

Entry and Exit Points:  
Violent Extremism  
*in South-East Asia*



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**ENTRY AND EXIT POINTS**



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**LIST OF ACRONYMS**

<b>AQ</b>	Al-Qaida
<b>ARSA</b>	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (Myanmar)
<b>BRN</b>	Barisan Revolusi Nasional
<b>CVE</b>	countering violent extremism
<b>EAG</b>	ethnic armed group
<b>FPI</b>	Front Pembela Islam (Indonesia)
<b>FTF</b>	foreign terrorist fighter
<b>GTI</b>	Global Terrorism Index
<b>IS</b>	Islamic State
<b>JI</b>	Jemaah Islamiyah
<b>MILF</b>	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
<b>MNLF</b>	Moro National Liberation Front (Philippines)
<b>PULO</b>	Patani United Liberation Organization (Thailand)
<b>PVE</b>	preventing violent extremism

7	<b>Executive Summary</b> <i>The Entry and Exit Points study</i> <i>Key findings and recommendations</i>
12	<b>Introduction</b> Moving away from security responses Approach of Entry and Exit Points study
20	<b>A summary of four thematic papers</b> <i>Assuming the Worst: Narratives and their Impacts on Violent Extremism in South-East Asia</i> <i>State of Violence: Government Responses to Violent Extremism in South-East Asia</i> <i>“As Long As They Don’t Use Violence”: Making Peace and Resisting Violent Extremism in South-East Asia</i> <i>Homecoming: The Return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters in South-East Asia</i>
23	<b>Conflict and violence in South-East Asia: where violent extremism fits in</b> <i>Thailand</i> <i>Myanmar</i> <i>Philippines</i> <i>Indonesia</i> <i>Malaysia</i>
31	<b>The role of the state</b>
33	<b>Towards better responses to violent extremism</b> <i>Addressing the issue of returnees</i> <i>Resolving conflicts</i> <i>Reducing state violence</i> <i>Ending discrimination</i>
38	<b>Implications for policy and programming</b> <i>For governments</i> <i>For donors and implementers supporting PVE</i>
40	<b>Stories told by those affected by violent extremism</b>
43	<b>Recommendations</b>
48	<b>Methodology</b>
52	<b>Endnotes</b>
59	<b>Glossary</b>

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GOVERNMENT RESPONSES SHOULD  
ALSO BE ABOUT **RESOLVING  
CONFLICTS,  
REHABILITATING  
FORMER EXTREMISTS,  
REDUCING STATE AND OTHER  
VIOLENCE  
AND ADDRESSING PROBLEMS OF  
INCLUSION AND FAIRNESS.**

*Waida's husband joined ISIS in the battle of Marawi.  
They have debts; she says he was lured by the promise of money.  
©UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Alecs Ongcal*



Violent extremism remains a significant challenge for South-East Asia, but in no country does it pose an existential threat. In Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand, governments have the capacity to prevent it, while at the same time they should understand that it is unlikely to disappear completely. Whether violent extremism spreads, or is minimized, depends largely on how states react to its presence.

Certainly, governments have the power to change the environment in which extremism flourishes. Agile, intelligence-driven and co-ordinated policing that functions within the rule of law is needed, but government responses should also be about resolving conflicts, rehabilitating former extremists, reducing state and other violence and addressing problems of inclusion and fairness.

Extremism here is defined as the view by an in-group that its very survival, and ability to succeed in its aims, can only be achieved by violence against an out-group.<sup>1</sup> Extremism has existed throughout time, is not bound to one ideology or faith, and can take over states, groups and individuals. Its origins and diffusion elude easy analysis. Extremism does not merely affect those living in poverty or the under-educated. It can have a profound hold on entire societies, causing violence or violation of their most cherished values as governments try to respond. There is no universal explanation, and therefore no universal response.

>>  
**A LACK OF EMPIRICALLY-BASED RESEARCH AND RELIABLE DATA, COUPLED WITH STRONG THREAT NARRATIVES, HAVE ARGUABLY OBSCURED THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM, AND ELICITED STATE RESPONSES THAT MAY DO MORE HARM THAN PREVENTION.**

### *The Entry and Exit Points study*

This study was commissioned by UNDP in partnership with the European Union. It examines some of the push and pull factors of violent extremism in South-East Asia—with a focus on the role of the state. The research, which took place over eighteen months, is the result of a comprehensive literature analysis and 200 in-depth interviews with local and regional experts including practitioners, government, civil society organizations and academics working in the field of countering and preventing violence.

This particular paper summarizes four complementary in-depth papers that explore the localized and transnational factors that influence individuals to move towards extremism and violence in South-East Asia, and the responses that are needed to prevent it.

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**A KEY FINDING OF THIS STUDY IS THAT GOVERNMENT NARRATIVES, POLICIES AND ACTIONS PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN DETERMINING HOW SOON, AND HOW EFFECTIVELY, COUNTRIES ARE ABLE TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM.**

### Key findings and recommendations

A key finding of this study is that government narratives, policies and actions play a critical role in determining how soon, and how effectively, countries are able to address the challenge of violent extremism. It also seeks to untangle fact from fiction. A lack of empirically-based research and reliable data, coupled with strong threat narratives, have arguably obscured the underlying causes of violent extremism, and elicited state responses that may do more harm.

This study identified the following four key areas where more effective engagement by governments and other stakeholders is needed.

#### Resolving conflicts

Insurgencies are not the same as violent extremism; however, they are often conflated.<sup>2</sup> Insurgencies involve people fighting for political rights; they are often resolved through negotiations and the devolution of power. Most South-East Asian ethno nationalist groups have kept their distance from globalist Salafi-jihadi groups, seeing themselves as entirely different in outlook and knowing that any association would destroy international support.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, insurgencies can create lawless spaces in which extremists thrive, train, and launch attacks. They can also be a source of weapons and inspiration for violence, as was the case in Poso and Ambon in Indonesia.

Peacemaking, with all its compromises and requirement for political courage, is central to reducing extremism. Likewise, the drawn-out process of peacebuilding is vital if regions are to move away from conflict. In South-East Asia, support for the peace process in Mindanao, for example, and the delivery of a peace dividend to its people, are vital steps towards reducing extremism in the region. Ensuring the success of Aceh's autonomy package over the long term is vital to maintaining peace.

#### Addressing the issue of foreign terrorist fighters

The exact figure of foreign terrorist fighters who have fought with the Islamic State (IS), and other groups in the Middle East, is unknown. It is equally unclear how many will return home. Few South-East Asians travelled there compared to other regions.<sup>4</sup> Of those who did return to Indonesia and Malaysia, the two countries which supplied the largest number of FTFs, only some may present a threat. Since the potential number of FTFs returning home to South-East Asia is limited, governments have an opportunity to put

in place individualized mechanisms to reduce risks. While the Malaysian government has instigated a clear repatriation policy, the Indonesian government's stance on the issue is currently unclear and has been the subject of some debate in the country.

To tackle the challenges related to returnees, both countries will need to develop clear policies that conform to the rule of law and international human rights standards. The main aim should be to prevent future violence and support returnee reintegration into communities that do not support extremism. Reintegration requires a pragmatic approach that recognizes it is easier to persuade people to abandon violence than to change their deepest religious or social beliefs.

>>  
**THE REDUCTION OF  
 VIOLENCE BROADLY  
 IN SOCIETIES IS THE  
 SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT  
 MECHANISM TO REDUCE  
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 EXTREMISM.**

#### Reducing State Violence

Decades of research on extremism have provided few answers as to why people take on extremist views and why they choose violence.<sup>5</sup> However, one driver of extremism is clear: state violence. Mistakes happen in security force operations, but states that inflict widespread violations on their citizens provoke a response. The reduction of violence broadly in societies is the single most important mechanism to reduce the risks of violent extremism. Human rights violations, including police and security force abuse, torture, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and poor prison conditions, all appear to worsen extremism. These incidents can reduce the legitimacy of the state and feed grievances among victims, their families and their communities.<sup>6</sup>

#### Ending discrimination

Discrimination, by states or institutions, hardens boundaries between groups and helps shape a political landscape in which extremism thrives. Certainly, there is an urgent need to address state violence as well as discrimination across the region by changing laws, institutional practice and through education and tackling hate speech.<sup>7</sup>

It is crucial that governments in South-East Asia do not face these challenges alone. UNDP practises a whole-of-society and human rights-based approach towards preventing violent extremism (PVE). In this way, UNDP supports governments in working closely with a variety of stakeholders including civil society and the private sector to address the root causes and drivers of extremism and violence.

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**...THE STRENGTH OF THE PVE AGENDA LIES IN ITS ALIGNMENT WITH PEACEBUILDING, GOOD GOVERNANCE, EMPOWERING OF WOMEN AND YOUTH, SAFEGUARDING HUMAN RIGHTS AND PROMOTING TOLERANCE.**

International donors and development partners have an important role to play in supporting responses to violent extremism that move away from traditional security approaches. Indeed, it is increasingly clear that the strength of the PVE agenda lies in its alignment with peacebuilding, good governance, empowerment of women and youth, safeguarding human rights and promoting tolerance. It is vital that the research and community of practice around violent extremism continue to evolve as the threats and environments we live in change, including the following: unprecedented digital growth; transnational movements of people, money and information; shrinking of political spaces and freedoms; polarization of views and intolerance of different identities and so forth. It is also critical to undertake more empirical research.

