

Muslim Countries and the Supportive Roles for Peacebuilding in the Southern Border Provinces of Thailand

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Abstract

This study examines the roles of Muslim countries (Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia) in Thailand's southern border conflict from 2004-2019, focusing on their motivations and impacts. Using qualitative methods including document analysis, interviews, and focus groups, the research explores these countries' involvement across multiple levels of engagement. The findings reveal diverse patterns of support, from Malaysia's role as an official facilitator to humanitarian and educational assistance from Gulf states. Identity politics and shared religious bonds emerge as key factors shaping engagement, while geopolitical interests and international image-building also play important roles. The study contributes to understanding how religious identity influences conflict resolution processes and provides recommendations for leveraging these relationships to support peacebuilding efforts.

Introduction

Since the outbreak of unrest in Thailand's southern border provinces in 2004, the conflict has resulted in significant losses across many dimensions for the local population. Despite a declining trend, violence continues to persist. Meanwhile, various stakeholders have attempted to find approaches to address this internal conflict but have been unable to resolve the problems with deep-rooted causes stemming from identity factors, policy structures, and justice system frameworks.

In any conflict area, conflict management processes become more effective when there are international actors involved who help strengthen, mediate, or create an atmosphere conducive to

the development of conflict-affected areas. When considering international actors involved in the overall picture of the southern border conflict, as noted in the book "International Actors in the Southern Border Deadly Conflict: A Preliminary Survey" prepared by the Strategic Nonviolence Working Group (2016), it is evident that beyond Malaysia, which serves as a facilitator between the main conflicting parties, there are various organizations, both state and non-state actors, that have continuously supported work in the southern border areas. However, the work of these external actors must remain within the framework of non-interference in the internal affairs of a state without that state's consent.

When examining the dimension of international actors in the southern border case, there is often debate about whether actors with potential to play a role are predominantly from Western countries. This is because Western actors employ norms or conceptual frameworks centered around human rights and peacebuilding in a democratic way, attempting to expand these frameworks to become universal. At the same time, there are critiques concerning actors from Muslim countries regarding their potential and sincerity in playing roles in other regions, given that many Muslim countries themselves face issues of violence and internal conflict. The researcher finds this to be an interesting point of contention. Preliminary research shows that since 2004, there have been only a few studies examining Muslim countries in relation to the southern border conflict.

One of the important works that initiated this study is the article "The Southern Thailand Conflict and the Muslim World" by Dr. Imtiyaz Yusuf (2007), which highlights the overview of relations between Thailand and Muslim countries, specifically pointing to the involvement of Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in southern border issues. Additionally, there are several analytical works that emphasize these actors. Jaran Maluleem (2012) has analyzed the issue of the Islamic Conference Organization and minority issues in the lower southern region of Thailand, which demonstrates how the OIC platform has been used as a political space between the main conflicting parties, whether the Thai government or movement groups. Therefore, it cannot be denied that Muslim countries are actors that play a role in conflict management in the southern border areas.

Identity is certainly a dimension that cannot be separated from understanding many conflict areas and international relations, where identity politics often significantly affects decision-making

and certain actions. The identity of being a Muslim country with the conceptual framework of "Ummah" or unity is another important factor that makes Muslims tend to trust and prioritize Muslim countries. According to the findings from Yasmin Sattar's (2018) doctoral dissertation on "Türkiye's Roles and Reflections in Conflict Areas in the Southeast Region," which included the southern border area in its study scope, it was found that conflict areas with Muslims as the majority, especially at the grassroots level and among movement groups, tend to have positive attitudes toward Muslim countries, and have confidence and hope for these countries to provide assistance, even though this may create threats at the international level. Nevertheless, it results in the development of closer relationships between them.

Building upon previous research covering only Türkiye, which reflected several interesting dimensions, the researcher is interested in expanding from this dissertation by examining other Muslim countries expected to have significant roles in the southern border area. This led to this research topic which will focus on studying the pathways of countries with apparent roles in the area, preliminarily seven countries: Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The study will explore their presence in the area and the opinions of local people and organizations to understand roles in Tracks 2 and 3, while also studying through documents and interviews with relevant individuals to understand roles in Track 1. After identifying these pathways, the research will develop policy recommendations to enhance international relations and cooperation with these influential groups to maximize benefits for the southern border area.

