



Islam in South and Southeast Asia

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Summary

There exists much diversity within the Islamic world. This is particularly evident in Asia. This diversity is to be found in the different ethnic backgrounds and in the different practices of Islam. The Muslim world of Asia has been experiencing an Islamic revival. This has had an effect on moderate as well as radical Muslims. An understanding of the dynamics of Islam in Asia should help inform United States' policy to develop respect between America and Muslim peoples, to foster economic policies to encourage development of open societies, to support education in Muslim states, and to identify and prioritize terrorist sanctuaries in order to pursue more effectively the war against terror. This report will be updated.

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By some estimates there are approximately 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, of which 60% live in Asia.¹ Only 15% of Muslims are Arab, while almost one third live in South Asia.² The four nations with the largest Muslim populations, Indonesia (194 million), India (150 million), Pakistan (145 million), and Bangladesh (130 million), are in Asia. China also has a population of 39 million Muslims.³ Despite this, the Muslims of Asia are perceived to be on the periphery of the Islamic core based in the Arab Middle East. Muslims are a majority in Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan and Turkmenistan in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in South Asia and Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia in Southeast Asia. (See map below) There are also significant minority populations in Khazakstan, India, Thailand, and the Philippines. Sizable Muslim communities are also found in Sri Lanka, China, Burma, and Singapore.

Islam⁴ is by some estimates the world's fastest growing religion. Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, is the spiritual center of Islam because Mohammad founded the religion there in 610. In 2002, Muslims constituted approximately 19% of the world's population as compared to 30% that were Christian. These percentages are projected by some to shift to 25% Christian and 30% Muslim by the year 2025.⁵

Islam in Southeast Asia is relatively more moderate in character than in much of the Middle East. This moderation stems in part from the way Islam evolved in Southeast Asia. Islam came to Southeast Asia with traders rather than through military conquest as it did in much of South Asia and the Arab Middle East. Islam also was overlaid on animist, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions in Indonesia, which are said to give it a more syncretic aspect. Islam spread throughout much of Southeast Asia by the end of the seventeenth century. Islam in Asia is more politically diverse than in the Middle East.

Islam has been undergoing a revival in Asia. RAND analyst Angel Rabasa points to several factors that contribute to this Islamic resurgence in Asia. These include both domestic and external factors. Internally, the forces of globalization and the impact of Western culture have played a role, especially the effect of rapid industrialization and resulting urbanization. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 resulted in the overthrow of the authoritarian Suharto regime and created political space for Islamists in Indonesia. Muslim separatist insurgents have continued their struggle in the Philippines and Thailand while the Parti Islam se Malaysia has worked through the political system to promote an Islamist agenda while in opposition in Malaysia. External factors include the current situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the export of Saudi-backed Wahhabi Islamic fundamentalism, the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, and the Afghan war against the Soviets.⁶

¹ "Islam," *BBC World Service*, 2 July, 2004 and Robert Hefner, "Islam and Asian Security," *Strategic Asia*, 2003. For general information on the history of Islam see Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002).

² Vartan Gregorian, *Islam: A Mosaic Not a Monolith*, (Washington: Brookings Institute, 2003).

³ "Huge Potential," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 5, 2004.

⁴ Islam has been defined as "the Arabic word meaning "surrender" or "submission," as in surrendering to God's will." Gregorian, p. 6.

⁵ V. Cieslak and C. Mark, "Islam/U.S. Ethnic Populations: Frequently Asked Questions/Statistics," Congressional Research Service, Electronic Terrorism Briefing Book.

⁶ Hefner, p. 353 & Angel Rabasa, *Political Islam in Southeast Asia: Moderates, Radicals and Terrorists*, Adelphi Paper 358, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2003, p.10-12.

Different Schools of Islamic Tradition

The majority of Muslims are of the Sunni tradition, while 10-15% are Shiite. This difference stems from disagreement over the succession to the prophet Muhammad. In South and Southeast Asia, Shiites are a significant portion of the population in only Afghanistan and Pakistan. The puritanical Sunni sect of Wahhabism has played an important role in the resurgence of Islam in Asia. It stems from a 18th Century movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab that preached a literal interpretation of the Quran and an orthodox practice of Islam. Historically there has been a close relationship between Wahhabism and the Saudi dynasty.⁷ Sufism is another more “mystical” variant of Islam, though its presence in Asia is small except for parts of South Asia.

