Postprint

II. Mapping armed conflicts over Islamist claims: exploring regional variations

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Introduction

Armed conflicts fought over Islamist claims have increased dramatically over the last two decades. This section explores the regional patterns of Islamist armed conflicts, starting with our definition. Religiously framed conflicts are not necessarily about religion *per se*. Behind the religious arguments, for example, there may be economic and power motives. Islamist intrastate armed conflicts are defined here as those between governments and rebels, in which at least one of the actors makes explicit Islamist demands regarding control of government power or a specific piece of territory.[1]

Therefore the characterization of a conflict as Islamist refers to what the warring parties *say* the conflict is about; it does not reflect an assessment of the causes of a conflict. For example, the civil war in Afghanistan and the Mindanao conflict in the Philippines fulfil the criteria of Islamist armed conflict. It is beyond the scope of this section to examine whether Islamist demands represent the key issues or instead play a more marginal role in such conflicts. There are usually many other issues involved, including claims relating to territory, governance, security, and grievances relating to social, political and economic marginalization as well as grievances over past violence and atrocities.

While all world faith traditions experience armed conflicts over religious incompatibilities, the focus here is on Islamist armed conflicts, in part because they have become much more common over time. While in 1975 no intrastate armed conflicts were fought over explicit Islamist demands, in 2015 56 per cent (28 out of 50 armed conflicts) were Islamist conflicts as defined here.. This increase is due to both an absolute increase in Islamist conflicts and a decrease in other types of armed conflicts.[2] This empirical trend is even more dramatic for civil wars—those involving more than 1000 battle-related deaths. When the first Islamist civil war since 1975 began in 1979 in Afghanistan, it represented 11 per cent of all civil wars. In 2015, 73 per cent of all civil wars were at least partially fought over Islamist claims.

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[1] Islamist aspirations and demands are here defined as explicit statements in the beginning of the conflict for a greater role of Islam in the society; the use of religious-based laws and punishment system (sharia), or other explicit Islamic demands.

[2] Pinker, S., *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes* (Penguin: London, 2011); Svensson, I., *Ending Holy Wars: Religion and Conflict Resolution in Civil Wars* (University of Queensland Press: Brisbane, 2012); Gleditsch, N. P. and Rudolfsen, I., 'Are Muslim countries more prone to violence?', *Research & Politics*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2016). On the decrease of ethnic conflicts over time, see Cederman, L-E., Gleditsch, K. S. and Wucherpfennig, J., 'Predicting the decline of ethnic civil war: was Gurr right and for the right reasons?', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2017).

Yet relatively little is known about regional variations in the patterns of Islamist armed conflicts; previous research has focused on global trends. This section, therefore, examines regional trends and features of Islamist intrastate armed conflicts, 1975–2015. New data from an ongoing research project based at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University reveal several potential long-term developments in Islamist armed conflicts.[3] It is important to know more about these conflicts because different regions suffer to a varying degree from this type of organized violence, due to different demographic patterns, historical trajectories, and variations in policy responses.

Regional trends and patterns

The number of Islamist armed conflicts has risen during a time when other types of conflict have declined or remained stable. According to Pinker, 'The Muslim world, to all appearances, is sitting out the decline of violence.'[4] Figure 3.1 demonstrates that Islamist conflicts increased during the period 1975–2015, whereas the trend for other types of armed conflicts is fairly stable, showing a decrease after the turbulent post-cold-war period, which experienced a historical peak in the number of intrastate armed conflicts. Figure 3.1 also illustrates that the proportion between different regions of Islamist armed conflicts has remained relatively stable over time.

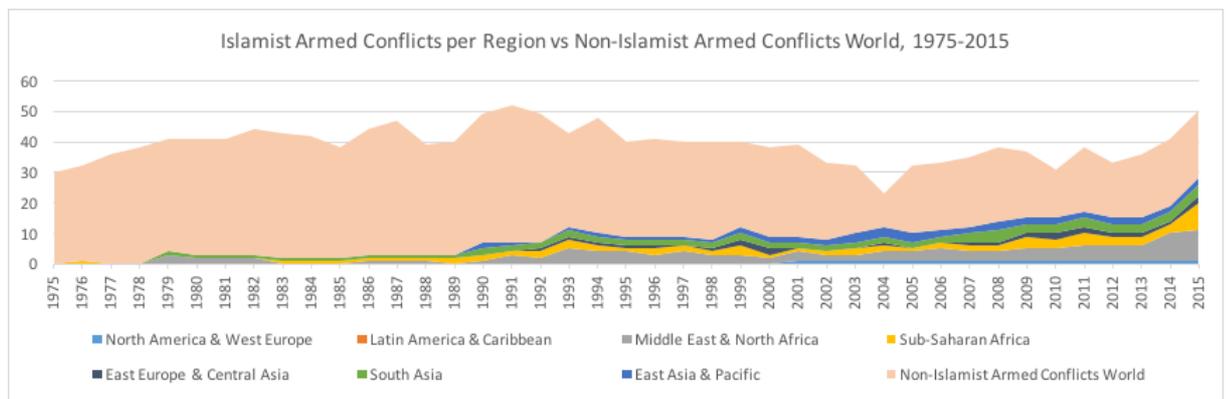**Figure 3.1.** Islamist armed conflicts per region vs. non-Islamist armed conflicts over time