Therefore, this study has the main purpose of examining the roles of Muslim countries involved in the conflict in the southern border area, including their motivations and impacts, as well as developing policy recommendations that

will benefit the area. This research aligns with the national security strategy on developing systems, mechanisms, measures, and international cooperation at all levels, as well as the national research strategy on research and innovation for creating basic knowledge for the country in terms of social and human basic knowledge, and strategic plans according to the National Economic and Social Development Plan regarding international cooperation for development and strengthening national security for country development towards prosperity and sustainability.

Research Methods

This qualitative study employs multiple data collection methods to examine the roles of Muslim countries involved in Thailand's southern border provinces from 2004-2024, as well as their motivations, impacts, and policy recommendations. The research design incorporates document analysis of relevant literature, in-depth interviews with key informants, focus group discussions, and field surveys using snowball sampling techniques.

The study population includes organizations in the southern border area that have worked with the countries under study (Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia), academic experts on the area and Muslim world issues, and representatives from relevant government agencies. The research process involves conducting field surveys along with studying relevant documents to obtain an overview of areas where the roles of the countries under study are evident.

For data collection, in-depth interviews are conducted with relevant individuals to obtain detailed information. Questions focus on the details of the apparent roles of the countries under study, the beginning of cooperation, attitudes, outcomes, and recommendations. Subsequently, focus group discussions are held with interviewees to exchange perspectives. After processing the data collected, another focus group discussion is organized to jointly develop recommendations.

During data collection, codes are used instead of personal information, and no information about the informants is disclosed. Participation is voluntary, including for photo and audio recording. If informants are uncomfortable, no recording takes place. The research instruments used in the qualitative approach are in-depth interview forms for conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

For data analysis, the researcher analyzes the data while verifying its accuracy, then classifies and systematizes the data. Subsequently, the data is analyzed based on the research framework and established theories, processed, and presented as descriptive text. The conceptual framework employs the main concept of identity politics, which connects to the efficiency and potential of being intermediaries at various levels among actors in conflict areas.

Results and Discussion

Identity Politics in International Relations:

Identity politics is fundamental to understanding both the dynamics of conflict in Thailand's southern border provinces and the involvement of Muslim countries in this region. Identity politics refers to political activities centered around shared identities such as language, religion, ethnicity, or tribal affiliations that influence political decisions and activities. These identity markers create perceptions of "us" versus "them," which can be forces that unite people with the same identity or generate prejudice against those who are different (Wigmore-Shepherd, 2013).

In international relations, identity is a crucial factor influencing how states perceive themselves and others, affecting foreign policy decisions and diplomatic engagement. From a constructivist perspective, international politics is constructed through frameworks, norms, and identities of people, especially policymakers. Each country has a specific identity rooted in expressions of national characteristics. Identity in international

politics is often linked to legitimizing state actions. Historical and cultural identities can be used to build nationalism and strengthen political legitimacy. Religious identity may be emphasized to create alliances or advance political agendas in international forums. In some cases, identity is used to create "common enemies" or "others," leading international politics toward conflict rather than cooperation.

In conflict areas, identity politics significantly impacts both the emergence and persistence of conflicts. Different population identities are often emphasized to legitimize maintaining specific identities while suppressing or neglecting others. This dynamic is clearly observable in Thailand's southern border provinces, where religious and cultural differences between populations noticeably affect state-citizen relationships. Malay-Muslim identity is used as a tool in political dialogue processes, while non-recognition of these identity differences leads to feelings of alienation that intensify and deepen regional conflict (Yusuf, 2007).

Patterns of Muslim Country Involvement and Motivations:

Muslim countries have demonstrated distinctive patterns of engagement in Thailand's southern border provinces, with assistance ranging from official diplomatic channels to grassroots humanitarian aid. These engagement patterns reflect complex motivations comprising religious brotherhood, geopolitical interests, and efforts to build international image.