The decline of Islamic power in the wake of European colonial expansion provoked two key schools of thought within Islam that continue to have relevance today. The traditionalist school believed that the cause for the decline of Islam could be traced to “moral laxity and departure from the true path of Islam.” As a result, their response was to call for an Islamic revival. Others, known as reformers, felt that the decline was due to “a chronic failure to modernize their societies and institutions.” The path of the reformers presents the question of whether it is possible to modernize without Westernizing. At its core this is a struggle over values: “... how to protect a society’s cultural heritage and traditional practices in an age of globalization and how to develop a creative coexistence between modernization and traditionalism without Westernization.”⁸

It is thought by some analysts that if the United States and the West seek to make common cause with moderate elements within the Islamic world against violent extremists they would be well advised to do so in a way that is not perceived to be a threat to the Islamic world. The United States, through its association with globalization and a globalizing culture, is perceived as a threat by many leaders of the Islamic world who are seeking to preserve, or restore, traditional culture even as segments of the populations they lead are drawn to American culture. The disconnect between Muslim elites and their people in Asia can also be seen in the decreasing popularity of United States’s foreign policy even as regional leaders seek to maintain close ties. Some analysts believe that as long as the Muslim world views the U.S.-led war against terror as a war against Islam there will be significant limits on the extent to which Muslim states will be able to cooperate with the United States in the war against terror. The problem is exacerbated by widespread Muslim opposition to United States policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Islamic Revival, Political Islam, Extremists, and Terrorists

The Islamic revival is changing the face of political Islam in Asia. The distinction to be drawn is between revivalists, who see religious change as an end in itself, and political Islam, or Islamists, who seek the Islamic revival as a means to the end of transforming the state.⁹ A further distinction

⁷ See CRS Report RS21432, *Islam: A Primer*, by Clyde Mark, CRS Report RS21745, *Islam: Sunnis and Shiites*, by (name redacted), and CRS Report RS21695, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya*, by (name redacted).

⁸ This argument is drawn from Gregorian, pp. 39, 50.

⁹ Jillian Schwedler, “Islamic Identity: Myth, Menace, or Mobilizer?” *SAIS Review*, summer, 2001.

is to be drawn between those who would work through the political process and those who would use violence to achieve their ends. The Islamic revival has a complex relationship to the level of extremism in Asia. While Islam in Southeast Asia has been moderate in character, it is undergoing a process of revivalist change in some segments of society. The resurgence is in part inspired by links to the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Some Southeast Asians returning from Islamic religious schools in the Middle East and Pakistan have returned with a new, radical, militant, Islamist, and extremist form of Islam that is more likely to be anti-American or anti-Western in character.¹⁰ There is also a significant number of violent extremists of returned Southeast Asians, and a larger number of South Asians, who had participated in the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.¹¹ Some of the South and Southeast Asians who have been radicalized through these experiences have gone on to spread extremist ideology, particularly by linking with local Muslim extremist groups who tend to have more nationally or regionally defined goals and who are largely opposed to local moderate Muslims. From one perspective “the most effective policies towards Muslim Asia will be those that contain extremism while working with, rather than against, the Muslim majority’s aspirations for social and economic improvement.”¹²

Connections between Islamic extremism and terrorist organizations in South Asia appear to be more extensive than they are in Southeast Asia. This stems in large part from closer interaction with the Middle East, strengthened recently by the presence of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is also a function of long term conflict in Afghanistan and in Kashmir. The extremist Taliban regime gave sanctuary to Al Qaeda until it was crushed. Since that time remnant Al Qaeda forces have linked up with other Sunni extremist groups in South Asia including Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan and Lashkar-i-Jhangvi. Pakistan has also experienced Sunni-Shiite conflict. An extensive array of Islamic schools known as *madrassas*, including some that teach a militant anti-Western and anti-Hindu perspective, operate in Pakistan. A coalition of Islamist political parties controls approximately 20% of the seats in Pakistan’s legislature, as well as the Northwest Frontier Province. They also lead a coalition in Baluchistan. It has been reported that Al Qaeda fighters escaped to Bangladesh after the fall of Afghanistan to American and Afghan Northern Alliance forces and that Bangladesh veterans of the conflict in Afghanistan have played a role in establishing radical *madrassas* in Bangladesh. In India, while there exists significant inter-communal strife between Hindus and Muslims it is largely domestically focused with the exception of Pakistani based groups operating in Kashmir.¹³

There are a number of Islamist groups in Southeast Asia that have linkages, either direct or indirect, to terrorist organizations. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and Abu Sayyaf are examples of groups in the Philippines where Islamist ideology, secessionism, criminality, and linkages to international terrorist networks are evident. The terrorist Jemaah Islamiya (JI) organization, which seeks to establish an Islamic Khalifate across much of Southeast Asia and establish Islamic law, has ties to Al Qaeda. In Indonesia, the now reportedly disbanded Lashkar Jihad incited inter-communal strife between Muslims and Christians in Sulawesi and the

¹⁰ Steve Raymer, *Living Faith: Inside the Muslim World of Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: Asia Images Group, 2001).

¹¹ Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), p. 10.

¹² Hefner, p.354.

¹³ See CRS Report RL32259, *Terrorism in South Asia*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted), CRS Report RS21654, *Islamic Religious Schools, Madrasas: Background*, by (name redacted), “Deadly Cargo,” *Time Asia*, October 21, 2003.

