and then amplified through social media by security-focused think tanks, and security experts, as well as traditional media. The propagation of this narrative keeps experts safe from reputational risk—since it is likely a terrorist incident could occur at some stage—and stabilizes the longevity of the security field.

Examination of the activities of South-East Asian extremist groups, the casualties they cause, their political impact and the extent of their funding from outside sources suggests that while the region does face some challenges from violent extremism, it may not be facing the dire threats analysts suggest. There are also dangers in focusing on one threat to the exclusion of others. For example, in the United States and across Europe, authorities ignored the rise of white supremacist violent extremism while focusing on the diminishing risks of IS-related threats.

Across South-East Asian countries, only the Philippines is in the top 10 of the Global Terrorism Index, having shifted up two places to ninth in 2018. But there is no commonly agreed upon measure by which to gauge the extent of extremist violence (in its limited definition in this paper) in the Philippines.<sup>11</sup> Thailand follows in the top 20 and Myanmar is 24<sup>th</sup>. Indonesia is in 42<sup>nd</sup> place and Malaysia is 70<sup>th</sup>, below such countries as Ireland, Sweden and Chile. These rankings are not weighted and thus do not reflect that almost all terrorist attacks take place in the top five countries on the Index and about 90 percent of the rest occur in the top ten.<sup>12</sup> This ranking also elides political and other conflicts, extremist violence, and other forms of terrorist violence, resulting in a significant but inaccurate rise in the number of deaths attributed to terrorism and a consequent misreading of the threat of terrorism globally.

Globally, and across almost all regions, the risks of terrorist acts have dropped significantly. As one study noted:

In particular, terrorism's apparent incidence, and therefore seeming importance, has been multiplied by effectively conflating it with insurgency. Even including 9/11, the number of fatalities committed by terrorists of all stripes outside war zones has been, with very few exceptions, remarkably low both before and after 9/11. During the period from 1970 to 2013—which includes 9/11—the yearly chance an individual within the United States would be killed by terrorism was one in four million. For the period after 9/11 until the present day, that rate is one in 90 million. The rate for other developed countries and even for most less-developed ones is similar.<sup>13</sup>

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**WITH THE EXCEPTION OF SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES, THERE WERE FEW VIOLENT DEATHS IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA FROM IS-LINKED GROUPS DURING THE PEAK OF ITS POWER AT THE DECLARATION OF THE CALIPHATE IN 2014 TO THE MARAWI SIEGE IN 2017.**

With the exception of southern Philippines, there were few violent deaths in South-East Asia from IS-linked groups during the peak of its power at the declaration of the Caliphate in 2014 to the Marawi siege in 2017. Twenty people died in Indonesia and no one was killed in Malaysia, Myanmar or Thailand. In the siege of Marawi, 87 civilians died, about 40 from untreated illness.<sup>14</sup> Other uncounted deaths would have been caused by the displacement of 400,000 people from the city. Nine hundred and seventy-eight militants were killed alongside 168 government forces.<sup>15</sup> While it is difficult to assign an accurate number to the deaths of civilians and security forces, from mid-2014 to the beginning of 2018 it appears to be 264, almost all in Marawi.

Support for extremism is hard to measure as in most countries it is illegal to be a member of any group or organization that openly supports it.<sup>16</sup> Polling presents a wide array of problems, as do definitions of “support”. Showing “understanding” of the rationales of extremist groups, or even a positive view of their tactics, is legal in most countries; funding them, spreading propaganda or joining with them in violent acts is not. Several hundred people did leave the region to join extremist groups in the Middle East but per million Muslims, fewer citizens of South-East Asian nations joined IS than from European states.<sup>17</sup>

Analysis of online activity does not present an accurate picture either; research suggests that there is a significant difference between people who boldly talk online about violent extremism and those who will act.<sup>18</sup> There are many extremist websites in Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Melayu—reports put the number at

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**MOST INDONESIANS  
 SEEM TO HAVE A  
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more than 300 in 2015—but it is a constantly shifting target.<sup>19</sup> A site or social media account may be near dormant or very influential, so the numbers say little. There are also many different tactics online to recruit members. For example, many websites aimed at drawing foreign terrorist fighters to Syria focused on the malevolence of the regime of Bashir al-Assad and were not linked to IS.

Most Indonesians seem to have a negative view of IS; at the peak of IS power in 2015, one poll put this at 79 percent.<sup>20</sup> The same poll reported disapproval in Malaysia at 64 percent. Just four percent of Indonesians and 11 percent of Malaysians approved of IS. Nevertheless, it is unclear what was meant in this poll by a “favourable view” or why people held it thereby telling us little about the real extent of support.

In contrast, in the United States, eight percent of those polled in 2017 supported white nationalism and 39 percent agreed with the statement “white people are currently under attack in this country.”<sup>21</sup> The extent of extremist views in South-East Asia does not appear to be significantly higher than in many countries, despite portrayals to the contrary.

### **IS, AQ and regional networks of extremism pose the greatest threat**

A snapshot of South-East Asia reveals a range of ethno nationalist armed groups: Southern Thailand’s Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO) and Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN); Mindanao’s, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the so-called Ethnic Armed Groups (EAG) in Myanmar, of which the tiny Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) is sometimes distinguished from the others due only to its Muslim membership. The tendency of governments and analysts alike has been since 9/11, when convenient for its immediate policy aims, to label these groups as terrorists, violent extremists, and/or jihadists.<sup>22</sup> These groups have all carried out violent acts, sometimes against civilians, but do not advocate the destruction or exclusion of their enemies. The National People’s Army and the Communist Party of the Philippines are fighting a Maoist insurgency. As is the case with the ethno-nationalist groups, they are not driven by the need to destroy their opponents and are potentially open to negotiated settlements. Thus, while there are groups that use terror and groups that could be described as insurgent or separatist, they are not violent extremists in the sense of rejecting all pluralism or associating their own survival with the need to cause harm to others.