The concept of "Ummah" or Muslim unity serves as a fundamental motivation for Muslim countries' involvement in Thailand's southern conflict. This religious and cultural brotherhood creates a natural bond between Muslim countries and the Malay-Muslim population in southern Thailand. Sattar's (2018) research found that conflict areas with predominantly Muslim populations, especially at the grassroots level and among movements, tend to have positive attitudes toward Muslim countries. These populations often express

We don't see any world being called for other groups of people at all. Saudi is just Saudi. If they were truly brothers (brotherhood), they wouldn't be killing each other so much. The concept of the Muslim world is a product of one period, created by Saudi Arabia establishing the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to counterbalance Egypt in terms of the Arab League. (Informant 6, personal interview, December 25, 2023)

This perspective reflects the complexity of relations between Muslim countries themselves, and that the concept of the "Muslim world" may be merely a political discourse created in a specific context and timeframe, rather than a practical reality.

Geopolitical and strategic interests serve as another important motivation, especially for regional powers like Malaysia and Indonesia. These countries view stability in southern Thailand as an essential component of regional security and their national interests. For Malaysia, which shares a border with Thailand's conflict area, preventing spillover effects of the conflict is a primary concern. Both Malaysia and Indonesia also aspire to establish themselves as regional powers, with involvement in conflict resolution enhancing their diplomatic status (Yusof & Jaes, 2020).

International image-building is another crucial motivation for Muslim countries' involvement. Countries such as Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait view their roles as humanitarian donors and peace mediators as **enhancing** international prestige by demonstrating their ability to contribute positively to conflict resolution and humanitarian assistance. These countries aim to build soft power and improve global standing. This motivation aligns with broader trends in humanitarian diplomacy, where emerging countries use aid and mediation as tools for conducting foreign policy (De Lauri, 2018).

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The engagement patterns of Muslim countries also reflect their differing capabilities and regional influence. Regional powers like Malaysia and Indonesia engage more directly in formal peace processes, with Malaysia serving as the official facilitator in talks between the Thai government and insurgent group representatives. Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait focus on educational and humanitarian support, leveraging financial resources rather than direct political engagement. Türkiye has positioned itself as both a humanitarian donor and potential political mediator, drawing on historical experience and growing role as an international actor.

Types of Support from Muslim Countries:

Muslim countries have provided various forms of support to Thailand's southern border provinces, with each country participating in peace-building efforts through different channels and mechanisms. This support can be categorized into several key areas that reflect both the capabilities of these countries and the needs of the conflict-affected area.

At the diplomatic level, several Muslim countries have participated in facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties. Malaysia has had the most prominent role as the official facilitator in peace talks between the Thai government and movement representatives since 2013. This formal mediator role is crucial in creating space for dialogue, despite the peace process facing many challenges and obstacles. Indonesia has also

participated in diplomatic efforts, particularly through sharing experiences in resolving similar conflicts in Aceh (Muna et al., 2023). As one informant observed regarding Indonesia's approach to mediation:

Being a mediator is something recognized globally. Malaysia has played a role in Mindanao and Aceh, and other countries want to play a role as well. It's not surprising that Indonesia tried to take a second-place role, but ultimately other countries came in instead, which some parties were not very satisfied with. (Informant 2, personal interview, December 2, 2021)

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has served as an important multilateral forum where Muslim countries engage with the southern Thai conflict. The OIC has periodically expressed concern about the situation of Muslims in southern Thailand, sending fact-finding missions and issuing statements promoting peaceful resolution. This multilateral engagement has helped give the conflict some international attention, despite the Thai government's caution about internationalization.

The OIC's stance has become clearer that it does not support separation from the Thai state but wants Muslims in the area to be able to live peacefully with the Thai state, have freedom in religious practices, and receive support for education and religion.

Humanitarian assistance is a key dimension of Muslim countries' support for Thailand's southern border provinces. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Türkiye have provided significant humanitarian assistance to communities affected by conflict. This assistance includes food aid, relief supplies, medical support, and funding for rehabilitation projects. Such humanitarian assistance addresses urgent needs while building goodwill between these countries and local communities (Barakat & Zyck, 2010).