This report provides the following recommendations for both governments and practitioners of countering and preventing extremism in South-East Asia:

- offer support for conflict resolution;
- back individualized programmes for foreign returned fighters;
- support prison reform;
- push for violence reduction;
- support measured responses to hate speech;
- strengthen human rights advocacy;
- support inclusive governance; and
- fund further research, looking beyond narrow definitions of violent extremism.



**THE REDUCTION OF VIOLENCE  
BROADLY IN SOCIETIES  
IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT  
MECHANISM  
TO REDUCE THE RISKS  
OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

*A bullet hole in the floor tiles of St Mary's Cathedral, located in a part of Marawi, the Philippines, most affected by violent extremism.*

*©UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Mailee Osten-Tan*

## INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism poses a threat to South-East Asia, but one that is often poorly understood. In each country in this study—Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines—the drivers of violent extremism are evolving. So, too, are government responses, but these are weakened by the absence of reliable information about how effective policies and programming might be used to prevent and counter extremist violence.

>>

**NOTABLY, THE TWO MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRIES ARE LESS AFFLICTED BY TERRORISM, DESPITE WIDESPREAD CONCERN THAT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A CALIPHATE BY THE ISLAMIC STATE (IS)... WOULD GALVANIZE JIHADIST GROUPS IN THESE COUNTRIES.**

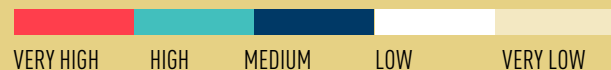
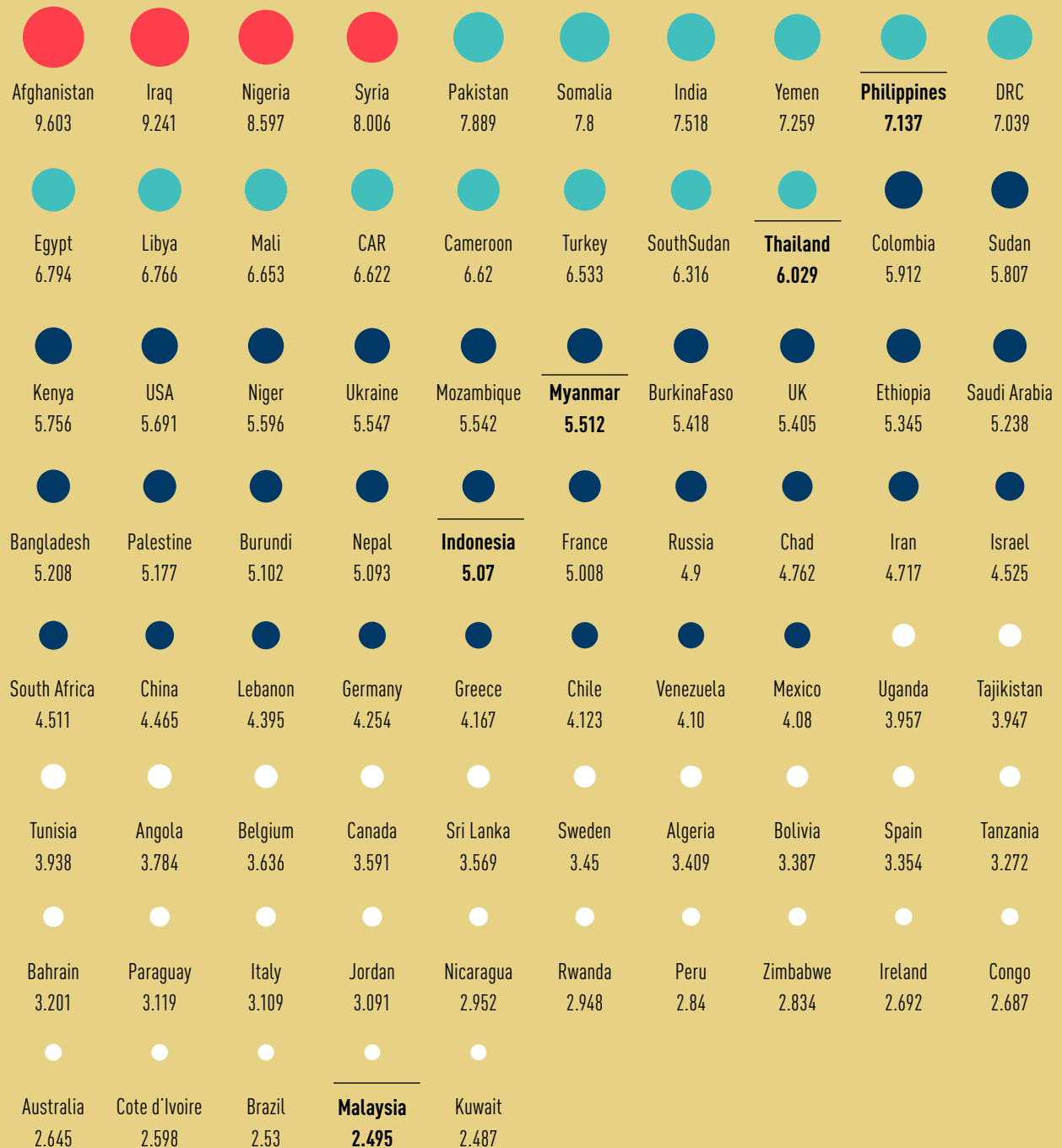
‘Violent extremism’, as used in this paper, is defined as “the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group.”<sup>8</sup> It occurs in all societies and in the name of many faiths, ideologies and beliefs based around religion, ethnicity, class or race. Violent extremism is a complex phenomenon that has structural and psychological drivers.<sup>9</sup>

Often, the term violent extremism is used interchangeably with terrorism. However, in South-East Asia, as elsewhere in the world, the risks of terrorism have actually decreased significantly over the last two decades.<sup>10</sup> According to the 2019 Global Terrorism Index (GTI), the Philippines ranks 9th globally, and is the country most impacted by terrorism and violence in South-East Asia. Thailand is 18th, Myanmar is 26th, Indonesia is 35th and Malaysia is 74th.<sup>11</sup> Notably, the two Muslim-majority countries are less afflicted by terrorism, despite widespread concern that the establishment of a Caliphate by the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq would galvanize jihadist groups in these countries.<sup>12</sup>

Historically, South-East Asian government responses to terrorism have been effective. For instance, Indonesia improved policing and resolved conflicts in areas where extremists were training and procuring arms alongside insurgents.<sup>13</sup> Malaysia’s security forces have deftly contained the threat, preventing any major attack from occurring, and authorities have also cracked down on the use of the country as a transit point for individuals heading to Syria.<sup>14</sup> Thailand’s southern insurgency remains clearly distinct from the globalized jihadi forces of Al-Qaida (AQ) and IS.<sup>15</sup> Extremist groups in the southern Philippines have been in a state of near constant flux—new groups emerge, others fade away—but even with the attack of IS-aligned groups on Marawi, they remain contained to a small area of the country.<sup>16</sup>

## THE IMPACT OF TERRORISM

Scores of the first 75 countries in the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), 2019. The GTI scores each country on a scale from 0 to 10; where 0 represents no impact from terrorism and 10 represents the highest measurable impact of terrorism. Countries are ranked in descending order with the worst scores listed first in the index.



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**IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA,  
THE LARGEST NUMBERS  
OF VIOLENT CIVILIAN  
DEATHS IN RECENT YEARS  
CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO  
STATE ACTIONS—RATHER  
THAN TO TERRORISTS.**

Terrorist action grab global headlines and attention, but violence from decades old insurgencies are more deadly. In South-East Asia, the largest numbers of violent civilian deaths in recent years can be attributed to state actions—rather than to terrorists. Attacks by Myanmar security forces on the Rohingya population, most severely in 2016 and 2017, are estimated to be above 10,000 and may be much higher.<sup>17</sup> In November 2019, the International Criminal Court authorised the Prosecutor to proceed with an investigation as there was a “reasonable basis to believe widespread and/or systematic acts of violence may have been committed that could qualify as the crimes against humanity of deportation across the Myanmar-Bangladesh border and persecution on grounds of ethnicity and/or religion against the Rohingya population”.<sup>18</sup> This figure does not include civilian deaths in military campaigns in Kachin or Shan States.<sup>19</sup> For example, in the Philippines government figures for civilian casualties in its war on drugs are around 6,000, with some independent estimates ranging as high as 30,000.<sup>20</sup> By better understanding the threat posed by terrorism, its relationship to other forms of violent extremism as well as persistent insurgencies, it is hoped that this project may rebalance the efforts of governments and donors in the region.