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**PLEDGING SUPPORT FOR IS IS A WAY FOR A GROUP TO INCREASE ITS LEGITIMACY, REBRANDING ITSELF AS GLOBAL RATHER THAN PURELY LOCAL, TO INCREASE PUBLIC FEAR, AND TO ATTRACT NEW AUDIENCES INTERESTED IN THE ESCHATOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF IS AND THE IDEA OF A PURE ISLAMIC STATE.**

Islamic State influence and reach should be assessed in terms of greater participation of individuals and groups or institutions. Some violent extremist groups in South-East Asia have pledged allegiance to IS.<sup>23</sup> There are several reasons for this loyalty. By pledging support for IS, a group can increase its legitimacy, rebranding itself as global rather than purely local to increase public fear, and to attract new audiences interested in the eschatological aspects of IS and the idea of a pure Islamic State. Supporting IS and signaling greater extremism is also a way to outbid other groups in a highly competitive market for supporters. None of this, however, seems to change much in terms of a group's resources or capacity for violence. Even the groups involved in the Marawi siege—an unprecedented coalition of pro-IS forces in the Philippines—only received a relatively small amount of money from IS and a handful of foreign fighters. Arguably, they are, in the words of one analyst, “imaginary” alliances.<sup>24</sup>

Islamic State may have inspired some terrorist attacks by these groups, however they have proved to be neither very deadly nor enduring. They also supplied some funding, which was not renewed, and the inspiration for the occupation of the city of Marawi in the Philippines through a loose conglomeration of supporting groups.<sup>25</sup>

However, the influence of IS should not be dismissed entirely. The end of the Caliphate has not meant an end to the fighting, and reports of IS demise appear premature. In prison camps in Syria and Iraq, where many members and their families are now being held, the group has stirred back into life and begun a new campaign of violence and indoctrination. The demise of the Caliphate and the transformation of IS back to an underground terrorist force has probably not dented the number of existing supporters, although it is unlikely to have encouraged many more.<sup>26</sup>

### **The influence of IS on individuals in South-East Asia**

The influence of IS in South-East Asia has less to do with offering individuals a home in the Caliphate, seeking territory, or providing support and funding for actions regionally. Instead, it hinges on indirect impacts: providing people with a narrative framework for their desires; inspiring local individuals or groups to violence; or changing the nature and aims of violent action. As the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka showed, IS is capable of inspiring deadly attacks while offering little in the way of direction, financing or logistical support.

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**TRADITIONAL RESEARCH ... HAS ACCURATELY IDENTIFIED CERTAIN WELL-ESTABLISHED PATTERNS, SUGGESTING THAT IT IS, FOR THE MOST PART, ANCHORED IN LOCAL CIRCUMSTANCE AND EVEN NATIONAL OR SUBNATIONAL IDENTITY AND PROPAGATED THROUGH FAMILY AND OFFLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS.**

Traditional research on, and analysis of, extremism in South-East Asian contexts has accurately identified certain well-established patterns suggesting that it is, for the most part, anchored in local circumstance and even national or subnational identity, and propagated through family and offline social networks. Language and local mores still divide groups as much as extremism brings them together. Violent groups in the area cover a spectrum from those whose vision seems to be nihilistic to those who have a clear political aim and wish to be part of a negotiated settlement.

In Indonesia and Malaysia, individuals who join extremist groups have mostly grown up amidst Islam. Unlike European IS members, they are not deracinated, or victims of religious discrimination or exclusion.<sup>27</sup> Many are second or third generation radicals whose parents may have married to cement the relationships between radical families. They tend to be well-read, well-educated in Islam and often quite prosperous. This is not the rage of the disenfranchised, excluded or dispossessed, but violence driven by those who have rejected religious pluralism, usually even within their own religion. In this, they resemble IS. Those who do join from outside family circles tend to be slow to radicalize, often taking years between starting down the road and carrying out a violent act.<sup>28</sup> In the Philippines, extremists have often come from clans with a long history of political and religious violence, connected to crime and political competition. They are not always dispossessed but have grown up in a national system that has mostly neglected Mindanao's welfare.<sup>29</sup>

The major impact of IS has been to disrupt some of these patterns. Past experiences of the evolution of violent extremists in South-East Asia may no longer accurately describe the evolution of a younger generation. Indeed, earlier experiences may draw the younger cohort away from established groups to IS and IS-like groups.

Extremists in Indonesia appear to be separating into traditionalists linked to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and new cells that have associated themselves with IS. Overall, South-East Asian supporters of IS—in contrast to members of other extremist groups in the region—appear to be younger and to go from first contact to first violent act much more quickly.<sup>30</sup> They are also less well-versed in theology than those with a more traditional extremist profile. “JI people studied and read books,” said one analyst in Indonesia, “ISIS people just watch YouTube.”<sup>31</sup>

In South-East Asia, the appeal of IS for those who tried to join (whether successfully or not) has been around either the economic, social or religious prospects of building a Caliphate, or the belief that Syria is the place to be when the world ends. Signing up to IS's agenda was thus about being part of the grand forces of history, not signing up to a terrorist group like Al-Qaida. Much of the appeal of IS came from its successes, particularly its control over territory and people. This seemed more heroic than the method of repetitive attacks advanced by AQ, which often just led to the rounding up of supporters.<sup>32</sup> According to Olivier Roy: "The genius of IS is to offer young volunteers the narrative framework within which they can achieve their aspirations".<sup>33</sup>

