

### III. Mapping armed conflicts over Islamist claims: exploring regional variations

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#### Introduction

Armed conflicts fought over Islamist claims have increased dramatically as a proportion of the total number of armed conflicts over the past two decades. This section explores the regional pattern of Islamist armed conflicts. Religiously framed conflicts are not necessarily about religion per se. There may, for example, be economic or power motives behind the religious arguments. Islamist intrastate armed conflicts are defined for the purposes of this chapter as conflicts between governments and rebels, in which at least one of the actors makes explicit Islamist demands regarding the control of government power or a specific area of territory.<sup>1</sup>

The characterization of a conflict as Islamist therefore 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 for an 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, such as claims relating to territory, governance and security or grievances related to social, political and economic marginalization—or even accusations of past violence or atrocities.

While all the 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. In 1975 there were no intrastate armed conflicts fought over explicitly Islamist demands. By 2015, 56 per cent (28 of the 50 armed conflicts) fit the above definition of an Islamist conflict. This increase is linked to both an increase in the number of Islamist conflicts and a reduction in the number of other types of armed conflict.<sup>2</sup> This empirical trend is even more dramatic in the case of civil wars—intrastate conflicts that lead to more than 1000 battle-related deaths

<sup>1</sup> Islamist aspirations and demands are defined here as explicit statements at the beginning of the conflict advocating a greater role for Islam in society, the use of religion-based laws and punishment systems (sharia) or other explicit Islamic demands.

<sup>2</sup> 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 in 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).

in one or more calendar year. When the first Islamist civil war in the period 1975–2015 began in Afghanistan in 1979, 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.

Nonetheless, relatively little is known about regional variations in the pattern of Islamist armed conflict. Previous research has focused on global trends. This section examines regional trends and the features of Islamist intrastate armed conflict between 1975 and 2015. New data from an ongoing research project based at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University reveals several potentially interesting long-term developments in the pattern of Islamist armed conflicts.<sup>3</sup> Different regions suffer to varying degrees from this type of organized violence, due to their different demographic patterns and historical trajectories, and variations in policy responses. It is therefore important to enhance our understanding of these conflicts.

### **Regional trends and patterns**

The number of Islamist armed conflicts has increased at a time when the numbers of 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’.<sup>4</sup> The number of Islamist armed conflicts increased in the period 1975–2015, whereas the pattern of other types of armed conflict was fairly uniform—a decrease after the turbulent post-cold war period, which experienced a historical peak in the number of intrastate armed conflicts (see figure 2.2). The proportion of Islamist armed conflicts in the various regions has remained relatively stable over time (see figure 2.2).

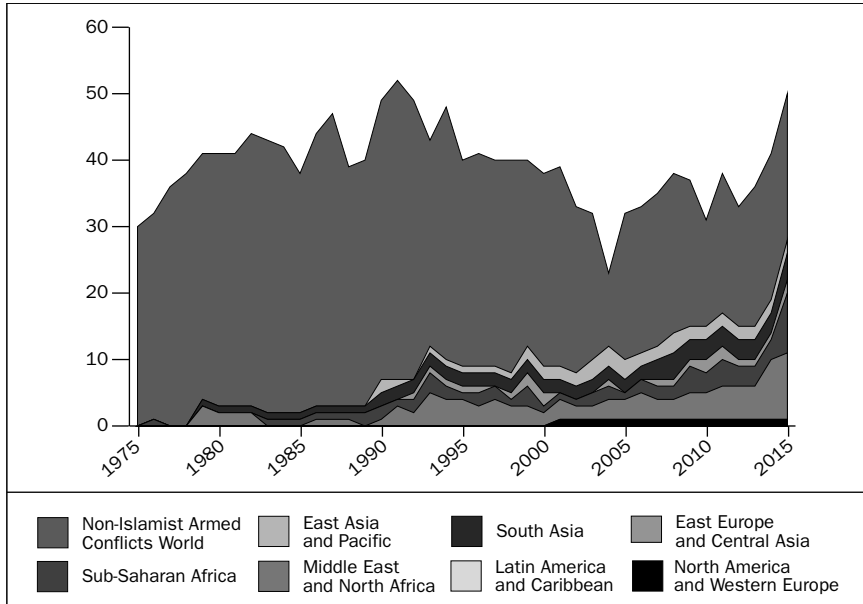
About one-third of the world’s Islamist armed conflicts take place in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), one-third in sub-Saharan Africa and the remaining conflicts are distributed throughout Asia (see figure 2.3). Only 2 per cent of the world’s Islamist conflicts during this period have taken place in North America or Western Europe, and there have been no such conflicts in the Latin America and the Caribbean region. The features of and trends in Islamist armed conflicts in each region are set out in more detail below.

