Religious conflict has sparked numerous civil wars around the world — but not in East Asia, despite the existence of many different religions in the region’s states. And where there are armed insurgencies partly motivated by religious differences, these have not escalated into full-scale civil war.

Isak Svensson looks at why the tinderbox of religious conflict has so far not been ignited in East Asia.

RELIGIOUSLY DEFINED civil wars have become a dominant form of political violence globally. Of all the civil wars being fought in 2014, 73 percent were over religious issues. Since 2000, civil wars in which at least one party defined the stakes in religious terms have represented a majority of the civil wars in the world. Research on religious civil wars — which has grown rapidly in recent years — shows that they tend to be more bloody, intractable and difficult to settle through peaceful means than other types of conflicts. As the world witnesses a decrease in other types of civil wars, religious civil wars remain an acute security problem.

Yet East Asia stands out from this global trend. The region, in fact, experienced very few major armed conflicts over religious issues. Only 2 percent of all the world’s religious wars in the period between 1975 and 2014 have occurred in East Asia, and the conflicts that have taken place have been at a relatively low level of intensity. While religiously defined wars have taken a larger share of civil wars globally, East Asia remains surprisingly peaceful — or rather, less belligerent — when it comes to religious conflicts. Religion plays a certain role in southern Thailand and Mindanao in the Philippines, and there have been anti-Muslim riots in Myanmar, but the global Islamist jihad, as we know it from the Middle East, has not been present in East Asia in recent decades other than through scattered (if deadly) bombings, mostly in Indonesia and linked to jihadist groups.

During the 1975-2014 period, there were only four years during which armed conflicts fought over religious issues passed the threshold of 1,000 battle-related deaths (the conventional way of measuring “wars”) in East Asia. Three of these years were in the Philippines, in the conflict between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2000 and with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1978 and 1981, while one was in the conflict between the government of Myanmar and the predominantly Christian Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in 1984. Four years are bad enough, of course, but compared to other regions this is a surprisingly low number. Thus, the East Asian Peace cannot be fully explained unless the relatively low number of religious civil wars is accounted for. This essay maps the landscape of religion as a factor in organized violence in East Asia, posing the question: why have there been so few religiously defined civil wars in East Asia after 1975?

PLENTY OF DIFFERENCES

Let me first mention a few explanations that do not hold up, in my view. First, it is not because of a lack of religious disputes. Religious identities and claims remain contested and religious actors are active in a small part of the organized violence in the region. East Asia has had its share of religiously defined conflicts, but of a lower magnitude and scope than in other regions. There have also been several cases of organized violence between communal groups (non-state conflicts) and between groups with different religious identities, which potentially could have sparked civil war.

Communal conflicts between Christians and Muslims have occurred in two Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines and Indonesia. In Indonesia, it happened in 1999 and 2000 in various places in the aftermath of the fall of the Suharto regime, and was also a dimension in the fighting that took place in the Maluku Islands during the

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1950s and in West Kalimantan in the mid-1960s. There was renewed violence in West Kalimantan in 1997 and 2001, with mostly Christian Dayaks attacking Muslim Madurese immigrants. This was not, however, a conflict over religion, but rather one related to identity politics. Local Muslim Malays were also opposed to the Madurese as immigrants or “strangers” with different Muslim practices. Moreover, the Fretilin liberation movement in East Timor, the Free Papua Movement (OPM) in Indonesia and the Kachin, Chin, Karen and Karenni insurgencies in Myanmar are not principally about religion but about demands for local autonomy. The dominance of Christianity among these minorities, however, means that it plays a role in differentiating between the conflict parties. Yet none of these escalated into a major civil war over religion.

It also not because of a lack of grievances. Many Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang Province in China believe that their traditional way of life is under threat and that the immigration of Han Chinese risks marginalizing them in their own territory. Government suppression of discontent, which has accelerated in recent years, is further increasing their sense of grievance against Beijing. Fear of losing one’s influence and identity can explain why groups take up arms, and why religions sometimes are drawn into the conflict dynamics. For example, fear of marginalization after losing their once-important role in the Myanmar army was one of the factors that led the predominantly Christian Karen insurgents to take up arms in 1948. In 1961, as a reaction to President U Nu’s decision to declare Myanmar a Buddhist state, the Karen stepped up their rebellion.

Moreover, the relative lack of religiously defined wars cannot be fully explained by cultural practices and legacies. The religious demography of Confucian Northeast Asia is historically quite tolerant of religious minorities, and with Japan, Korea and the Han Chinese completely dominated by one ethno-linguistic group it may not have been conducive to religiously defined armed conflicts. But one can’t say the same of religiously heterogeneous Southeast Asia, with difficult relations among Buddhists, Christians and Muslims that could have led to more violence than we have seen. Southeast Asia has, however, seen religiously motivated conflict in several parts of Indonesia, Mindanao in the Philippines, southern Thailand and Myanmar, and religious divisions are an essential part of Malaysian politics.

The relatively low level of religious civil war in East Asia during the last decades cannot, however, be taken for granted. The region’s ability to contain, prevent or attempt to resolve religiously defined conflicts is an important feat, but there is no guarantee that the future will follow the past. East Asia remains a fertile ground for Islamic jihadist entrepreneurs seeking to wire local secessionist campaigns into a global narrative and struggle.