Islamic State's adoption of extreme and performative violence, as well as the scale of its success, appear to be as important to attracting recruits. A cohort of extremists has now grown up with the idea that an Islamic state should use violence on the scale and in the manner of IS, which beheaded enemies, enslaved and attempted to wipe out an entire people, and burned people alive in cages. Roy contends: "I believe that the systematic association with death is one of the keys to today's radicalization: the nihilist dimension is central. What fascinates is pure revolt, not the construction of a utopia."<sup>34</sup>

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**FOR EXTREMISTS IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA, VIOLENCE HAS TRADITIONALLY NOT BEEN AN END IN ITSELF NOR HAS IT BEEN AS MEDIA-DRIVEN, AS IT WAS BY IS; RATHER, FOR MOST GROUPS IT HAS BEEN A MEANS TO POLITICAL ENDS.**

For extremists in South-East Asia, violence has traditionally not been an end in itself nor has it been as media-driven, as it was by IS; rather, for most groups, it has been a means to political ends. In Indonesia, for example, these grievances stretch back to writing of the country's first constitution in 1945, revenge for the killing of Muslims by Christians in inter-communal violence in the late 1990s, and general push back against perceived Western influence.<sup>35</sup> Islamic State's greatest and most dangerous legacy may be to have exposed many people globally to the notion that an Islamic state should deploy almost limitless violence against its opponents. That idea possibly remains more attractive in the abstract than based on personal experience. Yet, it would only need to be a small number of people in South-East Asia acting on the belief that extreme violence is almost a duty. This is not unthinkable as both Islamic and Buddhist extremists in this region are linked to and ideologically inspired by attacks in South Asia<sup>36</sup>, such as the 2016 Holey Bakery attacks in Dhaka and the 2019 Easter attacks in Sri Lanka, which were carried out by small groups of young men whose families did not embrace extremism and who might have been considered relatively immune to its lure due to their secular educations.

## Challenges to establishing IS presence in South-East Asia

Influence is somewhat easier to track on an institutional level. Islamic State will want to maintain some sort of territorial base now that it has lost the Caliphate it attempted to build in Syria and Iraq. Outside small areas of the southern Philippines, however, South-East Asia offers barely any ungoverned spaces for it to occupy. The epicentre of any would-be IS caliphate in South-East Asia is Mindanao, but this is not the prospect it once was; the sea route from Malaysia through the Sulu Sea to Mindanao is increasingly policed.<sup>37</sup> It cannot be compared to the thousands of miles of open land borders in the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Activities by extremists in the Philippines often appear in the IS media almost immediately, suggesting a close link on some level, at least in terms of media support. It is not obvious that organizational direction and core funding goes from IS to the Philippines.<sup>38</sup>

The security analyst Anthony Davis noted in 2018:

Over a year after the fall of the IS capital of Raqqa and the siege of Marawi, at most around 100 FTFs are estimated by Philippine authorities to have reached the Sulu-Mindanao region. Whether this number warrants terms such as “flocking” and “flooding” currently bandied around in media reporting is a matter of semantics. But it certainly does not amount to a militarily decisive force let alone a nucleus for the all-foreign units seen in Syria recently and in Afghanistan in the late 1980s and 1990s.<sup>39</sup>

The government response to the Marawi attack depleted and scattered IS-aligned forces to ever more remote areas. Fighters from the Middle East, FTFs or others, no longer have a clear geographical area to target. There is little political and organizational cohesion; atomized armed groups function in fluid alliances based on family, clan and criminality. It seems unlikely that IS can end the longstanding factionalism of Mindanao’s historically-divided violent extremist groups. Moreover, there are significant risks that the IS brand and message would be degraded if it were to attempt such an intervention.

There are cultural and power dynamics at play as well. South-East Asia is seen by many Muslims from the Middle East and North Africa heartland of Islam as a backwater when it comes

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**SOME ANALYSTS POINT TO SIMILARITIES BETWEEN SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST THAT COULD ENCOURAGE IS TO REGARD IT AS A STRATEGIC PRIORITY ...HOWEVER, THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST ARE MORE STRIKING.**

to religious thought or teaching. The region does not host a major religious educational establishment nor any of the main religious or philosophical thinkers whose work contributes to the framework of transnational Jihadist thinking. There is also underlying racism that colours the perception of Middle Eastern Islamist organizations towards South-East Asian Muslims.<sup>40</sup>

Some analysts point to similarities between South-East Asia and the Middle East that could encourage IS to regard it as a strategic priority. These include porous borders, poor policing, disgruntled Muslims and weak regimes.<sup>41</sup> However, the differences between South-East Asia and the Middle East are more striking than the commonalities. States in South-East Asia are robust by global standards,<sup>42</sup> the level of conflict is far lower, and governance much stronger than in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>43</sup> Islamic State has not been able to exploit conflicts in southern Thailand or Myanmar as it has in the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Organizations fighting the government in Thailand and Myanmar identify as strictly ethno-nationalist insurgents and have actively distanced themselves from globalized jihadist causes.<sup>44</sup>

There are groups that have historically been aligned with global Salafi-Jihadist causes, or that have sprung up more recently in response to IS. Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia, the Abu Sayyaf Group, the Maute Group and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in the Philippines, as well as groups such as the tiny cells inspired by IS in Indonesia and Malaysia, can all be described as violent extremist in the limited sense used by this paper. All these groups may say they want to create an Islamic State in South-East Asia, but they operate under constraints of the security context, ideology, geography and capacity. They may swear allegiance to IS or AQ but most have shown little capacity to expand outside quite small networks in their own countries or provinces; they are still mostly family-run firms.<sup>45</sup>