Moluccas that created a struggle that can be exploited by terrorist groups such as JI. Lashkar Jundullah is another group that has been involved in inter-communal violence in the Moluccas and Sulawesi. The extremist Kampulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) is an example of an organization in Southeast Asia established by veterans of the fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan. In Thailand, separatists have mounted an insurrection in the Muslim southern provinces.¹⁴

The relatively few Muslims of Northeast Asia are found in China for the most part. China is home to an estimated 17.5 to 36 million Muslims. The largest, most concentrated group is the Uighurs of Xinjiang Province in western China. The Uighur minority has experienced unrest of an Islamic character in recent years. Many Uighurs seek autonomy within China. Demographic trends arising from Han-Chinese in-migration are projected to make the Uighurs a minority in their home province.¹⁵

The scope of the Islamic revival in Asia, and the extent to which increased religious fervor will translate into extremist positions or political power that will express itself in violent ways towards the West, is debated. Some see this phenomenon manifesting itself more in terms of increased piety among individuals within society without necessarily expressing itself politically.¹⁶ Karen Armstrong, author of *Islam: A Short History*, believes that because fear feeds extremism the war against terror should include a better appreciation of Islam in the West.¹⁷ It has been observed that U.S. counter-terrorism policy “tends to conflate political Islam and terrorism worldwide.”¹⁸ A key distinction for some in this debate is the distinction between cultural or religious identity and political identity. An Islamic revival that finds its expression through cultural or religious means is not necessarily a threat, even as some in the Islamic world would manipulate it to their anti-American or anti-Western ends.¹⁹

An examination of recent developments with political Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia illustrate this point. Radical Islamist or extremist parties have not demonstrated broad appeal among Indonesian or Malaysian voters in recent elections even as some segments of these societies have experienced a resurgence of Islamic belief. The Islamist Parti Islam se Malaysia experienced significant electoral setbacks in the 2004 elections to the relatively more secular Barisan National Coalition of Prime Minister Badawi, who is himself regarded as a respected Islamic scholar. In Indonesia, Islamist parties, such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), made small gains based not on their Islamist agenda but on their anti-corruption and good governance policies. Secular and nationalist parties clearly are preferred by voters in Indonesia and Malaysia even as Islam remains a core value of the people. There are also fundamentalists in Southeast Asia that would introduce strict Islamic law but would not advocate the use of violence to do so. There is also a distinction to be made between those who would focus primarily on sub-national, national and

¹⁴ CRS Report RL31672, *Terrorism in Southeast Asia*, by (name redacted) et al.; Steven Rogers, “Beyond the Abu Sayyaf,” *Foreign Affairs*, January, 2004, Rabasa, pp. 63-64 & Zachary Abuza, p.124.

¹⁵ See CRS Report RS20476, *China's Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region: Developments and U.S. Interests*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

¹⁶ Greg Fealy, “Understanding Political Islam in Southeast Asia,” Asian Social Issues Program, Asia Society, New York, May, 21, 2003.

¹⁷ Karen Fragala, “Understanding Islam,” *Newsweek*, October 29, 2001.

¹⁸ The Stanley Foundation, “Political Islam and Counter-terrorism in Southeast Asia: An Agenda for U.S. Policy,” *Policy Bulletin*, October 16, 2003.

¹⁹ May 5, 2004 Asia Source interview of Mahmood Mamdani, author of *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

regional objectives, such as secession for a Muslim province, rather than focus on the international agenda advocated by Al Qaeda.

Alienation and humiliation appear to be key concepts for understanding the Islamic resurgence in Asia and for understanding why individuals are drawn to terrorist groups. In discussing madrassas and pesantren in Indonesia, from which extremists have been recruited, Zachary Abuza has taken the position that the “radical fringe (of Islam) will continue to grow, as modernization leaves people more isolated and the political process leaves people more disenfranchised. The Islamists and their supporters will continue to gain in power unless the more secular Muslim community again provides a successful model of tolerant and modernist Islam that it has done fairly successfully for forty years.” In this way, some analysts believe frustration from diminished expectations driven by economic malaise, the lack of effective political participation, and a sense of humiliation are at the core of why many Asian Muslims have become radicalized. It is thought by some that U.S. policies can help best by assisting moderate elements in Asia to “respond to mainstream Muslims’ hopes for economic improvement and political participation ... education, balanced development, participatory governance, and civil peace” that will give hope to alienated individuals who might otherwise drift towards radicalism. Some observers feel that diminishing the ranks of alienated Asian Muslims will in turn restrict room for maneuver by extremists and terrorists by limiting active or passive support from the societies within which they operate.²⁰

²⁰ Abuza, pp. 13-14, Hefner, p.386, Gregorian, p. 68, and “... the jihadi groups draw their strength from a common pool of self-righteous anger at what they see as the humiliation of Muslims at the hands of the West ... the passion that fuels Islamist terror is growing. The main reason for this is the perception, widespread in the Muslim world, that America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with its support for Israel, are tantamount to a war on Islam.” “Al-Qaeda: Amorphous but Alive,” *The Economist*, June 5, 2004.

Figure I. Map



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS. (K.Yancey 8/2/04)

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