#### *South Asia*

South Asia has a long history of Islamist armed conflicts (see figure 2.3). After a slight increase in the early 1990s, the number of conflicts has remained fairly stable. Since 1979, Islamist armed conflicts have represented

<sup>3</sup> Svensson, I. and D. Nilsson, ‘Disputes over the divine: introducing the religion and armed conflict (RELAC) Data, 1975–2015’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, forthcoming.

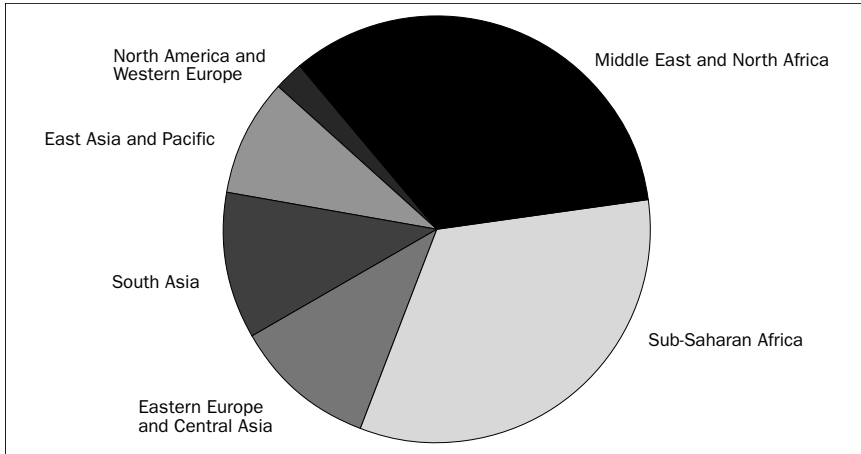
<sup>4</sup> Pinker (note 2), p. 362.



**Figure 2.2.** Islamist armed conflicts by region vs. non-Islamist armed conflicts, 1975–2015

on average around 30 per cent of all conflicts in the region. The proportion increased markedly after 2007 and a majority of the conflicts in South Asia involved Islamist claims in 2011. 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 Afghanistan in 1979. This conflict is pivotal to understanding the dynamics of Islamist armed conflicts in the region. The Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan in 1979. The so-called Mujahedin movement—a loosely organized network of rebel groups—formed the basis for the resistance to the occupation. This resistance was organized with explicit Islamist aspirations and around specific demands against an avowedly secular state—the Soviet Union. After the regime in Kabul was ousted, a period of fighting between different warring factions followed leading to a dysfunctional state. In this context, the Taliban movement emerged from its base in Pakistan, successfully challenging government forces and seizing 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 regime from Kabul. The intervention followed the terrorist attacks on the United States of 11 September that year, which was 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



**Figure 2.3.** Regional share of all Islamist armed conflicts, 1975–2015

spread regionally: the Pakistan Taliban movement grew particularly strong in the wake of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

Another major 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 in Kashmir there is an ongoing insurgency seeking independence from India. Kashmir therefore represents an unresolved state-formation conflict and a focal point for the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan. In this conflict, there are many rebel groups, some of which—for example, the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution (Pasdaran-e-Inqilab-e-Islami), the Party of Holy Warriors (Hizb-ul-Mujahideen) and the Army of Mohammed (Jaish-e-Mohammed)—have formulated their demands for secession or union with Pakistan in Islamist terms. Kashmir has become 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 to take 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 number have increased in recent years, especially since 2009. Sub-Saharan Africa has a high proportion of the world's Islamist conflicts. In 2015, for the first time, over half (53 per cent) of all conflicts were over Islamist claims, meaning that at least one of the combatant groups originally raised Islamist demands.