Only JI has the history and regional networks that make organizing towards this goal an even marginally realistic enterprise. But following sustained efforts by the Indonesian state, JI has been seriously diminished as a force. While it has not repudiated violence, in 2007, it developed a line that the fight should be post-poned until most Muslims support it.<sup>46</sup> Noordin Mat Top, a Malaysian trained in Afghanistan, continued violent attacks against Western-oriented targets until he was killed two years later.<sup>47</sup> Since then, JI has been a quiescent force, while IS-linked groups have drawn most new recruits



from among young Indonesians. An association with Al-Qaida also runs contrary to IS's aims; indeed the two organizations have a deep mutual hostility: AQ has very different ideas about the Caliphate and groups associated with it, and like JI in Indonesia, hold divergent views on the utility of violence.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, while JI established deep links over many years around the region, IS networks and recruitment rely much more on social media and less on domestic political concerns than JI once did. This change, along with the group's intense Middle East and North Africa focus, has also meant that it has not cultivated the kinds of links and activities that are more reliable methods of recruitment in South-East Asia.<sup>49</sup>

Islamic State's orders are often not followed, even by enthusiasts. When IS suggested that those who could not make it from Indonesia and Malaysia to the Middle East should fight in Mindanao instead, there was a decidedly lukewarm response. For those interested in IS, the group's success and visibility, and the Caliphate are the main attractions.<sup>50</sup>

### The prospect of fighters returning from the Middle East amplifies the threat

*The dangers posed by South-East Asian ISIS fighters both to their home countries and to the current conflict zone, cannot be underestimated.*<sup>51</sup>

Security analysts often assume the following: there are many potential returnees; they will be able to make it home without being detected by the authorities; once they are home they will want to pass on their knowledge and skills to others; and they all remain highly radicalized. These assumptions are not entirely accurate nor even verifiable.

It is hard to know precisely how many people from South-East Asia went to the Middle East to fight, but per million Muslims, the numbers were not large. Some 1,500 left Indonesia and Malaysia.<sup>52</sup> Few Filipinos went; most of those engaged with Salafi-Jihadi extremism fought at home. There is no clear evidence of anyone joining from Thailand or Myanmar. But the number of FTFs globally has been significant. Within a year of the establishment of the Caliphate, some 20,000 people had joined from abroad, more than the number that fought in Afghanistan during 10 years of the war there in the 1980s.<sup>53</sup>

It is similarly difficult to put numbers on fighters who have been killed in battle, executed by IS for attempting to desert and other crimes, or died of natural causes.<sup>54</sup> Thousands are now held in camps by Kurdish forces or have escaped elsewhere.<sup>55</sup> But given that the appeal for many who went was to fight in the battles that would precede the End Times, it is likely that many have fought to the end there.<sup>56</sup>

Detention in Kurdish and Iraqi camps may lead to another round of radicalization and more concrete reasons to hold fast to the ideology; IS itself emerged from the torture chambers of prisons in Iraq, splitting from AQ and adopting an even more violent posture. Much depends on how governments around the world respond to Kurdish pleas to take the prisoners and IS families off their hands.<sup>57</sup> Interviews with many of those held in Kurdish camps suggest a sense of regret about having joined IS, a sense that IS misled people, and a desire to go home among both fighters and their families. At the same time, detainees are likely to say anything if they think it might improve their chances of release or access to improved conditions. It is impossible to say who is truly repentant.

Some of the most dedicated are likely to be the estimated 435 Indonesians who tried to join IS in the Middle East but were held in Turkey or before they left their home countries.<sup>58</sup> They may still retain an ideological fervour undented by the harsh realities of life in Syria or Iraq. On the other hand, they do not have the combat experience or the technical skills that potentially make returnees dangerous.

Several thousand European foreign fighters are believed to have returned to their homes and some are known to have carried out attacks. Research on these returnees and the attacks some have carried out suggest that the involvement of FTFs may make attacks deadlier. One study showed that FTFs were involved in 18 of the 27 IS attacks in Europe between January 2014 and July 2016.<sup>59</sup>

As explained in the UNDP report *Homecoming: The Return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters in South-East Asia*,<sup>60</sup> however, European IS adherents appear to be quite different from those who left South-East Asia. Returning to their home countries also appears to have been much easier for these fighters and, possibly, less traumatic. They have been mostly involved in self-organized and funded attacks with little connection to IS beyond inspiration. No one has openly emerged as a charismatic figure bringing in new recruits—

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**THOSE WHO JOINED IS TENDED TO VIEW IT AS A PERMANENT MOVE, NOT AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN FIGHTING SKILLS TO BRING BACK TO THEIR HOME COUNTRIES.**

with the caveat that little is known about the whereabouts or activities of most returning FTFs.<sup>61</sup>

Islamic State jihadists from South-East Asia are also different in motivation and behaviour from JI members who left to fight in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, with a clear aim of returning home to with experience and skills to fight their own governments. Those who joined IS tended to view it as a permanent move, not an opportunity to learn fighting skills to bring back to their home countries. They often financed their journeys by selling all their assets and took their families with them. Many were women with their children; one study said both made up 70 percent of those from South-East Asia.<sup>62</sup>

In such an environment of uncertainty, an abundance of caution is important. Actions should be practical, accountable and based on both the rule of law and human rights. Allowing FTFs and their families to return to their South-East Asian countries of origin with no de-radicalization process or social support in place would clearly be irresponsible but mere imprisonment is not likely to achieve results. Likewise, regional experts on extremism interviewed argued that ignoring those from South-East Asia jailed in Syria and Iraq, or held in Kurdish camps, with hopes that they will not return only raises risks.<sup>63</sup> The role of the communities to which some FTFs will return will be crucial, and they must be supported to receive and reintegrate former violent extremists.