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**RATHER THAN PREVENT  
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ACCEPTANCE OF VIOLENCE.**

Despite what the numbers indicate, the discourse around violent extremism has an outsized impact on policymaking and public debate because it creates deep societal uncertainty as well as fear and insecurity.<sup>21</sup> Even sporadic extremist violence can prompt states to overreact, impose counterproductive laws, violate international human rights and humanitarian law, and securitize civilian institutions.<sup>22</sup> Often, these actions are prompted by exaggerated threats, perceptions and narratives. Such responses contribute to polarization in society, the demonization of minorities and violence against the vulnerable.<sup>23</sup> Rather than prevent violent extremism, harsh responses may have the inadvertent effect of mainstreaming extremist thinking. There is evidence that such approaches may lead to hardened political boundaries, worsened hate speech and increased acceptance of violence.<sup>24</sup>

Governments would do well to note that even the most well-intentioned actions, if conducted without analysis of the targeted communities, could incite more violence. Conversely, these actions could help achieve full peace and contain violent extremism, if undertaken in detailed consultation and partnership with all relevant stakeholders.



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**OFTEN, ANALYSIS—AND FUNDING FOR RESEARCH AND PROGRAMMING—FOLLOWS GOVERNMENT LINES BY FOCUSING ON IS OR AQ SPECIFICALLY, AND ISLAMIST VIOLENT EXTREMISM GENERALLY. THIS TENDENCY HAS DISTORTED UNDERSTANDING AND ANALYSIS OF THE NATURE OF EXTREMIST VIOLENCE IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA.**

These patterns illustrate three interrelated and often overlooked issues: 1. state violence, as much as non-state violence, exacerbates violent extremism; 2. the relationship between state actions and violent extremism needs more attention; and 3. sociopolitical changes currently underway could impact whether violent extremism spreads or is contained.

Yet, available research on violent extremism in South-East Asia is limited, apart from literature on Indonesia.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, policymaking in the region risks not being based on evidence and instead being driven by policies that strengthen the perception of the state geopolitically. Often, analysis—and funding for research and programming—follows government lines by focusing on IS or AQ specifically, and Islamist violent extremism generally. This tendency has distorted understanding and analysis of the nature of extremist violence in South-East Asia. While it is true that Islamic State propaganda did lure men, women, children and entire families to travel to the Caliphate as foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), and even though small numbers of returnees may pose a threat, the response needs to be tempered.<sup>26</sup> Importantly, analysis and policy responses to violent extremism in South-East Asia need to broaden in several ways.

### Moving away from security responses

*Entry and Exit Points: Violent Extremism in South-East Asia* reflects increasing international unease over the failure of security-focused counter-terrorism policies to address violent extremism. While the quality of policing, intelligence gathering and counter-terrorism operations carried out in conformity with the rule of law are all important, security measures alone will not tackle the root of the problem. This study aligns with the UN Secretary General’s *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* as well as UNDP’s work in Asia and Africa, particularly the 2017 regional report *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and Tipping Points*.<sup>27</sup> The UN Secretary General’s *plan of action* and UNDP’s approach underline the importance of addressing the structural drivers of violent extremism. It is essential for prevention to deal with the root causes that allow violent extremism to flourish. Similarly, the 2018 joint UN-World Bank study, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, states that “exclusion from access to power, opportunity, services, and security creates fertile ground for mobilizing group grievances to violence, especially in areas with weak state capacity or legitimacy or in the context of human rights abuses.”<sup>28</sup>

In partnership with the European Union, UNDP carried out a study of violent extremism in five South-East Asian countries—Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand. The research sought to analyse the risk posed by violent extremism to each of these five countries, review government responses to violent extremism and recommend improvements.

First, the study contends that research and policy should move away from a longstanding focus on radicalization and deradicalization. Individuals may embrace extremist thinking and use violence in support of a cause—only to step away later, often for personal reasons which governments are unlikely to be able to influence. Second, other forms of extremist violence in South-East Asia, beyond that inflicted by violent Islamist groups, deserve attention. Third, it is important to acknowledge that states have, in fact, sometimes inadvertently exacerbated violent extremism when seeking to mitigate it. The recognition of government errors and learnings is the first step to corrective action and better policymaking.

*Entry and Exit Points: Violent Extremism in South-East Asia* is UNDP's contribution to a broader research agenda in South-East Asia. A detailed, empirical understanding of violent extremism is needed for governments to embrace—and for donors to support—a more holistic, whole-of-society approach to prevention. The study aims to inform future policy and programming by suggesting where existing responses to violent extremism have value, where they do not, and by identifying what remains to be done.

### **Approach of *Entry and Exit Points***

UNDP's Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) team in the Regional Bureau of Asia and the Pacific initiated the research by convening a small group of regional experts in Bangkok 25–26 October 2018 to examine current dynamics and trends in violent extremism in Asia. A framework was developed for a region-wide study to inform future PVE development policy and programming for the wider development community, donors and governments. A further meeting was held in March 2019 to finalize research plans and agree on final outputs and communications. The meeting identified the following four research priorities:

1. the manner in which some state responses may have exacerbated rather than mitigated violent extremism; ;
2. the role of conflict and the value of peacemaking and prevention in addressing violent extremism;
3. the importance of government and extremist narratives, as well as the common assumptions that underlie

- conventional approaches believed to be effective for tackling violent extremism; and
4. the risks posed (real and imagined) from both returned fighters and extremists due to be released from prison.

This research is necessarily qualitative. It draws on a mixture of literature analysis and in-depth interviews with an array of experts and actors in the field of violent extremism and its prevention. Following an initial desk review of available academic, practitioner and policy-focused literature on preventing violent extremism and counter-terrorism, as well as the planning meetings mentioned above, the study team conducted 200 in-depth interviews with key individuals and organizations across five countries—Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand—over four months. Interviewees included national and regional policymakers, conflict and violent extremism experts, security think tanks, local and international development organizations, human rights organizations, academics, members of the security forces, relevant government agencies, members of peace negotiation teams, former members of insurgent and extremist groups, United Nations country-based teams, civil society organizations, and religious or other organizations working on PVE. Interviews were used to test the conclusions of the desk-based research, and to assess how best to strengthen the evidence base for PVE activities and increase the effectiveness of PVE programming in the region, particularly in areas affected by ongoing crises.

Due to limited time, resources and available reliable data in the region, this paper did not involve quantitative research; however, this type of analysis is sorely needed and the establishment of rich data is a key recommendation for future policy and programming.

Another limitation in the scope of this study is a detailed examination of the gendered nature of the assumptions that frame and inform state policies on countering violent extremism (CVE) and PVE. Violent extremism is often seen as a problem of men, in particular young men, however women can have varied and often complex relationships with violent extremism and violent extremist groups: as victims, as active participants and also as less visible mobilizers and sympathizers. In addition, new research highlights how unequal gendered power structures fuel and shape violent extremism around the region.<sup>29</sup> Future research should consider the importance and complexity of gendered dimensions of violent extremism so that existing policies and practices are adapted to be gender-responsive for both men and women.<sup>30</sup>

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**RESEARCH AND POLICY  
SHOULD MOVE AWAY  
FROM A LONGSTANDING FOCUS  
ON RADICALIZATION  
AND DERADICALIZATION.**



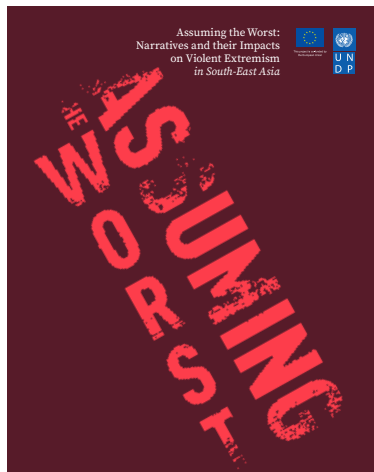
*Displaced residents of Marawi playing guitar in the Sagonsongan Transitional Shelter  
©UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Alecs Ongcal*



## A SUMMARY OF FOUR THEMATIC PAPERS

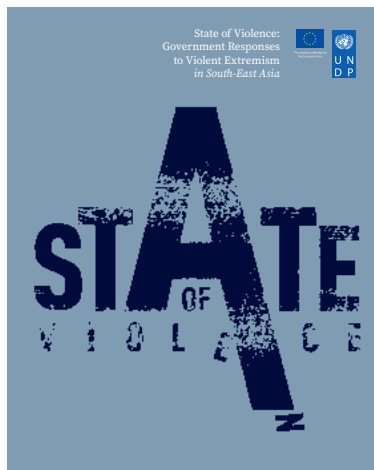
*Entry and Exit Points: Violent Extremism in South-East Asia* summarizes the research findings and recommendations of four thematic research papers. Featuring individual methodologies, findings and limitations, each paper provides a deeper understanding of the study's conclusions.

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



Policy and programming for preventing or countering violent extremism in South-East Asian states are arguably underpinned by a handful of assumptions about the scale, nature and sources of risk of violent extremism. This paper assesses the accuracy and utility of assumptions and narratives about violent extremism in the context of South-East Asia, its extremist groups and movements, and the ways that radicalization has historically occurred in the region. P/CVE policies need to be examined in the context of empirical evidence and evolving local political contexts if they are to avoid worsening the situation. A holistic research agenda would help identify overlooked sources of risk and better adjust resource allocation in P/CVE programming.