LOCAL DYNAMICS AT WORK
I argue that there are two main, inter-related explanations for the relative lack of religiously defined conflicts in East Asia. The first is that East Asia’s religiously defined conflicts in general, and Islamic jihadist armed conflicts in particular, have remained rooted in local dynamics and contexts. Thus, the main explanation for the lack of civil wars is that the present intra-state conflicts have not, as elsewhere globally, created strong trans-national conflict lines that would draw in external support or intervention.

East Asia, for example, might be expected to be fertile ground for the expansion of global jihadism. Indonesia is the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world, and Malaysia and Brunei are also important Muslim-majority countries. The region includes five countries with ethnically concentrated Muslim populations, in which armed opposition groups have been active: the Malay-Muslim south in Thailand (the former Sultanate of Patani), Rakhine State in Myanmar (the historical state of Arakan), Mindanao in the Philippines (part of the Sulu Sultanate), Xinjiang (East Turkestan) in China, and Aceh (the former Aceh Sultanate) in Indonesia.

All of these can look back at a historical period when they had their own state or a high degree of self-determination. Several attempts have been made by trans-national jihadist groups to internationalize or globalize uprisings among these Muslim populations. Some small factions, notably Abu Sayyaf in Mindanao and Jemaah Islamiya (JI) and Laskar Jihad in Indonesia, have had links to the international jihadist movement. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement in Xinjiang has occasionally had operational and ideological connections with jihadist movements in Central Asia and beyond.

Following 9/11 and in response to bombings in Bali and Jakarta and Indonesia’s successful hunt for the leaders of JI, there was much talk about an emerging Southeast Asian “second front” in the global confrontation between secular governments and armed jihadist movements. Yet a striking feature of the Muslim insurgencies in Southeast Asia is resistance among the insurgents themselves to being drawn into the global jihadist movement. They have largely remained committed to their own local agendas. International jihadism in the form that has unfolded in the Middle East (Syria and Iraq), South Asia (Afghanistan and Pakistan), Africa (Somalia, Nigeria, and Mali) and Central Asia ( Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), exploits local grievances and pulls the young generations of local rebels into a larger conflict narrative, where they can see themselves as belonging to a unified global front — quite similar to what the international communist movement did in the past. Sometimes, however, leaders with a mainly local agenda (such as a wish to maintain and revive an identity linked to a former Sultanate) and with a high degree of local legitimacy, do not want to subsume their cause to the struggle for a global caliphate. East Asia is a region where most armed Muslim groups seem to prefer to stand outside the global jihadist campaign. Hence, the Islamic rebels in the region, such as the MILF in the Philippines or the Patani insurgents in southern Thailand, have distanced themselves from international jihadist networks.

TOUGH GOVERNMENTS
The second explanation has to do with the state capacity of East Asian states. Whereas the first explanation can partly be found on the rebel side (the decision not to be linked to international jihadist campaigns), the second has more to do with the government side. More precisely, effective repressive measures — many of them time-harsh — by governments in the region and effective security services can help account for
why the conflicts have not spread, and why prov-
ocations and incidents have not escalated into
full-scale civil wars. The ability of the security
apparatuses of Indonesia and Malaysia, in par-
ticular, to prevent outbreaks of jihadist conflict
can partly explain the lack of escalation into civil
wars over religion. (The repressive nature of the
East Asian Peace is discussed later in this cover
package in an article by Kristine Eck).

The fact that Indonesia has been effective in
sharply downgrading, if not eliminating, jihadist
movements, should be seen from a historical per-
spective. Islamists have taken up arms against
the government in the form of violent uprisings
by the Islamist group Darul Salam in 1953, and
again in 1959-61, and even mainstream Islamic
groups were active in repressing and basically
eliminating the communist movement through
bloodshed in Java and elsewhere in 1965.

There has also been a limited, but still real,
political space and openness for raising religious
aspirations within the constitutional system, par-
ticularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. This applies
in particular to political Islam. A combination of
security measures and relative political open-
ness seem to partly explain why there has been
such meager enthusiasm for jihad in Indonesia
and Malaysia. The combination of hard and soft
approaches has not been pursued throughout the
region, however. Notably, in the case of Xinjiang,
the Chinese authorities have, particularly since
May 2014, repressed almost all manifestations
of political Islam, and they monitor closely vari-
ous expressions of Muslim and Uighur identity.
At the same time, economic investments in infra-
structure and the mining industry are meant to
decrease the incentives to support secessionist
forces. So far, it remains to be seen whether this
approach will succeed.

The low degree of internationalization of reli-
gious conflicts and the state capacities of East
Asian countries are two inter-related factors. The
relative — and it should be underlined that it is
relative, not complete — detachment from global
jihadist movements is a consequence of the fact
that East Asian states have remained in control
of the military campaigns against religious mil-
itants. There has been no American-led drone
warfare as in South Asia, the Middle East and
parts of Africa. Although American support and
training have been given to the armed forces of
the Philippines, for example, the main military
tasks have remained domestic.

The relatively low level of religious civil war in
East Asia during the last decades cannot, how-
ever, be taken for granted. The region’s ability
to contain, prevent or attempt to resolve reli-
giously defined conflicts is an important feat, but
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the past. East Asia remains a fertile ground for
Islamic jihadist entrepreneurs seeking to wire
local secessionist campaigns into a global narra-
tive and struggle. The assertiveness of nationalist
Buddhist forces in Myanmar remains a security
challenge that may provoke religiously motivated
violence at higher levels. Buddhists and Chris-
tians have mobilized politically in several parts
of East Asia, sometimes quite aggressively and
with armed violence. Still, if East Asia can capi-
talize on some of its achievements, then there are
important lessons that many other parts of the
world can learn from the region.

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