This increase is partly attributable to the emergence of the Islamic State (IS), to which some rebel groups, such as a faction of the insurgency group known as Boko Haram—an elusive rebel formation—have pledged allegiance.<sup>5</sup>

The Islamist armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa have transformed and their territorial ambitions and radical aspirations have increased. The al-Shabab movement in Somalia was a radicalization of an earlier insurgency—also framed in Islamist terms—under the banner of the Union of Islamic Courts.<sup>6</sup> This radicalization was due in part to the war economy, the continuously fractious nature of the largely non-functioning Somali state and the Ethiopian military intervention in 2006. Al-Shabab has also targeted civilians beyond Somalia, such as in Kenya.<sup>7</sup>

In Nigeria the character of Islamist armed conflict has also changed. Boko Haram has demanded a stricter application of sharia in Muslim-dominated parts of the country. In 2014, the insurgency escalated when the group declared an Islamic caliphate in north-eastern Nigeria and extended its regional ambitions to neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Niger and Chad.<sup>8</sup> In 2015, the group pledged allegiance to IS, which declared Boko Haram its West African province. The national and regional military offensive against the group has pushed it back militarily, however, and new splits have emerged within the leadership. Nonetheless, it still has the capacity to cause havoc in the Lake Chad region.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

### *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 2.3). In every year since 1993, except for 1996 when their share dropped to 43 per cent, conflicts over Islamist claims represented the majority of all conflicts in the region, and in some years (1997–98, 2001–2002, 2004, 2014) all the conflicts in the region were being fought at least partly over Islamist aspirations.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the IS see chapter 3, section II, in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> On the Union of Islamic Courts see the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia, <<http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/database/>>.

<sup>7</sup> See the UCDP Conflict Encyclopaedia, <<http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/database/>>.

<sup>8</sup> Comolli, V., *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* (Hurst & Co.: London, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Varin, C., *Boko Haram and the War on Terror* (Praeger Security International: Santa Barbara, CA, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> For more on the conflict in Mali, see Sköns, E. and Nyirabikali, G., 'The implementation of the peace process in Mali', *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, pp. 159–88.

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

In the MENA region, several Islamist insurgencies and rebel movements have coexisted with—and to some extent are being increasingly challenged by—groups with more radical transnational Islamist aspirations.<sup>13</sup> More moderately oriented Islamists that belong to the tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood have tried to organize politically and gain influence through elections. Their electoral victories have either been overturned (Egypt and Algeria) or failed to achieve international recognition ( Hamas in Palestine). Hezbollah has combined political work with armed tactics. In Algeria, the Islamic Salvation Front, an Islamist political party, was denied its electoral victory in 1992, which unleashed a brutal civil war.

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. During the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War, for example, 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.<sup>14</sup>

### *East Asia and Pacific*

East Asia is host to 9 per cent of all contemporary Islamist armed conflicts; there are none in the Pacific (see figure 2.3). There were no such conflicts in the region between and 1975 and 1990, when Islamist armed secessionist groups arose in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and China.<sup>15</sup> After peaking at around 60 per cent of all conflicts in the region in 2003–2004, the

<sup>11</sup> 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. Not all Syrian insurgents make explicit Islamist demands.

<sup>12</sup> Estimate by Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, May 2015. See Shaheen, K., 'Isis "controls 50% of Syria" after seizing historic city of Palmyra', *The Guardian*, 21 May 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Melander, E., Pettersson, T. and Themnér, L., 'Organized violence, 1989–2015', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 53, no. 5 (2016), pp. 727–42.

<sup>14</sup> On the Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry see chapter 3, section I, in this volume.