### State of Violence: Government Responses to Violent Extremism in South-East Asia

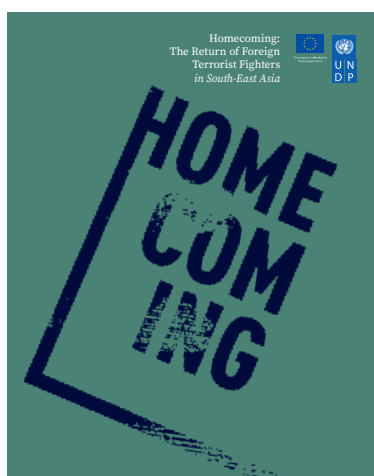


States have a significant role to play in the emergence or expansion of violent extremism through policies that have marginalized ethnic or religious groups. This paper argues that heavily securitized state responses to violent extremism, exclusionary politics based on religious and ethnic identity, state action and inaction that reinforces hate speech and intolerance in society, and the use of violence against citizens are all ways governments can engender further violence. Instead, South-East Asian governments should respect human rights when countering terrorism, build inclusive politics through conflict resolution, protect minority rights, reduce violence and tackle hate speech.



### **“As Long As They Don’t Use Violence”: Making Peace and Resisting Violent Extremism in South-East Asia**

Violence has often been used by governments and non-state actors to achieve political aims. This paper examines the impact of past and ongoing conflicts, and their political responses, on Aceh, Ambon, Maluku, and Poso in Indonesia, Mindanao in the Philippines and Timor-Leste. It explores how the conflicts interact with violent extremism and affect prevention. While conflict often opens the door to extremists, political processes may help close it by creating favourable environments for disengagement, resilience and resistance to extremists and their ideologies.



### **Homecoming: The Return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters in South-East Asia**

South-East Asians who travelled to fight and live in Iraq and Syria are beginning to return home. Returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) may pose a risk to South-East Asia unless governments design effective responses. This paper analyses the real risks posed by, both combatants and non-combatants, and explores the issues faced by governments and local communities as well as FTFs. The reasons that lead people to return home are as diverse as the decisions to leave and fight. Even if only small numbers come home to Indonesia and Malaysia, individualized reintegration programmes are urgently needed. Disengagement from violence—rather than deradicalization—should be the focus of government efforts.



## >> SOUTH-EAST ASIA – A REGION IN FLUX

### Indonesia

Indonesia has a diverse conflict landscape that spans Aceh, Ambon, Northern Maluku and Poso. It has also been home to several violent extremist groups, from Darul Islam to Jemaah Islamiyah.

### Thailand

After years of political instability, coups and violent street protests, national elections in 2019 led to a democratically-elected parliament. Underlying sources of deep fragility remain and, if left unaddressed, may lead to violence. Fissures include political and identity-based marginalization, lack of voice, stark regional inequalities, issues around resource management and lack of access to justice.

### Philippines

For the past four decades, there have been two significant insurgencies in Mindanao, the second

largest island in the Philippines. How recovery and reconciliation are handled will likely determine whether support for violent extremism grows or if it can be limited.

### Malaysia

Malaysia does not suffer any long-term civil conflict and has not experienced significant domestic terror-ist events in recent decades. However, homegrown militants have a history of becoming key players in both regional and international conflicts.

### Myanmar

Myanmar has multiple ethno nationalist insurgencies. By some estimates, conflict affects close to 60 percent of the state's territories.

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Many forms of violence and conflict are prevalent in South-East Asia—separatist movements and insurgencies, urban conflict and gang violence, resource conflict, electoral violence and gender-based violence.<sup>31</sup> Extremism in South-East Asia is closely associated with wider violent conflict. While motivations for violence and paths to radicalization are manifold and complex, it is well established that exclusion, inequality and human rights abuses—factors associated with sustaining or exacerbating insurgencies, civil conflict or criminal violence—also encourage extremism.<sup>32</sup> Failure to address embedded violence has meant that conflict has become the key driver of extremism. The reasons for this failure are varied: concerns about national unity, the economy and the interests of those involved in fighting. A reluctance to devolve power is likewise a factor.

South-East Asian states are home to a range of ethnonationalist groups; in Southern Thailand, the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) and Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), the Mindanao group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and ethnic armed groups (EAGs) in Myanmar. While these actors have all carried out violent acts, sometimes against civilians, they are not proponents of extremist violence as defined in this project since they do not advocate the destruction or exclusion of enemies. The New People's Army and the Communist Party of the Philippines are fighting a Maoist insurgency. Unlike ethnonationalist 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, none are violent extremists in the sense of rejecting all pluralism or associating their own survival with the need to cause harm to others.

Civil conflicts can fuel extremism and provide a space for bases and training. They can also create a cadre of experienced fighters, breed extremist ideologies, and reduce state control of territory thereby undermining service delivery capacity or the ability to monitor the emergence of groups. Yet, outside of Mindanao in the southern Philippines, violent extremists are not a major threat

to states or populations in South-East Asia. The region is, in fact, relatively safe from extremist violence. South-East Asia's long history of ethnonationalist movements and the tactical rejection of violence by main regional jihadist groups, have made it difficult for IS to tap into existing networks of groups that use violence. Socially, too, approval for IS and its actions is low in most areas.

Yet, returning foreign terrorist fighters are poorly monitored, and their motivations and ability to mobilize and act are not well understood. It is also too early to fully grasp whether and how the influence of IS can be disaggregated by age; younger sympathizers or members of jihadist groups may be more inspired to act by the success of IS and its embrace of theatrical violence.

Finally, the risk of state radicalization, whether in response to civil conflicts, or to perceived threats to national unity and identity, is also a critical factor in any examination of violent extremism in South-East Asia today.

## Thailand

Thailand's southernmost provinces have been the site of insurgency for separatist ethnic Malay groups fighting for the independence of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani, an area brought under Thai rule at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The insurgency has claimed more than 7,000 lives since 2004.<sup>33</sup>

To date, the conflict has shown no credible links to any wider religious extremism.

Ethnic Malays fighting the government have focused on gaining independence for the area and breaking away from the highly centralized, Buddhist-dominated Thai state. The numbers of insurgents are uncertain with estimates ranging up to 15,000. Half a dozen groups have been involved at various times but PULO and the BRN remain the main actors. All the groups maintain very low profiles, make few public statements, and mostly remain underground to preserve their security against the 60,000 Thai soldiers and police arrayed against them.<sup>34</sup>

Despite numerous attempts at political negotiations from 2005 to 2018, successive Thai governments have been unable to resolve the conflict. The reasons for an absence of progress are many, including an inability to agree on a methodology and shared objectives to underpin a dialogue process. In January 2020, a new peace dialogue process was launched between the Royal

Thai Government and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), which controls most cells, and therefore violence, on the ground. Demands of the southern insurgent groups remain at odds with the prevailing paradigms for governance in Thailand, especially regarding relations between the national centre and the provinces. Furthermore, the national centre is rarely impacted by violence in the south, thus making it difficult for the advocates of a negotiated settlement to sustain their case.

## Myanmar

Myanmar has multiple ethnonationalist insurgencies, many that have lasted for six decades. By some estimates, conflict affects close to 60 percent of the state's territories. Several of the ethnic armed groups (EAGs) have been in peace talks with the government since 2013. In 2015, a National Ceasefire Agreement was signed between the state and ten EAGs. Eight groups have not yet signed, including the large Kachin Independence Organization and the United Wa State Army, as well as other groups. In areas dominated by these groups, often serious clashes continue to occur.

Minority ethnic groups argue that since Myanmar gained independence in 1948, they have been denied the autonomy and federalism they were promised in the Panglong agreement. Empirical evidence suggests that even after the democratic transition began in 2011, minority ethnic groups have remained on the periphery, physically and politically. Buddhist Barmars continue to dominate the state, imposing an ideology of religious and ethnic dominance over others.

In this crowded conflict landscape, it is state violence directed at the Rohingya minority that has attracted international attention. Rigid systems of ethnic identity, grounded in colonial laws and strengthened by a homogeneous state ideology, have led to pogroms and state violence in Rakhine State. The independent fact-finding mission established by the UN Human Rights Council concluded that there were grounds to warrant an investigation for genocide.<sup>36</sup> Military operations against the Rohingya, in retaliation for attacks mounted in 2016 by the small Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, resulted in 750,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh in a matter of months; just 600,000 Rohingya remain in Myanmar.<sup>37</sup> The scale of hate speech against the Rohingya minority, and the degree to which many in Myanmar have adopted hostile views towards them, illustrates how citizenship and identity are at the heart of this disproportionate response.

## The Philippines

The Philippines has consistently seen the highest rates of violence in South-East Asia in the past few decades. It is also the only top ten South-East Asian country in the Global Terrorism Index, having climbed up two spots in 2018 to rank ninth.<sup>38</sup>

For four decades, there have been two significant insurgencies underway in the Philippines. The communist New People's Army and the Communist Party of the Philippines have been in talks with the government, mediated by Norway, since 2001. Talks continue despite occasional breakdowns of the ceasefire.

The Moro separatist struggle in the southern Bangsamoro region was led by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), until it entered a peace agreement with the state in 1996. The separatist struggle was then carried by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which signed a comprehensive peace agreement in 2014, leading to the inauguration of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in 2019. Decommissioning of MILF combatants and firearms began in September 2019.