### **Extremism is driven by ideas imported by these groups**

Policymakers, academics and others engaged in countering and preventing extremism in South-East Asia have focused on the risk of external forces and extremist ideologies generated outside the country (by IS and, previously, AQ) gaining a hold on communities and individuals through social media and the efforts of established networks of violent extremists.

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**EXTERNAL ACTORS AND IMPORTED IDEAS PLAY INTO PRE-EXISTING AND LOCAL DYNAMICS.**

There is some, but limited, evidence to support this concern. But even when such factors are part of the equation, the turn towards extremism and terrorist action by individuals is a complex, many-layered phenomenon that the UN and World Bank define as a “pathway”: “[t]he trajectory that every society shapes through the constant, dynamic interaction of its actors, institutions, and structural factors over time.”<sup>64</sup>

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**STATES CAN ALSO BE MOTIVATED TO ASSIGN OUTSIZE INFLUENCE TO FOREIGN ELEMENTS, IN PARTICULAR IS OR AQ, BECAUSE DOING SO IS GEOPOLITICALLY BENEFICIAL.**

External actors and imported ideas play into pre-existing and local dynamics. These include localized push factors—domestic structural factors including socioeconomic, political and cultural phenomena that might encourage or entrench extremist tendencies and groupings. Blanket assessments about the malign and substantial power of outside influences also do not disaggregate the so-called pull factors that might make foreign ideologies attractive, such as the desire for a better life, including by belonging to a bigger cause or countering a perceived existential threat. Many existing groups have extremist antecedents that predate the emergence of global Salafi-Jihadist extremists.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, the state can be a driver of extremism, through sociopolitical exclusion, responses to conflict, or by disregarding human rights. States can also be motivated to assign outsized influence to foreign elements, in particular IS or AQ, because doing so is geopolitically beneficial. The US-driven War on Terror continues to exert profound and often subtle effects on CVE and PVE policies across the world.

It is this complex of factors that former insurgents from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front—now in charge of the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region—encapsulate when they insist that, to keep extremism at bay in Mindanao, autonomy was essential and, following its implementation, delivering significant improvements in security, services and economic opportunities.<sup>66</sup>

There is, however, a major new factor whose impact cannot yet be assessed. In parts of South-East Asia—Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar—mainstream politics, as undertaken even by traditionally secular parties, is marked by a newly overt and competitive majoritarianism.

Even when appeals to majoritarianism are related to electoral cycles and do not have post-poll policy impacts—as in the case of Indonesia where anti-Christian sentiment is played up in campaigns but not followed by legislation—such politicking contributes to a mainstreaming of extreme positions. The most deadly consequence of this has been in the case in Myanmar, where the government and many citizens agreed on the expulsion of large sections of the Rohingya community.<sup>67</sup>

Although not comparable in impact, even in Indonesia, the exclusionary rightward shift of the political centre legitimises positions historically considered against the state's founding principles of Pancasila, including the idea that a Muslim-majority country is best ruled by a Muslim.<sup>68</sup> This has played out in counter-reactions against Muslim minorities, especially in the eastern part of the country.<sup>69</sup>

On the extreme fringe, minority Muslim groups such as Ahmadiyyas and Shias continue to face challenges from the mainstream, persecution and threats.<sup>70</sup> In Malaysia, the debate about the introduction of Jawi, the Arabic script to write Bahasa Melayu, in schools for all communities, fuels the perception of non-Muslims that Malaysia's multi-ethnic identity is under threat.<sup>71</sup> On the extreme end, the country is the largest source of FTFs in the region.

In South-East Asia, as in some parts of the West and in India, alongside an increasing mainstream acceptance of intolerance, there has also been a strengthening of powerful non-governmental extremist movements. These include the Ma Ba Tha in Myanmar, and the Islamic Defenders Front and the Betawi Brotherhood Forum in Indonesia among others.<sup>72</sup>

Majoritarian politics promotes the idea that the majority — be it ethnic, racial or religious — is somehow threatened by minorities, even when they are mostly disadvantaged or already restricted in their access to public goods by law. Its creation of in-groups and out-groups and its promotion of conspiratorial ideas about the malevolence of minorities, is a step towards violent extremism by states. In Indonesia, Malaysia and Myanmar, the idea that minority groups that mostly came to the country during the colonial era unfairly dominate the economy, has been used to promote majoritarianism in laws and in politics. This was often seen as part of the beliefs of rural constituents of the ruling parties, but majoritarian views have long become embedded in urban and middle-class populations. The discourse of human rights and the structures of civil society and democratic political parties have been weaponized by majoritarian politicians and the urban middle class to further restrict minorities and to push back against any effort by minorities to claim protections. For example, extremist Buddhist monks have adopted the language of religious freedom to press the case for greater legal protections for Buddhists, even though they are dominant in the society.<sup>73</sup>

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 INTO THEIR OWN  
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Simultaneously, majority groups often have an underclass that cannot access the same benefits of this group identity as its elites and, increasingly, middle classes. Yet, the narrative remains that these parties and the governments they form, as well as these groups, represent “the people”, understood to be ordinary, non-cosmopolitan citizens. PVE programming can thus misunderstand the new ways in which extremist networks can be formed and supported.

There is growing evidence that intolerant majoritarian political discourse can provide opportunities for extremist groups “who are able to blend official narratives into their own discourses, enabling them to creatively update their existing belief systems and draw renewed legitimacy by bringing their ideologies into closer proximity to mainstream views.”<sup>74</sup> These contexts are all evolving, and the evidence is limited, but researchers would do well to examine whether an increasingly exclusionary conservatism at the political centre inoculates or emboldens extremists.