Figure 3.2 illustrates that about a third of the world's Islamist armed conflicts take place in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, another third occur in sub-Saharan Africa, and the remaining third is distributed throughout Asia (11 per cent in South Asia, 11 per cent in East Europe/Central Asia and 9 per cent in East Asia/Pacific). North America/West Europe have had only 2 per cent of the world's Islamist conflicts whereas

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[3] Svensson, I. and D. Nilsson, Disputes over the Divine: Introducing the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) Data, 1975-2015, Manuscript, Uppsala University (2017).

[4] Pinker (note 2), p. 362.

Latin America/Caribbean have had none. The following sections describe the features and trends of Islamist armed conflicts in these regions in more detail.

Figure 3.2. Regional share of all Islamist armed conflicts, 1975–2015
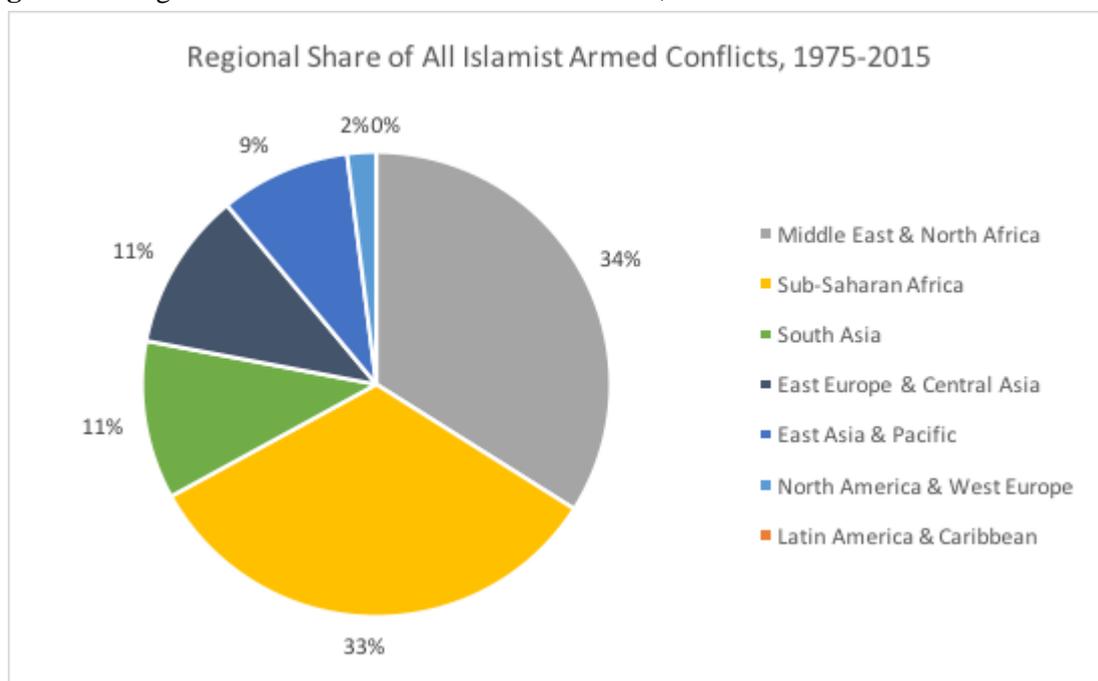
South Asia

Figure 3.1 illustrates South Asia's long history of Islamist armed conflicts. After a slight increase in the early 1990s, the number of conflicts has remained fairly stable. Since 1979, Islamist armed conflicts have represented a significant share, on average around 30 per cent, of all conflicts in the region. From 2007 the proportion has increased markedly, and in 2011 a majority of the conflicts in South Asia involved Islamist claims. Since then the share of Islamist armed conflicts in the region has decreased slightly, but remained stable at around 50 per cent.