Several groups remain outside this process, including the Maute Group—which led the five-month-long siege of Marawi in 2017—the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). The coming together of these pro-IS forces was unusual in the context of the long-running fragmentation of Bangsamoro groups over questions of politics, and competition over criminal interests and clan influence. Islamic State supported the siege online and financially, albeit only modestly.

Analysts say these IS links are only “imaginary” alliances,<sup>39</sup> but caution that the success of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region is the surest way to reduce the appeal of extremism. The new administration is working against the odds, with ongoing violence by criminal and pro-IS groups.

## Indonesia

Indonesia is home to a diverse conflict landscape; state approaches to resolving these conflicts are equally varied. The country's conflicts have included those in Timor-Leste, Aceh, Ambon, Northern Maluku and Poso. Timor-Leste's separatist struggle ultimately proved successful. In Aceh, following an internationally-mediated peace process, the ethnonationalist movement negotiated special autonomous status within Indonesia for the province, which

is now the only one that implements *jinayat* (Islamic criminal law). In Poso, communal conflict between Muslims and Christians opened the door to collaboration with the violent extremist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The situation turned into a vertical conflict between local leaders and the government. In the general elections of 2019, however, former extremists turned to peaceful politics. Maluku was also the site of intense communal violence that was addressed through a peace agreement.

Indonesia has historically been home to violent extremist Islamist groups, from the original Darul Islam, to JI, members of which were convicted in 2008 for their role in the 2002 Bali bombings. Historically, JI has had links with AQ and networks in both Indonesia and Malaysia; several of its leaders fought or trained in Afghanistan. Sustained efforts by the Indonesian government on many fronts significantly hobbled JI. While its organization and networks remain, in 2007 it developed a stance that the fight should be postponed until most Muslims support it. One member, Noordin Mat Top, continued attacks until his arrest two years later. The group has not formally repudiated violence, and members sought—at times successfully—to exploit the Poso and Maluku conflicts for their own ends.

Islamic State-linked groups have been unable to exploit these old networks of violent extremist groups for a variety of reasons including JI's current stance on violence, its establishes and strong member networks that draw influence from each other and family lineages, and JI's association with AQ that runs counter to the aims of IS.

At this time, extremist violence is at its lowest ebb in Indonesia. The country ranks 35th on the 2019 Global Terrorism Index. Only two people per million Muslims in Indonesia left home to fight with IS in the Middle East. This is in large part due to the steps taken by successive Indonesian governments to prevent and counter violent extremism, including the following: a focus on conflict resolution; an adaptable, responsive and responsible police force; a focus on religious education that reduces the appeal of extremism; and an open political environment that tolerates Islamist parties and civil society, thereby reducing the appeal of violence.

## Malaysia

The context of extremism in Malaysia is unique in South-East Asia as the country has witnessed neither subnational nor internal

conflict. A high middle-income country, Malaysia is also commonly viewed as moderately Islamic. Despite the nation's relative social and economic stability, increasing radicalization and extremist activity are growing concerns for authorities. Several terrorist organizations are known to be operational in Malaysia, some of which have direct affiliations with Islamic State. While the number of IS supporters in the country remains debatable, there is evidence of sizeable levels of sympathy for IS in Malaysia.<sup>40</sup>

According to the head of the Special Branch, Counter-Terrorism Division of the Royal Malaysian Police, the police have foiled 25 terrorist attacks since 2013.<sup>41</sup> Homegrown militant groups have a history of involvement in both regional and international conflicts as key players. Since the 1960s, the Malaysian government has identified up to 22 homegrown militant groups.<sup>42</sup> Historically, Malaysia has served as a transit point for terrorists from South-East Asia travelling to other regional conflicts. The 1980s brought many militants to Afghanistan; some fighters subsequently returned to Malaysia and formed local groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah and Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia. The alumni of these groups were later involved in terrorist attacks and regional insurgencies in Southern Philippines and Ambon and Poso in Indonesia. Well-known figures included Azahari Hussin, Nordin Mat Top, Mahmud Ahmad, Zulfikli Hir, and Amin Baco.

Since 2011, many Malaysians have travelled, or been apprehended by Malaysian authorities en route, to Syria and Iraq to join IS and militant groups in Syria such as Jabhah al-Nusra and Afnad al-Sham. Since the fall of IS in 2018, there is growing concern around the issue of returning foreign fighters and their families. Estimates indicate that as many as 100 Malaysians left to join IS in Syria.<sup>43</sup> Malaysia has adopted a "repatriation policy" whereby returnees face judicial proceedings and rehabilitation upon returning home. To date, 11 Malaysians, including eight men, one woman and two children, have returned home, with others having expressed the wish to return.<sup>44</sup> To deal with the repatriation of returnees, the government employs a raft of existing anti-terrorism laws. The treatment of returnees highlights the constant need for states to balance national security with the protection of human rights.

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**HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS,  
INCLUDING POLICE AND  
SECURITY FORCE ABUSE,  
TORTURE, EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS,  
DISAPPEARANCES, AND  
POOR PRISON CONDITIONS,  
ALL APPEAR TO  
CONTRIBUTE TO THE  
WORSENING OF EXTREMISM**

>>

**EXTREMISM IN  
SOUTH-EAST ASIA  
IS CLOSELY ASSOCIATED  
WITH W I D E R  
VIOLENT CONFLICT.**

*A bear lies in the rubble of what were once buildings in the Most Affected Areas of Marawi, the Philippines*  
©UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Mailee Osten-Tan



## THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Research and public debate on violent extremism often focus on non-state groups and the individuals who join them, with insufficient attention paid to the political contexts from which these groups and their agendas emerge. Prevention, as acknowledged by the UN Secretary-General's *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, must be much broader than a concern with counter-terrorism alone.

>>  
**WHILE COUNTER-TERRORISM IS LED BY SECURITY FORCES USING INTELLIGENCE TO FOIL PLOTS AND STOP ATTACKS, PREVENTION ADDRESSES THE STRUCTURAL DRIVERS THAT RENDER SOCIETIES VULNERABLE TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM.**

While counter-terrorism is led by security forces using intelligence to foil plots and stop attacks, prevention addresses the structural drivers that render societies vulnerable to violent extremism. As government and donor budgets for PVE have expanded, the ways in which state responses can worsen the problem of violent extremism have been ignored.<sup>45</sup> PVE programmes cannot succeed if other state actions reinforce grievances that may lead individuals to embrace violent extremism.

States may exacerbate violent extremism in South-East Asia in three ways: by propagating misleading narratives; by enabling violent extremism through inaction and negligence; and by committing extremist violence themselves or in collusion with non-state agents. Such behaviour varies across the five countries analysed in this study.

Narratives shape the way societies respond to extremism. Some South-East Asian governments depict the most recent wave of violent extremism as coming from outside, driven by Middle Eastern groups whose ideologies brainwash the innocent. Slick IS propaganda has fed a perception that social media is luring young people to the cause. Indeed, social media has intensified the spread of extremist views.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, recruitment and radicalization in South-East Asia, as elsewhere, is fundamentally a social process, depending on offline religious study classes, group activities and the creation of networks.<sup>47</sup> The reasons why individuals embrace violent extremism are often more connected to local politics and grievances than economics or education. State narratives that frame violent extremism as an external force, rather than one that comes from within, can lead to ineffective policymaking, stand in the way of honest dialogue with the public on a challenging topic, and potentially obscure emerging domestic threats.

States need to act in the face of increasingly majoritarian politics that put religious and ethnic minorities in peril. Although the countries discussed in this study are all quasi-democracies without an official state religion, support for religious pluralism is declining and hate speech is growing. This is true in Muslim majority states, where Ahmadis and Shiites are under pressure, as well as in Buddhist majority states, where Muslim and Christian minorities experience harassment and worse. Although South-East Asia has a rich history of diversity and tolerance, governments must do more to reinforce their commitment to build inclusive societies, as per Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>48</sup>

In some cases, states and state actors have created conditions that exacerbate the perpetration of extremist violence. Linkages between vigilante groups and police in Indonesia are but one example. Another example is the persecution and mass killing of Rohingya people in Myanmar, where the state has deployed a narrative of counter-terrorism in support of the military's actions in Rakhine state.<sup>49</sup> The rhetoric and logic used to justify the Myanmar military's actions are similar to those used by extremist groups: the violence sought to protect an in-group of citizens who belong against an out-group of illegal Muslim immigrants. Human rights abuses by states, or actors closely aligned with them, are alarming in themselves, but they are especially so when they occur in polarized environments where this kind of violence is more likely to receive popular support.

States in South-East Asia need to do more than operate a handful of PVE programmes. They also need to change aspects of their own behaviour and policies that may feed further violent extremism. The next section outlines four areas that require urgent attention.

## TOWARDS BETTER RESPONSES TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

### Addressing the issue of returnees

Compared to FTFs from countries in Europe and North Africa, few South-East Asians travelled to Iraq and Syria. Between 1,000 and 1,500 Indonesians and 100 Malaysians left their countries to fight, or live, with IS and other groups in the Middle East.<sup>50</sup> Many were intercepted in Turkey and elsewhere and were deported. Among those who reached their destinations, some were killed in combat, some are now in detention camps run by Syrian Kurdish forces and some remain at large.<sup>51</sup> These people travelled to the region to be part of the Caliphate. Most had no intention of returning, sold everything and left with their families. Only a limited number are likely to return to South-East Asia.