<sup>15</sup> The Moro National Liberation Front raised nationalist demands, whereas the MILF expressed Islamist-nationalist claims. Therefore, only the latter's conflict with the Government of the Philippines is coded as an Islamist armed conflict.

share of Islamist armed conflicts decreased to approximately 30 per cent in 2015. The frequency of Islamist armed conflicts has not increased in the past decade as in other regions. East Asian Islamist-nationalist movements operate predominantly among Muslim minorities in the region, in particular in the southern Philippines, the southern parts of Thailand and 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 a sustained large-scale military conflict.<sup>16</sup>

The region has also had some success in negotiating solutions to conflicts that initially involved Islamist aspirations in one of the warring parties. For example, in 2005 a peace agreement was reached in the Aceh conflict with the Free Aceh Movement. Similarly, in the Bangsamoro conflict in the southern Philippines, a peace agreement was signed in 2014 between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF); and negotiations were held in 2016 between the Government of Thailand and Patani insurgents in southern Thailand.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Eastern Europe and Central Asia*

In the period 1975–2015, 11 per cent of the world's Islamist armed conflicts took place in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (see figure 2.3). 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 power. The IRP is particularly interesting because it joined a rebel coalition with secular-leaning groups, and due to the fact that the conflict in Tajikistan had been ended, at least temporarily, by 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. Violent jihadi groups have been a key security concern for governments in Central Asia. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, in particular, has challenged the Uzbek Government and fought in Tajikistan and Pakistan.<sup>18</sup>

In the Caucasus, a nationalist war involving Chechnyan separatists began in 1991. This was later replaced by an Islamist-framed insurgency that metamorphosed into a regional jihadist armed conflict. The Forces of the Caucasus Emirate proclaimed its struggle in 2007. It included among its

<sup>16</sup> Liow, J. C., *Muslim Resistance in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines: Religion, Ideology, and Politics*, Policy Studies no. 24 (East-West Center, Washington, DC, 2006); and Uppsala Conflict Data Program, <<http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/database/>>.

<sup>17</sup> Finnbogason, D. and Svensson, I., 'The missing jihad: why have there been no jihadist civil wars in Southeast Asia?', *Pacific Review*, forthcoming (2017).

<sup>18</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program (note 16).

aims retaking all Muslim lands in the Caucasus, such as Chechnya, Dagestan and Ossetia, and establishing sharia in the northern Caucasus. The group has been in decline since 2013 as many factions have defected and pledged allegiance to IS.<sup>19</sup>

## Implications

While the number of conflicts in each region has decreased or remained stable, the proportion that are Islamist armed conflicts has increased substantially in several regions of the world. The conflict in Syria involving IS has had serious ramifications not only in Syria, but also for the emergence of armed conflicts in other regions. In 2015, IS was active in 12 conflicts in four different regions: Central Asia, MENA, 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 related forms of violence. For instance, actors such as IS have been responsible for terrorist attacks against civilian targets in Europe and elsewhere.

In some cases, a not necessarily religiously framed opposition has adopted explicitly Islamist grievances that transformed into transnational Islamist aspirations over time. The need to constructively manage and resolve these types of conflict at each step of the escalation has important implications for conflict prevention policies. Given the existence of global ideological movements of transnational armed Islamists, it is pivotal to try to settle the many unresolved conflicts in the Muslim world that have not yet been drawn into the transnational jihadist narrative. Among these are a number of intractable state-formation conflicts, such as in Palestine, Western Sahara, Omoro, southern Thailand, Kashmir and the Mindanao-Bangsamoro region of the southern Philippines. Although there have always been strong arguments based on justice and international law for 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, in particular South East Asia, has defied the empirical trend: the proportion of Islamist armed conflicts in the region has decreased over time. Future research should examine the reasons why.<sup>20</sup> East Asia has provided some room for negotiations, civil society and political parties, but how far this explains why it has not followed the pattern of other regions is too early to say. It could be that the conflicts in that region are inherently different from those that are taking place elsewhere.

<sup>19</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program (note 16).

<sup>20</sup> See Svensson, I., 'Peace by avoidance of religious civil wars', eds E. Bjarnegård and J. Kreutz, *Debating the East Asian Peace* (NIAS Press: Copenhagen, 2017); and Finnbogason and Svensson (note 17).