   Islamist militancy in South Asia began in 1979 with Afghanistan; this conflict is pivotal to understanding the dynamics of Islamist armed conflicts in the region. In response to the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan, which started in 1979, the so-called Mujahedin movement—a loosely organized network of rebel groups—formed the basis for the resistance against the occupation. This resistance was organized with explicit Islamist aspirations, and around explicit demands against an avowed secular state (the Soviet Union). After the regime in Kabul was ousted, there followed a period of fighting between different warring factions and a dysfunctional state. In that context, the Taliban movement emerged; from its base in Pakistan, it successfully challenged the government forces and seized power. The Taliban regime was in power from 1996 until November 2001 when a US-led

intervention targeting the al-Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan and the Taliban regime ousted the Taliban from its power base in Kabul, following the terrorist attacks on the United States of 11 September that year (another important turning point in the development of Islamist armed conflicts). However, the Taliban movement was never defeated. It continued to fight as an insurgency movement and spread regionally: the Pakistani Taliban movement grew particularly strong in the wake of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

Another main source of Islamist armed conflicts in South Asia is the disputed region of Kashmir. Both India and Pakistan have incompatible claims to this region, and within Kashmir, there has been an ongoing insurgency seeking independence from India. Thus Kashmir represents an unresolved state-formation conflict and focal point for the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan. In this conflict, there are many rebel groups, some of which—for example, the Pasdaran-e-Inquilab-e-Islami (Guardians of the Islamic Revolution), the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (Party of Holy Warriors) and the Jaish-e-Mohammed (Army of Mohammed)—have formulated their demands for secession or union with Pakistan in Islamist terms. Kashmir has developed into an intractable conflict, in which religious claims are amalgamated with ethnic identity and grievances over what several parties to the conflict perceive to be repressive measures by the Indian state and army.

Sub-Saharan Africa

The first Islamist armed conflict that took place in sub-Saharan Africa during the study period occurred in Sudan in 1976, when the Islamic Charter Front rebel group attempted to overthrow the Sudanese Government in a coup. Between 1975 and 2015, an average of 15 per cent of all intrastate armed conflicts in the region were Islamist, but the proportion and absolute numbers have increased in recent years, especially since 2009. This is why Sub-Saharan Africa has such a high proportion of Islamist conflicts from a global perspective. In 2015, the majority (53 per cent) of conflicts were, for the first time, over Islamist claims (i.e. at least one of the combatant groups originally raised Islamist demands). This increase is partly attributable to the emergence of the Islamic State (IS), as some rebel groups, such as Boko Haram, have pledged allegiance to the group.[5]

The Islamist armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa have transformed in nature: their territorial ambitions and radical aspirations have increased. The Al-Shabaab movement in Somalia radicalized from the earlier insurgency—also framed in Islamist terms—under the banner of the so-called Union of Islamic Courts.[6] This radicalization was due in part to the economy of war, the continuous fractious nature of the largely non-functioning Somalia state and the reaction to the Ethiopian military intervention in 2006. Al-Shabaab has also targeted civilians beyond Somalia, such as in Kenya.[7]

[5] For more on the Islamic State, see section II in chapter 4 of this volume.
[6] Uppsala Conflict Data Program (note 3), UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia, 2017.
[7] Uppsala Conflict Data Program (note 6).

In Nigeria the character of Islamist armed conflict has also changed. The insurgency group known as Boko Haram—an elusive rebel formation—has made demands for the stricter application of sharia law in Muslim-dominated parts of the country. In 2014, the insurgency escalated as the group declared an Islamic caliphate in Northeastern Nigeria and extended its regional ambitions to neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Niger and Chad.[8] In 2015, the group pledged allegiance to the IS, which subsequently declared that Boko Haram now constituted the West African province of the Islamic State. The increasing national and regional military offensive against the group has pushed it back militarily, and new splits have emerged within the leadership. Yet it still has the capacity to cause havoc in the Lake Chad region.[9]

The Islamist armed conflict in Mali has also transformed. In 2012, Tuareg separatists formed an uneasy alliance with three Islamist movements (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, and Ansar Dine) to create a short-lived, self-proclaimed Islamist emirate in Northern Mali. This state-formation project broke down in the wake of a French-led international military intervention in 2013.[10]

Middle East and North Africa

Just over one-third (34 per cent) of all Islamist armed conflicts are located in the MENA region (see figure 3.2). In every year since 1993, except for 1996 when their share dropped to 43 per cent, conflicts over Islamist claims have represented the majority of all conflicts in the region, and in some years (1997–98, 2001–02, 2004, 2014) all conflicts in the region have been fought at least partly over Islamist aspirations.