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**THE MOTIVATIONS THAT  
 LED SOUTH-EAST ASIANS  
 TO RETURN HOME ARE  
 LIKELY AS DIVERSE  
 AND INDIVIDUAL AS THE  
 REASONS WHY PEOPLE  
 RADICALIZE.**

Returning FTFs pose a possible threat to South-East Asia, but there is very little information about their intentions. Research conducted with European returnees suggests the risks appear far lower than expected.<sup>52</sup> The motivations that led South-East Asians to return home are likely as diverse and individual as the reasons why people radicalize. In the absence of further information, governments should not assume all returnees pose risks, while at the same time remaining vigilant.

Many returnees are likely to be women and children without operational experience but who may spread the views of the Caliphate.<sup>53</sup> For children, a key issue may be trauma and rehabilitation. But some women were active participants and torch bearers for IS violence as well as enforcers in the Caliphate and now in the camps. Islamic State opened the door for a much greater role for women in all aspects of Islamist violent extremism. A more thoughtful approach to their reintegration is needed.<sup>54</sup> Others, possibly most, will just want to forget their experiences.<sup>55</sup>

Malaysia has indicated that it will take back anyone who wants to return provided they are subjected to mandatory deradicalization programmes regardless of whether they have committed an offence.<sup>56</sup> Indonesia has taken some individuals back, primarily deportees to date.<sup>57</sup> Recently, the government raised concerns regarding the repatriation of any Indonesians who traveled abroad to join IS. Indeed, the government issued a statement in February 2020 confirming that they will not repatriate FTFs.<sup>57</sup> In both countries, new legislation was adopted in recent years to enable governments to charge FTFs under domestic law. However, there may be insufficient evidence to press charges and prosecution of returnees is not necessarily desirable.

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**PROGRAMMES NEED TO  
 FOCUS ON CHANGING  
 VIOLENT BEHAVIOURS  
 RATHER THAN BELIEFS.**

It is critical that governments develop clear plans and policies for handling returnees and assessing the risk they may pose. Malaysia has a security-focused approach while Indonesia's method is more *ad hoc*. Both countries aim to deradicalize FTFs. However, evidence in support of deradicalization is inconclusive.

Programmes need to focus on changing violent behaviours rather than beliefs. Since violent acts, and extremism in general, often take place in a group, it is important that FTFs are given an option to be part of a new, peaceful community. Governments and civil society need to work with communities, as well as FTFs, to ensure that they have support and do not find themselves ostracized.<sup>59</sup> Monitoring is necessary and should be done with a light touch by mentors as well as community and religious leaders, rather than by security forces.<sup>60</sup>

### Resolving conflicts

Conflict fuels violent extremism. Most terrorism takes place in countries at war.<sup>61</sup> Protracted insurgencies lead to cycles of victimization and revenge, which in turn deepen grievances and may motivate individuals to embrace extremist thinking and violence. Contested areas also provide places for violent extremists to rest, train, arm themselves and recruit. Where the writ of the state is weak, violent extremism is likely to thrive.

Since different forms of violence may co-exist, states must be careful to distinguish violent extremism from other types. In South-East Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines have used peace negotiations to address grievances and isolate violent extremists, with varying success. Indonesia has been most effective at ending conflict and devolving power; its democracy has proven remarkably innovative and flexible when it comes to making peace. A decades-long peace process in the southern Philippines has led to the granting of more autonomy to the minority Moro population, yet significant challenges remain. In many areas, Mindanao remains lawless and violent splinter groups that rejected the peace agreements and pledged allegiance to IS persist.

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**STATES BENEFIT WHEN  
 THEY ACKNOWLEDGE THE  
 LEGITIMATE GRIEVANCES  
 OF INSURGENTS...**

States benefit when they acknowledge the legitimate grievances of insurgents; negotiated settlements hinge on this realization. In turn, insurgents—especially ethnonationalists—may take steps to distance themselves from violent extremists in their midst. Jemaah Islamiyah was pushed out of MILF territory in the southern Philippines, as well as from Aceh in Indonesia, due to differences

with insurgent groups who perceived them as a liability. Likewise, insurgents in southern Thailand have never sought to align themselves with regional or global jihadist groups. While it may not be possible to negotiate with, or eradicate, violent extremists, states should seek to marginalize such groups and deprive them of material support, recruits and safe haven.

Ending internal conflict often costs governments political capital they are not inclined to spend unless there is a stalemate. Even then, peacemaking involves taking on significant powers that have an interest in continuing a conflict in all societies.

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**WHILE IT IS DIFFICULT FOR STATES TO DESIGN POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES TO PREVENT INDIVIDUALS FROM EMBRACING VIOLENCE, THEY DO HAVE THE POWER TO AFFECT THE BROADER POLITICAL CONDITIONS THAT MAY GIVE RISE TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM.**

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**MISUSE AND ABUSE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM LAWS CAN LAY THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE VERY SAME EXTREMIST VIOLENCE SUCH LEGISLATION SEEKS TO COMBAT.**

### Reducing state violence

Research suggests that terrorism correlates closely with political violence and oppression.<sup>62</sup> State action, as well as inaction, plays a role in creating an environment in which violent extremism foment. While it is difficult for states to design policies and programmes to prevent individuals from embracing violence, they do have the power to affect the broader political conditions that may give rise to violent extremism.

State violence may be enacted by security forces or carried out through proxies. In cases where abuses are underpinned by an extremist logic—the use of violence by an in-group against an out-group that it perceives as an immutable threat—state violence may itself constitute extremist violence.

Misuse and abuse of counter-terrorism laws can lay the groundwork for the very same extremist violence such legislation seeks to combat. South-East Asia has followed the global trend towards privileging national security over human rights. In overreacting to individual acts of terrorism, states may inadvertently exacerbate problems. In Myanmar, the discourse of counter-terrorism was invoked to justify military operations against the Rohingya.<sup>63</sup> The subsequent campaign of violence exemplifies how state extremism can have devastating consequences.

Vigilantism is an underreported form of violence that underscores how states can be complicit in the growth of violent extremism. Often, it is motivated by a desire to police and harden boundaries between groups, particularly along religious lines. Far from indicating an absence of the state, vigilantism often prevails in areas where policing is strong. In Indonesia, police use vigilantism to

control minority groups while maintaining institutional distance. *Pamswakarsa*, or vigilante forces, are common and these hybrid forms of security are known to local authorities who often seek to control them.<sup>64</sup> Frequently, members of the Ahmadi sect have been the victims.

States that tacitly support vigilantism fail to protect the members of targeted groups, creating a second class of citizens against whom violence can be justified and normalized. Impunity for those involved in these attacks only reinforces boundaries between in-groups and out-groups and signals government approval of extremist violence. Vigilante groups that gain popular legitimacy contribute to the polarization of societies. In Indonesia, the Christian incumbent governor of Jakarta lost the gubernatorial election and was eventually convicted of blasphemy, following protest rallies and a successful campaign led by an alliance of Islamists and conservative traditionalists.<sup>65</sup>

South-East Asia is not immune to the problems that beset emerging democracies elsewhere. Politicians overlook organized crime and vigilantes in exchange for political support, impunity worsens violent crime and the middle classes retreat, living in gated communities and visiting only secured locations. The middle classes may then vote for zero-tolerance policies, sometimes giving tacit approval to extrajudicial violence and human rights violations that only worsen crime.<sup>66</sup> Reversing this cycle of violence is necessary to reduce the threat of violent extremism.

### Ending discrimination

Pluralism is under threat across South-East Asia, which in turn has fed discrimination against minorities. The forces underlying increasing majoritarianism include the following: a shift from more syncretic and tolerant forms of Islam to more modernist, often Salafist beliefs, in Indonesia and Malaysia;<sup>67</sup> the fusion of religion with nationalism, as seen in both Myanmar and Thailand where the religious hierarchy also serves the needs of the state; and the complicity of politicians who have played into the politics of “othering” for political gain.

The scapegoating of minorities, especially religious minorities, has been fuelled by the rhetoric of counter-terrorism which often constructs these groups as threats to the nation.<sup>68</sup> In Myanmar, Muslims are portrayed as an threat to ethnic Bamar Buddhist dominance in the country.<sup>69</sup> Ethnic superiority on the part of Myanmar’s leadership is widely accepted by the population.

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**PLURALISM IS UNDER  
 THREAT ACROSS SOUTH-  
 EAST ASIA, WHICH IN TURN  
 HAS FED DISCRIMINATION  
 AGAINST MINORITIES.**

Extremist views have spread such that those who uses the word “Rohingya” on social media are subject to vilification; hardline nationalists insist they are “Bengali” immigrants.<sup>70</sup> The othering of the Rohingya has allowed the military to reposition themselves; instead of being the anchor to a 60-year authoritarian regime, they are now perceived by many as defenders of the faith and nation, notions central to their self-image.<sup>71</sup>

Hate speech on social media hardens the boundaries between in- and out-groups. Vilification of minorities is not a new political tactic, but these beliefs are now disseminated to mass audiences at high speed. Both politicians and social media companies have failed in their responsibility to stop extremists using online networks to spread hate.