States can often gain by characterizing violent extremism as a scourge from the outside. Portraying it as irrational, foreign, difficult to control, and thus requiring expansive state interventions or political responses in support of greater social conservatism can benefit many. Conventional PVE-focused research and policy recommendations will go only so far in challenging these entrenched interests. What is also needed is a broader sociopolitical stock-taking, with debates and findings channelled through mainstream media.

### Counter-narratives are an effective way to challenge these ideas

Across South-East Asia, organizations are working to counter narratives put out by extremist groups. In some cases, efforts have been driven by local religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, which together account for over 100 million members.<sup>75</sup> In others, however, the pushback has been motivated by the large amounts of donor money available for these efforts.<sup>76</sup>

There are good reasons to fund this work, principally that the rhetorical space—online and offline—should not be ceded entirely to extremists. Pushback is important to sustain and motivate those who wish to see a pluralist society. But this work should be done with few illusions. Those who are avidly reading sites linked to extremists and absorbing their world view are unlikely to be persuaded by anything put out by governments or foreign-funded groups. In many instances, they may be looking for a channel for revolt, be intrigued by how it would be to live under a Caliphate, or come from a multi generational heritage of extremist beliefs and be seeking to “modernise” or otherwise develop their strategies.<sup>77</sup> Depending on their level of engagement, such individuals are more or less likely to seek out diverse viewpoints. But studies show that most people tend to reflect confirmation bias, preferring information that backs up their own pre-existing ideas; it is extremely difficult to change a mind that has been made up.<sup>78</sup>

There is, in any case, currently limited evidence that the majority of counter-narrative efforts prevent extremism. Counter-narrative campaigns can be run by those who do not fully understand the local landscape of extremist thought and often apply experiences from elsewhere. They rarely move rapidly enough to keep up with developments in extremist thinking, and without firm research, their output risks engaging insufficiently with target audiences. Importantly, while technology may have changed the environment in which extremists engage, in most places recruitment still takes place in person and the ethos is very social.<sup>79</sup>

As with deradicalization programmes, counter-narrative efforts that do show signs of success tend to be close to the ground and anchored in a context of providing extremists with a community and a future. Appeals for tolerance, the rule of law or national unity may meet with limited success, not least because individuals' life experiences often provide evidence for how loosely, if at all, others—including their own governments or often unequal societies—uphold such principles. These appeals can lack credibility and there is little immediate pay-off for being good in the abstract.

Counter-narrative work is by its very nature highly political and politicized. Some, such as Andrew Glazzard, have argued that counter-narrative work is “barely more than a euphemism for state propaganda—communications designed to further a state’s political objectives.”<sup>80</sup> While there may be a place for government messaging, counter-narratives must be sensitive, tempered to social contexts and be mindful of the marginalization of groups within society.

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**INCREASINGLY  
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REGARDING ISLAMIST  
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APPEAR TO BE  
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Counter-narrative work also tends to examine radicalization, as if only violent extremists were capable of radicalizing. But governments and societies radicalize too. Indeed, increasingly radicalized public discourses and media hyperbole in Western countries regarding Islamist violent extremism appear to be normalizing hate speech. For extremist groups, and individuals inclined to extremist violence in South-East Asia, such hate speech only confirms the assessment that their communities and religion face an existential threat that needs to be countered. South-East Asian states need to monitor the impact of global discourses on their own citizens and policies.

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WHEN THE WAR  
BROKE OUT IN SYRIA,  
I FELT ANGRY INSIDE  
AND I WANTED TO DO  
SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

AHMAD

*Ahmad at his computer in Kuala Lumpur.*  
© UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Jules Ong



STORIES TOLD BY THOSE  
AFFECTED BY VIOLENT EXTREMISM  
THIS IS AHMAD'S STORY

I watched the news and followed social media to keep up with the daily developments. From the things I watched and read online, I believed my Muslim brothers were being oppressed.

I got in touch with jihadists through social media. Most of them were asking for us to help spread their ideology and raise funds to assist some Malaysians who wished to go over and help other jihadists in Syria. I created my own Telegram group, and then recruited my members through social media by chatting to them on messenger.

I didn't have any family problems at the time or anything, I actually have a very good relationship with my family, my parents, my siblings and I always spend time with my wife, kids. I was stable financially and had a career. I was respected in my workplace.

But I became really focused on my job and facilitating my own group, my own jihadist group. In my eyes, our fight was to help the oppressed brothers in other countries. I was in deep, but no one realized it.

Most of my friends were shocked when I was arrested, but I felt strangely relieved. The fight is a burden, especially I came to feel that the fight was wrong. Malaysia is a very peaceful Muslim country. Nobody is stopping you from praying, from practicing anything about your religion, as long as you don't disturb other people's rights. I didn't want to promote violence.

When I was done with the rehabilitation programme and came out from prison, I said to myself, I'm a new person, and I am thankful I have gained so much knowledge through the programme and perspective. When I think back, I am scared about what would have happened if I had gone too far down the rabbit hole and it would have been very difficult to come back. Or maybe there would have been no way to have come back from it again.



Ahmad at the mosque.

© UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Jules Ong



Family time in front of the TV.

© UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Jules Ong



... RESEARCHERS WOULD DO  
WELL TO EXAMINE WHETHER  
AN INCREASINGLY  
**EXCLUSIONARY  
CONSERVATISM**  
**INOCULATES**  
**& EMBOLDENS**  
**EXTREMISTS.**

AT THE  
POLITICAL  
CENTRE

*A slum area built on the riverbanks of Jakarta, Indonesia.  
© UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Jefri Tarigan*

Terrorism analysts, the media and governments feed into a narrative of ever-increasing risk to South-East Asian states posed by IS and groups inspired by or related to it. A specific fear concerns the impact of returning FTFs. These fears are neither borne out by empirical nor historical evidence. At the same time, the assessment and analysis of states does not always reflect either new possible pathways to violent extremism or rapidly changing domestic political contexts—many of which are often characterized by majoritarianism. Political actors can also benefit by playing up the risk of violent extremism. These factors can lead to an excessive fear of unpredictable events, a misalignment of resources with risks, and an inability to identify new sources of risk in a timely manner.

There are challenges to addressing these shortcomings. Governments are averse to downgrading broadly-stated risks, since an individual or a small group could launch a terrorist attack. In addition, some actors benefit from propagating these flawed assumptions and the P/CVE programming that follows from them. Governments cannot influence some factors that could re-radicalize FTFs, or enable the formation of new networks, such as can happen in IS prison camps or detention centres in Turkey. Finally, research on violent extremism has insufficiently grasped the rapidly changing sociopolitical factors that alter the pathways by which people move towards violent extremism.

Yet, extremism has always been present, albeit in different forms. It has been dealt with through conflict resolution, the promotion of reconciliation between divided communities, and improved state behaviour including respect for human rights and efforts to improve inclusion and equality. It is now imperative to test the assumptions that drive P/CVE programming and engage in more holistic research to uncover the changing calculus of risk South-East Asian states face.

>>  
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 TEST THE ASSUMPTIONS  
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 STATES FACE.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS



### Recognize that P/CVE policies are mostly untested and unproven

Current P/CVE policies are currently a mix of old counter-terrorism approaches and as yet unproven policies developed in Europe and the United States. They are often piecemeal and ignore the complex social phenomena that lead to violent extremism. States must commit to revisiting these policies and testing them against empirical and historical information.



### Commission and support challenging and wide-ranging context-specific independent research

Think tanks, donors and research organizations should start with a wide-ranging review of the efficacy of the past 10-20 years of P/CVE policies and programming. In doing so, they must be wary of research being co-opted merely to validate current and past programming, as doing so can obscure new sources of risk. A forward-looking research agenda is more holistic and iterative, factoring in the broad changes occurring in sociopolitical systems and the speed with which these happen.



### Keep the focus of policing and counter-terrorism on domestic groups of concern rather than focusing unduly on foreign links

The available evidence suggests that, for now at least, local groups are the primary threat and the influence of IS is limited. There is good reason to remain vigilant, but local groups and conditions need greater attention.



**Work to bring FTFs and their families back from the Middle East, treat them within the rule of law, and support their reintegration into communities that do not support extremism**

Bringing back the relatively few FTFs and family members is politically unpopular; however, leaving them in Kurdish camps risks engendering further and deeper radicalization. Families must be re-integrated in such a way that they are not shunned by moderate communities and have somewhere to feel at home other than alongside other extremists. These efforts must have sufficient financial and social support.



**Reduce, but do not stop, counter-narrative programming; instead, integrate it into broader socioeconomic programming**

There is limited proof of the efficacy of many of the current P/CVE approaches, in particular counter-narrative programming. In part, this may be explained by the variability of extremist behaviours and motivations. While it is important to continue providing alternative narratives in the online space, so that it is not entirely ceded to extremists, it is even more important to focus on ensuring that voices that raise socio-political and economic grievances are heard and addressed by governments. Research suggests, therefore, that it is more effective to focus on a broader improvement of social conditions and improving the performance of the state.



IN SUCH AN ENVIRONMENT

**OF UNCERTAINTY,**

AN ABUNDANCE OF CAUTION  
IS IMPORTANT. ACTIONS SHOULD BE

**PRACTICAL, ACCOUNTABLE**

AND BASED ON BOTH THE **RULE OF LAW**

**AND HUMAN RIGHTS.**



*Children play kites against the skyline of the main business district of Jakarta, Indonesia.*

© UNDP Asia-Pacific/Jefri Tarigan



1. This report uses Islamic State (IS) for the group variously known as the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State in Shams (ISIS) or by its Arabic acronym Daesh. Some object to this term as they believe it to be neither Islamic nor a state. The use of Islamic State as a name does not imply any view of Islam or the group. It has no political connotations and implies no legitimacy. It is used here for the sake of simplicity. We also use the term Caliphate for the area under IS control in Iraq and Syria. IS leader al-Baghdadi declared the Caliphate on 29 June 2014. Its last bastion fell to Kurdish forces on 22 March 2019. The use of this term, likewise, does not suggest legitimacy.
2. *UN General Assembly Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary-General*. A/70/674, 24 December 2015. Available at <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/70/674>.
3. J. M. Berger, *Extremism* (Boston, MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series, 2018).
4. A UNDP discussion paper explains the term as follows: “The root causes of violent extremism are complex, multifaceted and intertwined, and relate to the structural environment in which radicalization and possibly violent extremism can start to take hold. Violent extremism is the product of historical, political, economic and social circumstances, including the impact of regional and global power politics. Growing horizontal inequalities are one of the consistently cited drivers of violent extremism. Critically, unemployment or poverty alone is not the only push factor inciting violence and extremism: perceptions of injustice, human-rights violations, social-political exclusion, widespread corruption or sustained mistreatment of certain groups, are also considered important push factors....There is a risk that failed political transitions, with weak institutions, law enforcement and checks and balances provide a fertile ground for violent extremism. Weak States thus create opportunities for the physical location of extremist groups. Other structural drivers include the rejection of a State’s socio-economic-political system and rejection of growing diversity in society. The banalization of violence through its daily projection and consumption (via media, books, movies, magazines, video games) should not be ignored as a contributor to the rise in violent behaviour....In addition to these structural drivers, people get pulled into radical and violent movements through well considered manipulation and accompaniment (socialization) processes, often facilitated by personal, emotional or psychological factors, such as alienation, a search for identity and dignity, revenge for previous mistreatment, breakdown of communication between authority figures and youth, as well as through virtual communities on social media.” United Nations Development Programme, “Preventing Violent Extremism Through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect For Diversity: A Development Response to Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism” (New York, UNDP, 2016).
5. For a more complete historical discussion of the difference between Salafism and Salafi-Jihadism, see International Crisis Group (2004), *Indonesia Backgrounder: Why Salafism and Terrorism Mostly Don’t Mix*. Asia Report No. 83 (2004). See also Karnavian. *Explaining Islamist Insurgencie*, p. 115 and L. Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York, Random House, 2007).
6. For instance, Singaporean academic Dr Rohan Gunaratna regularly predicts chaos in Asia following terror attacks. Most recently, following the 2019 Easter bombings in Sri Lanka, he claimed the “complete collapse of