Syria has experienced unprecedented numbers of battle-related deaths out of all conflicts involving Islamist groups.[11] The country's civil war, which involves rebel coalitions that include Islamist groups, has been ongoing since 2011, after an initially largely nonviolent uprising against President Bashar al-Assad was violently repressed. The IS managed to exploit the fractious nature of the Syrian insurgency to manoeuvre itself into a strong position. At its height, the IS controlled around half of Syria's territory.[12] The group has since lost most of its territorial control, and at the end of 2016 was mostly restricted to a few urban strongholds such as Raqqa and Palmyra in Syria and Mosul in Iraq.[13]

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[8] Comolli, V., *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* (Hurst & Company: London, 2015).

[9] Varin, C., *Boko Haram and the War on Terror* (Praeger Security International: Santa Barbara, CA, 2016).

[10] For more on the conflict in Mali, see SIPRI Yearbook 2016, chapter XYZ.

[11] Note that due to the lack of disaggregation of the actors, battle-related deaths can occur in the fight against (or by) groups with Islamist demands. Syrian insurgents comprise various types of actors, including, but not limited to, groups with explicit Islamist demands.

[12] Estimate by Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in May 2015. See Shaheen, K., 'Isis "controls 50% of Syria" after seizing historic city of Palmyra', *The Guardian*, 21 May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/21/isis-palmyra-syria-islamic-state>.

[13] For more on the IS and the conflict in Syria, see section II in chapter 4 of this volume.

In the MENA region, several Islamist insurgencies and rebel movements have coexisted with (and to some extent, are increasingly challenged by) groups with more radical transnational Islamist aspirations.[14] The more moderately oriented Islamists, belonging to the tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood, have tried to organize politically and attain influence through elections, yet their electoral victories have either been overturned (Egypt and Algeria) or failed to achieve international recognition (Hamas in Palestine). Hezbollah have also combined political work and armed tactics. In Algeria, the Islamist political party, the Islamic Salvation Front, was denied its electoral victory in 1992, which unleashed a brutal civil war. In the midst of war, the radicalization of some armed Islamist groups led parts of the wider Islamist movement to agree to an amnesty.[15]

The Islamist armed conflicts in the MENA region are interwoven, and reflect the intractable rivalry between Shia-dominated Iran and Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, and Iraq under Saddam Hussein. For example, during the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War, both countries supported rebel movements as part of their interstate rivalry. More recently, Saudi Arabia and Iran have become important players in Syria, aiming to undermine each other by supporting opposing sides in the country's civil war.[16]

East Asia and Pacific

East Asia is the site of 9 per cent of all Islamist armed conflicts; there are no conflicts Islamist in the Pacific (see figure 3.2). Between 1975 and 1989 there were no such conflicts in the region. In 1990, Islamist armed conflicts began erupting in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and China as militant groups demanded secession from the state.[17] After reaching a peak of around 60 per cent of all conflicts in the region in 2003–04, the share of Islamist armed conflicts decreased to approximately 30 per cent in 2015. East Asia is thus unique: the frequency of Islamist armed conflicts has not increased overall as in other regions. East Asia has predominately experienced Islamist-nationalist movements among Muslim minorities in the region, in particular in the Southern Philippines, in the Southern parts of Thailand and in the Indonesian province of Aceh. Transnational Islamist armed movements—in particular Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines and Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia—have engaged in violence against civilians, but this has not resulted in sustained military conflicts on a large scale.[18]

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[14] Melander, E., Pettersson, T. and Themnér, L., 'Organized violence 1989–2015', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 53, no. 5 (2016), pp. 727–42.

[15] Ashour, O., 'Islamist De-Radicalisation in Algeria: Successes and Failures', *Middle East Institute*, 21 (November 2008), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/94111/No_21_Islamist_De-Radicalization.pdf>.

[16] On the Iran-Saudi rivalry, also see section I in chapter 4 of this volume.

[17] The MNLF raised nationalist demands, whereas the MILF expressed Islamist-nationalist claims, and therefore only the latter's conflict with the government of the Philippines is coded as an Islamist armed conflict.