The quality of democracy is declining in the region.<sup>72</sup> Conservative religious forces now have a stronger voice in government than before. How this relates to extremism is complex. Such forces may be less inclined to use or support violence.<sup>73</sup> But if governments try to appease them with actions against minorities, and through support for religious conservatism, these groups may not be assuaged. Governments must address how they are combat discrimination, and hate speech that targets minorities. In polarized societies where perpetrators expect impunity, extremist thought can readily turn into violent action.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

### For governments

Governments have a number of tools at their disposal to deal with violent extremism. Yet often, rather than enact policies or take steps on issues within their power to influence, state responses focus on trying to change the mindsets of extremists themselves. There is little evidence to suggest that governments have the ability to change minds in this way. Groups like IS will always appeal to a relatively small number of people with an eschatological bent or those who are looking for a utopian Islamic state. The attempt to pull people away from such views is difficult. Responses should not focus unduly on interventions—such as counter-messaging—whose effectiveness is generally unknown. No set of policies will provide immunity from terrorist attacks but South-East Asian governments can take steps to reduce the prevalence of extremism.

States should fulfil their responsibilities to provide citizens with equal rights and protection, reduce violence—including their own complicity in forms of extremist violence—and resolve conflicts through political solutions when possible. Violent and intolerant states that limit religious freedoms, persecute minorities and stigmatize dissenting voices will not be able to successfully tackle violent extremism. Political repression, human rights abuses and corruption all sustain its appeal. Rather than use terrorism to justify heavy-handed measures, South-East Asian governments need to take steps to reduce violence, diminish polarization in politics and society, and protect vulnerable minorities.

### For donors and implementers supporting PVE

Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines each have effective security forces, growing economies, and are able to provide basic services to their citizens. While IS has expressed rhetorical interest in South-East Asia, its priority remains the Middle East. There is little risk of South-East Asia becoming central to the Salafi-jihadi world view. The knowledge that no state in South-East Asia is at risk of collapse due to violent extremism creates more space for donors and international organizations to instead provide incentives to regional governments to move beyond security responses and towards preventative, whole-of-society approaches. Organizations may offer technical support to address the core issues that contribute to extremism and violence, also help mitigate the after-effects of conflict and instability.





**STATES SHOULD FULFIL THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES TO PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH EQUAL RIGHTS AND PROTECTION, REDUCE VIOLENCE—INCLUDING THEIR OWN COMPLICITY IN FORMS OF EXTREMIST VIOLENCE—AND RESOLVE CONFLICTS THROUGH POLITICAL SOLUTIONS WHEN POSSIBLE.**



*Workers repairing a fishing boat, Jakarta, Indonesia  
©UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Jefri Tarigan*



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**“I WON’T FIGHT ANYMORE.  
I WON’T GO BACK.”**

### THIS IS ALLEN’S STORY

**“I was a tricycle driver. I was about to go through Mapandi Bridge in Marawi City, but then a man wearing black clothing blocked my path. He was pointing a gun at me, so I stopped. He then handed me an M16 and said I should join them. I joined them because I felt couldn’t get out; I was forced.”**

Allen was also offered money: P50,000 to ensure his loyalty. There were other young men like him who were also happy to receive such a large sum. Allen recounts that propaganda and misinformation was also used to convince them to stay.

He says “We were told that the Christians living in Marawi would steal our homes. At the time, I was happy when someone got killed when I shot them, but I was also afraid because someone might shoot me.”

Allen was inside the main battle area for nearly the entire duration of the Siege Marawi before sustaining a head injury from a piece of shrapnel. When asked if he would ever join an extremist group again, Allen expressed mixed views: “I won’t fight anymore. I won’t go back. But I believe my contributions in the fight of Marawi will earn me a place in heaven. I hope my brothers who have died are now in Paradise.”

## THIS IS UMMU'S STORY

### Ummu's husband and son joined an ISIS-affiliated group that attacked Marawi City. Her husband died there.

"It was his decision to join them. I could not stop him. My son was also recruited by ISIS when he was just 13 years old. When the recruiters came to Barangay Gacap in Piagapo, Lanao del Sur, he would go on errands for them and they would give him money. They managed to brainwash him."

"Fortunately, my son didn't go with them when they headed to Marawi.

I also made him surrender to the government. I was afraid that the soldiers or the police would go after him since he was identified as an ISIS member. Now, he's 16. I hope the bad decisions he made as a child will not affect his future."

"I would tell anyone not to join ISIS. It does not do anyone any good."



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# DATA, RESEARCH AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

WILL BE VITAL TO...PROVIDE GOVERNMENTS  
AND SOCIETIES WITH THE  
TOOLS TO UNDERSTAND AND ACT  
ON GROWING EXTREMIST VIEWS AND  
VIOLENCE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

*An anonymous spokesperson for the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters clutches a book.*  
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### Offer support for conflict resolution.

Conflict resolution reduces the ability of the most dangerous groups to operate, train and recruit in a particular location. In South-East Asia, many existing conflicts may be resolved through inclusive policies which recognize the legitimacy of the grievances of insurgent groups. Crisis management can include mediation support, monitoring, or a peace operation. It may include providing political options for militants and extremists. The promotion of successful transitions, as is the case in Bangsamoro, is another way to counter the narratives of extremists. It is critical that governments avoid the use of deadly force and violation of human rights. Post-conflict peacebuilding restricts opportunities for violent extremists to exploit discord in communities.



### Back individualized programmes for FTFs.

Motivators for extremism can be highly individual; people from South-East Asia travelled to the Middle East for a myriad of reasons. Responses should reflect this diversity. There is an opportunity for governments, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia (if repatriation remains an option), to create tailored, individualized responses to support the reintegration and rehabilitation of FTFs. A combination of fair and transparent judicial processes, prison reform, effective rehabilitation and reintegration programmes are essential. It is crucial to research the needs of returned or released FTFs and their families. Tailor support for local conditions—including consideration of the localized nature of violent extremist networks—and provide the assistance necessary for reintegration. Build local capacity to run deradicalization programmes with communities.



### Support prison reform.

In many countries, the incarcerated have become a focus for recruitment by Salafi-jihadist groups. This has been a greater problem in Europe than in South-East Asia, where recruitment to extremist groups is more likely to come through family and friends. Nevertheless, prisons have been a focus for extremist activity. Greater attention is needed on prison conditions, education and reintegration into communities. Implement prison reform that encompasses deradicalization and violent extremist programmes. Key elements include: good prison management practices; proper filing and classification systems; quality prison conditions,

including infrastructure and living conditions; and rehabilitation programmes. Ensure transparency regarding policy, trials, sentencing and rehabilitation programmes.



### **Push for violence reduction.**

Countries that have suffered the worst eruptions of extremism all have one thing in common: poor protection of human rights and state violence. Likewise, state complicity in vigilantism has become a growing problem across the region. Donors and international organizations should encourage governments to protect human rights at all times and support programmes which encourage social cohesion and build tolerance and understanding in local communities.



### **Support measured responses to hate speech.**

The language of politics has become debased and potentially a source of inspiration for violence. Although social media may have accelerated the spread of hatred, it is not the source of it. That has come from the media and political leaders using religious, ethnic and political differences to enhance their power. Most countries put limits on incitement to violence or racial hatred but these offences are overlooked when they originate from politicians. The United Nations Secretary-General has launched a campaign against “the disturbing groundswell” of hate speech, calling for politicians to refrain from incitement against religious groups and minorities. In this light, harmful counter-narrative programming should also be avoided. Instead, encourage focus on positive narratives by different voices that address the broader range of social issues.



### **Strengthen human rights advocacy.**

All available evidence suggests that respect for international human rights norms lies at the heart of any solution to violent extremism. Shying away from human rights abuses—state violence or the state’s encouragement of violence by proxies, torture and poor prison conditions, inadequate conflict resolution or the inequitable treatment of minorities—is likely to obstruct policy implementation. There is also a role for donors and development organizations to ensure that human rights are not undermined in the interest of national security. When working with governments

to develop policies related to preventing violent extremism, it is critical to ensure conformity to international human rights and humanitarian law.

### **Fund further research, looking beyond narrow definitions of violent extremism.**



Violent extremism in South-East Asia is entrenched in local conflicts and contexts. In South-East Asia, there are many forms of violence that emerge around issues of identity, belonging and sociopolitical inequalities that are historical, sometimes entrenched, and at times heightened to the point of violence. Debate and research about extremism cannot be restricted to discussion of Islamist extremism, for example, nor to the behaviour of only non-state actors. As the world becomes more connected, both online and offline, there is a growing need to understand the impact of new challenges posed by migration, online hate speech, fake news, growing polarization and intolerance. Data, research and communities of practice will be vital to identify and create monitoring systems and knowledge that provide governments and societies with the tools to understand and act on growing extremist views and violence in their communities. There is an urgent need for greater understanding of the why and when of violence, not just the how. In addition, it is critical to test P/CVE policies against empirical evidence.