- the national security system”. See M. Borham and A. Singh, *Rohan Gunaratna debunked?*, *Sunday Observer* online, 26 May 2019. Available at <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2019/05/26/news-features/rohan-gunaratna-debunked>.
7. The index measures four factors: terrorist incidents, deaths, injuries and property damage over five years and then develops a weighted average. See Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2018*. Available at <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/12/Global-Terrorism-Index-2018-1.pdf>.
  8. United Nations Development Programme, *Preventing Violent Extremism Through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity: A Development Response to Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism* (New York, United Nations Development Programme, 2016).
  9. For a recent report on how gender dynamics underpin violent extremism in South and South-East Asia see United Nations Development Programme and UN Women, *Conflicting Identities: The Nexus between Masculinities, Femininities and Violent Extremism in Asia* (Bangkok, 2020). Available at [www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/the-nexus-between-masculinities-femininities-and-violent-extremism-in-asia.html](https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/the-nexus-between-masculinities-femininities-and-violent-extremism-in-asia.html).
  10. See for example A. Habulan and others, *South-East Asia: Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Online Extremism*. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, vol. 10, No. 1 (2018) pp. 7–30; E. Amin, *South-East Asia: The New Terrorism Destination* (Cairo, Asharq Al-Awsat, 2018); R. Gunaratna, *ASEAN’s Greatest Counter-Terrorism Challenge: The Shift from “Need to Know” to Smart to Share* (Konrad Adenaur Stiftung, 2018). Available at [https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/288192/Terrorism\\_Gunaratna.pdf/20fb5191-5289-d16e-a6c1-879a0442fbe4](https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/288192/Terrorism_Gunaratna.pdf/20fb5191-5289-d16e-a6c1-879a0442fbe4).
  11. The country suffers from one of the highest levels of violence in Asia but there is little evidence that much of this is driven by extremism. Reporting on violence in the Philippines is difficult because there are so many possible actors: several organized extremist groups, clans, the police, the military, various insurgents, and indigenous groups defending themselves against outsiders and criminals. It is often unclear who has carried out an attack or why, and only a small number can be attributed with much certainty.
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- In Indonesia, groups like the Forum of Islamic Law Activists (FAKSI), Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) or the Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia, Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT), Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid wal Jihad, Ring Banten and Gema Salam have pledged allegiance in the past.
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- more mainstream Islamist, usually Sunni, groups. Individuals from these communities would not, however, be welcome in traditional Salafi-Jihadi groups either, and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, this paper assumes that people from South-East Asia who join or act in the name of IS are not from these groups.
28. Extremists in Europe appear to be very different. Researchers such as Olivier Roy have found that European Islamist extremists are mostly second-generation immigrants with secular parents and little religious experience. They have often led lives of petty crime, drinking and using or dealing drugs. Those not seeking redemption after a life of crime have been seeking adventure. About a fifth of those recruited in Europe have been converts. Their religious conversion was invariably individual or in a small group but never in the context of a recognized religious organization. Many took to faith in prison and their beliefs were shaped in opposition to that of their parents' generation. European extremists go from a religious re-awakening to violence often in a very short time. See O. Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of*
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## KEY TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT (GLOSSARY)

**Countering Violent Extremism (CVE):** Programs, projects of activities designed to actively counter violent extremism ideas and/or activities.

**Counterterrorism (CT):** Actions, often implemented by security forces, to actively counter known terrorist groups.

**Disengagement:** Disengagement is understood to be the process of an individual or group ceasing to use violence, leaving a movement or migrating to a non-violent role to achieve political goals.

**Extremism:** A belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group.

**Hate Speech:** Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.

**Insurgents:** Localized armed groups using violence to achieve specific negotiable goals that have their own political infrastructure as well as the control of population and territory.

**Majoritarianism:** Majoritarian politics promotes the idea that the majority — be it ethnic, racial or religious — is somehow threatened by minorities, even when they are mostly disadvantaged or already restricted in their access to public goods by law.

**Preventing Violent Extremism:** Programs, projects of activities designed to prevent violent extremism ideology taking route or activities taking off.

**Radicalization:** The process by which people are converted to radical ideas, such as those held by violent extremists.

**Terrorism:** Terrorism, as used in this paper, refers to the use of indiscriminate violence, likely targeting civilians. It refers only to a behaviour or an act; it does not indicate the nature of the group or individuals responsible.

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