[18] Liow, J. C., 'Muslim resistance in southern Thailand and southern Philippines: religion, ideology, and politics', *Policy Studies* 24, East-West Center Washington (2006),

The region has also had some success in negotiating solutions to conflicts that initially involved Islamist aspirations by one of the warring parties. For example, in the Aceh conflict with the Free Aceh Movement a peace agreement was reached in 2005; similarly in the Bangsamoro conflict in the Southern Philippinesa peace agreement was signed between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2014, and negotiations have been held between the government and Patani insurgents in Southern Thailand.[19]

East Europe and Central Asia

During the period 1975–2015, 11 per cent of the world's Islamist armed conflicts took place in East Europe and Central Asia (see figure 3.2). The first such conflict in the region was in Tajikistan in 1992. After Tajikistan was granted independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and other democratic parties formed an alliance, the United Tajik Opposition, to challenge the ex-communist leaders who had taken over power. The IRP is particularly interesting, given that it joined a rebel coalition with other secular-leaning groups, and due to the fact that the conflict in Tajikistan ended, at least temporarily, through an arrangement that allowed for the formation of religious parties. A peace agreement was signed in 1997, but the conflict continued into 1998, as some field commanders opposed the deal.[20] In Central Asia, violent jihadi groups have been a key security concern for governments, in particular the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has challenged the Uzbekistan Government and has been fighting in Tajikistan and Pakistan.[21]

In the Caucasus, a nationalist war involving Chechnyan separatists began in 1991, and was later replaced by an Islamist-framed insurgency that metamorphosed into a regional jihadist armed conflict. The Forces of the Caucasus Emirate proclaimed their struggle in 2007; their aims included retaking all Muslim lands in the Caucasus, such as Chechnya, Dagestan and Ossetia, and the establishment of sharia law in the Northern Caucasus. The group has been on the demise since 2013, and since then many factions have defected and claimed allegiance to the IS.[22]

Implications

In several regions of the world, the proportion of Islamist armed conflicts has increased substantially, while the number of other conflicts overall has decreased or remained stable. Most notably, perhaps, the conflict in Syria

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<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/PS024.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=32138>;   Uppsala Conflict Data Program (note 3).

[19] Finnbogason, D. and Svensson, I., 'The missing jihad: why have there been no jihadist civil wars in Southeast Asia?', *The Pacific Review,* 2017, forthcoming.

[20] Uppsala Conflict Data Program (note 3).

[21] Uppsala Conflict Data Program (note 3).

[22] Uppsala Conflict Data Program (note 3).

involving the IS has had serious ramifications not only in Syria but also for the emergence of armed conflicts in other regions. In 2015, the IS was active in 12 conflicts in four different regions: MENA, Central Asia, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. While this analysis has focused on armed conflicts, it is important to keep in mind that some regions have experienced other forms of related violence, for instance, actors such as the IS have been responsible for terrorist attacks against civilian targets in Europe and elsewhere (as discussed in section II, chapter 4).

In some cases, an escalation over time can be observed from a not necessarily religiously framed opposition that incorporates explicit Islamist grievances, and then transforms into transnational Islamist aspirations. The ability to constructively manage and resolve these types of conflicts at each step of this escalation has important implications for conflict prevention policies. Given the global ideological movements of transnational armed Islamists, it is pivotal to try to settle the still-unresolved conflicts in the Muslim world that have not yet been drawn into the trans-jihadist narrative, including a set of intractable state-formation conflicts such as in Palestine, Western Sahara, Omoro, Southern Thailand, Kashmir and the Mindanao-Bangsamaro region of Southern Philippines. Although there have always been strong arguments based on justice and international law as to why these need to be settled, the increasing proportion of armed conflicts motivated by Islamist claims is another compelling reason to address these conflicts with an increased sense of urgency.

East Asia, and in particular Southeast Asia, has defied the abiding empirical trends: the proportion of Islamist armed conflicts in the region has decreased over time. Future research should examine the reasons why.[23] Whereas East Asia has provided some room for negotiations, civil society and political parties, it is too early to tell whether this helps explain why it has not followed the pattern of other regions, or whether it is because the conflicts in that region are inherently different from those occurring elsewhere.

[23] See Svensson, I., 'Peace by avoidance of religious civil wars', ed. E. Bjarnegård and J. Kreutz, *Debating the East Asian Peace* (NIAS Press: Copenhagen, Forthcoming 2017); Finnbogason and Svensson (note 19).