**WHEN I WAS  
YOUNGER, I HAD  
NO DIRECTION  
IN MY LIFE.**

*Amir © UNDP Asia-Pacific/ Jefri Tarigan*



## STORIES TOLD BY THOSE AFFECTED BY VIOLENT EXTREMISM

### THIS IS AMIR'S STORY

**“I feel like we can prevent terrorism by consulting more ex-terrorists. We have valuable experiences and knowledge to share.”**

“I thought of religion as the way to find meaning, and after the first Bali bombing, I became interested in jihad. On reflection, I don't think my involvement in the 2009 attack on the JW Marriott and Ritz Carlton hotels can be separated from my interest in studying Islam.

I met with Islamist groups, and with more radically minded clerics. In 2005, I became acquainted with Syaifuddin Zuhri who began to directly mentor me. He gave *tausiah* [religious sermons] and explained how his groups' actions in the name of jihad were justified in religion.

There was a bond between me and Syaifuddin Zuhri. I was willing to contribute my energy, my money, my thoughts, everything to help him in his activities.

Soon Syaifuddin said he deemed me worthy to join in his plans to bomb those hotels. We carried out the attack on July 17, 2009. I was on the run for about one month before the authorities caught up with me.

Throughout my detention, I was stubborn and maintained that the attack was religiously justified. Some of those imprisoned with me did not agree with what I had done. The prison also invited several knowledgeable clerics to build a dialogue with us. I reflected on my actions. I came to understand that I had swallowed radical preaching raw before I had learned

how to critically consider whether certain things were right or wrong. In Indonesia, there are no obstacles to worship; we are free. If a country is already safe why should I be trying to make it unsafe? I had attacked my own community, exploding a bomb resulting in the death of my fellow innocent Muslims.

When I got out of prison people around me were a bit awkward, and a little scared. But I had friends and NGOs who gave me advice and helped me. When there was a community service I could get involved with, I decided to join. By getting involved with the community, people started to trust me and see the change in me. They even trusted me to lead a prayer at the mosque. This had a positive impact on me.

I feel like we can prevent terrorism by consulting more ex-terrorists. We have valuable experiences and knowledge to share.”



*At the masjid.*

## METHODOLOGY

### Origins and purpose of this study

The impetus for these studies of South-East Asian countries was based the around increasing international unease over the failure of coercive counter terror efforts tackling Violent Extremism (VE). The reports in this collection reflects this concern amongst others, the 2016 United Nations Secretary General's (UNSG) Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism and UNDP's work in Africa and particularly its regional report "Journey to Extremism" as well as prior regional work carried out by UNDP in Asia. The Secretary General's report underlines that if VE is to be tackled, development expertise and resourcing must be leveraged to address the structural drivers of VE. While VE affects most countries in Asia, most responses to VE have been security focused. Rarely have the root causes, history or social drivers been examined or sufficiently addressed.

These reports are focused on Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand, but recognize that ideas behind extremist violence are not self-contained in South-East Asia, but instead are constantly interacting with global trends. As is referenced in this research, violent extremists in this region have known links with South Asia and patterns of behaviour similar to seen among extremists on other continents. Regional understanding of what is driving VE and how these drivers intersect is weak. Most study is carried out in Europe, the Middle East and is related to the responses of western governments. In South-East Asia there is some good literature on Indonesia, but most countries have scant research and there are quality concerns. Like elsewhere, public debate, tends to be emotional, driven by fears of seeming to be weak on terrorism, fed by the extreme violence of Islamic State (IS) and often irresponsible journalism. There are few challenges to the frequent but mostly unreliable warnings of imminent attack.

### Definitional challenges

The terms violent extremism and terrorism are used interchangeably in the region. To discredit groups with legitimate grievances, governments blur the line further by often calling some ethno-national insurgents terrorists, when it is politically convenient. This research defines violent 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>74</sup> Extremism occurs in all societies and under all faiths. It can be a product of

ideologies based around religion, ethnicity, class or race. In South East Asia, two forms of extremism are most prevalent: one based on Buddhist identity in Myanmar and that of Salafi-Jihadism, the form of an ideology that believes Islam must return to the practices and beliefs supposedly followed by the Prophet and his immediate followers and that it is legitimate to use violence to enforce this.<sup>75</sup> It uses terrorism to refer 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.<sup>76</sup> The region has many active insurgencies, defined as 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.<sup>77</sup> These and other key terms are highlighted in the glossary.

### Local impacts and global movements

With notable exceptions, most analysis tends to shadow government narratives about the source the causes of terrorism. These blame Islamic State, Al Qaeda narratives, unemployment, opposition political parties and “foreign hands.” These assessments are then propelled around social media echo chambers by security-focused think tanks, security “experts” and the media and filters up to regional and international systems so that this dominant narrative becomes the only source of analysis and funding. The report seeks to examine the evidence for that portrayal.

In addition, most recent literature is focused on acts of terror by people who identify as Islamist to the exclusion of all others. There are serious limitations to existing research, much of these owing to the politicized nature of counter terror and the focus on a limited security prism as well as the difficulties of conducting research on a population involved in criminal and clandestine activities.

Violent extremism is a challenge in South-East Asia that is not always well understood. This leads governments and security agencies to promote an often-inflated sense of risk and threat. In turn, this can be used to tip the balance away from political solutions to justify a heavy-handed security response. In South East Asia, policies to counter or prevent violent extremism (CVE and PVE) are underpinned by assumptions about the scale and nature of the threat, Islamist groups’ transregional links and influences, the radicalising influence of ISIS and returning fighters, including on women. Counterterrorism (CT) and CVE/ PVE efforts are also

designed in the context of national narratives of exceptionalism, localised social narratives about government and other radicalism, global narratives about the necessity for aggressive government responses to state-defined instances of insurgency, jihadism, extremism and terrorism. At the other end of the spectrum, employment and education are often seen as the main drivers of VE, but the evidence suggests a more complicated intersection of factors.

These narratives do not hold up against empirical evidence. As a result, the policies they drive fail to address the challenges of violent extremism, sometimes create the problems they seek to mitigate, and often enable states and elites to expand control over political and social spaces with unforeseeable consequences.

Violent extremism is linked to conflict as well as political and social exclusion. Governments of a region influential in causing conflict by neglecting minorities and upholding human rights, but they are also the resolving conflict within their borders by compromise and peacemaking. For example, a history of violence and conflict in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines underlines the importance of rights, justice and transparent and accountable policing. Another common theme for many has been a marginalized periphery's demand for greater inclusion and equality. The joint UN-World Bank study, *Pathways for Peace* identified further that "exclusion from access to power, opportunity, services, and security creates fertile ground for mobilizing group grievances to violence, especially in areas with weak state capacity or legitimacy or in the context of human rights abuses".<sup>78</sup>

The international draw of VE is also complicated. Islamic State sold a vision of an ideal life that attracted men, women, children and entire families to travel to the Islamic State. While violent propaganda had a place, this broader sales pitch defined recruitment from South East Asia. The concern is that even small numbers of returns may embolden and capacitate the region's extensive national terror networks.

### **Background on this research project**

UNDP's Regional Hub initiated the research by gathering a small group of regional experts in Bangkok on 25-26 October 2018 to examine current dynamics and trends in violent extremism (VE) in Asia. These research projects that emerged were intended to

result in a framework for a region-wide study to inform future PVE development policy and programming not just for UNDP, but for the wider development community, donors and governments. The reports are intended to help redress the knowledge gap on VE in South-East Asia. This summary report and the four background papers in this series are intended to underline four key areas where more effective engagement by governments and other stakeholders is needed, including on resolving conflicts, addressing returning foreign fighters, reducing state violence and ending discrimination.

The reports are based on a thorough document review and on more than 200 interviews of key informants in South-East Asia including activists, analysts and government officials as well as protagonists such as convicted terrorists, insurgents, negotiators, peacebuilders, and security forces. Most were semi-structured interviews conducted between April-June in 2019, with one quarter of these interviews conducted with women. Many of these sources requested anonymity. Where possible interviewees have been cited or names have been changed, but while the conclusions of the research are informed by these exchanges the ongoing sensitivity of the subject means that some references to these dialogues are omitted from the report texts.

In addition to background research and interviews, a number of case studies have been included with these reports to illustrate the personal stories and some of the people behind them. These draw on the UNDP's Extreme Lives project and are intended to help personalize the data, research, and citations. They emphasize that violent extremism impacts the lives of real people in South-East Asia. As a collection, they place this research in the region and as part of the lives of its men, women, and children.

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75. There are various interpretations of Salafism. Many followers of this version of Islam, which seeks to return to what they see as the purest form of the faith practiced by the Prophet and his followers, reject engagement in politics or elections and focus mainly on religious practice. Some reject violence and suicide as this is said to interfere with the will of God. A more radical form of the faith, often known as Salafi-jihadism, has emerged that has adopted an extremist position, denouncing any Muslims whose views diverge from their own and claiming the right to kill those who do not follow its religious rules.
76. See Ben Schonveld and Robert Templer, *Challenging Assumptions about Extremism in South-East Asia*, (Bangkok, United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Available at [www.entryandexitpoints.asia-pacific.undp.org](http://www.entryandexitpoints.asia-pacific.undp.org), p.12.
77. See Jim Della-Giacoma, "As Long As They Don't Use Violence": Making Peace and Resisting Violent Extremism in South-East Asia (Bangkok, United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Available at [www.entryandexitpoints.asia-pacific.undp.org](http://www.entryandexitpoints.asia-pacific.undp.org), p. 17.
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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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