As Mary Anderson observes in her influential work on aid in conflict settings, "When aid is given in the context of a violent conflict, it becomes a part of that context and thus also of the conflict" (Anderson, 1999). This highlights the importance of understanding the complex interplay between humanitarian assistance and conflict dynamics.

Education is one of the most important and enduring forms of support from Muslim countries to Thailand's southern border provinces. Middle Eastern countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Kuwait, have provided scholarships for southern Thai students to study at Islamic universities abroad. These educational opportunities have created generations of religious leaders and professionals with international experience and connections who, upon returning to Thailand, often hold leadership positions in religious institutions, civil society organizations, and educational institutions, bringing new perspectives and capabilities to the region.

Economic development assistance is another important dimension of support from Muslim countries. Countries like Türkiye and Gulf states have funded infrastructure projects, small business development, and agricultural initiatives in conflict-affected areas. These projects aim to address economic grievances underlying the conflict by creating opportunities and improving living standards. The Islamic Development Bank, supported by several Muslim countries, has also implemented development projects consistent with Islamic financial principles.

Key Muslim Countries and Their Specific Support:

Among the Muslim countries involved in Thailand's southern border provinces, several have developed particularly significant roles based on geographical proximity, resources, and strategic interests. Each country has established specific approaches to supporting peace-building

efforts, reflecting their capabilities and relationships with Thailand.

Malaysia has served as the official facilitator in peace talks between the Thai government and dissenting groups in the southern border provinces since 2013 to the present. This role is based on geographical proximity, shared Malay cultural identity, and strategic interests in border stability. Malaysia's role in the southern border conflict reflects the complex interaction between domestic and international factors. While this conflict is an internal Thai issue, its proximity to Malaysia gives it complex international dimensions (Daoreuang, 2024).

Thailand-Malaysia relations regarding the southern border issue faced significant tension in 2005 when 131 Muslims from Narathiwat fled across the border into Kelantan. This incident led to diplomatic controversy when Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra condemned them as terrorists. However, relations began to improve after the 2006 coup, eventually leading to formal peace talks in 2013. McCargo (2014) observes that Malaysia often seems to exceed the boundaries of a facilitator toward a mediator role, creating discomfort for the Thai side. A significant challenge for Malaysia is maintaining an image of neutrality, as shared Malay-Muslim identity with the population in Thailand's southern border provinces makes it appear potentially biased toward insurgent groups.

Indonesia has positioned itself as an experienced peacebuilder with relevant lessons from its own internal conflicts, particularly the successful resolution of the Aceh conflict. Rather than seeking a formal mediator role, Indonesia has focused on sharing conflict resolution expertise and capacity building among various stakeholders in southern Thailand. Indonesian civil society organizations and academic institutions have organized workshops, training programs, and exchange visits focused on peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction. As Muna et al. (2023) point out, "Indonesia's

approach to the Southern Thailand conflict is characterized by sharing practical experiences from Aceh while respecting Thailand's sovereignty, creating an effective model of diplomatic engagement that balances external support with internal ownership of the peace process."

Türkiye has become an increasingly visible actor in Thailand's southern provinces, employing a humanitarian diplomacy strategy that blends aid, cultural engagement, and potential political influence. Turkish assistance includes humanitarian aid through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and other organizations, focusing on education projects and community development. Türkiye's cultural and educational initiatives are also prominent, including scholarship programs for southern Thai students to study in Türkiye and support for cultural exchanges (Sattar et al., 2023). Turkish involvement reveals a different approach focused more on humanitarian assistance:

Türkiye also provides some support through private organizations as they operate, but not to the point of interference. We try to make them aware of the southern border issues, but perhaps not to the point where they come to observe as it might elevate this issue. (Informant 1, personal interview, May 18, 2023)

This observation highlights the careful balance Türkiye maintains between providing humanitarian support and avoiding political interference that might antagonize Thai authorities.

Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait, have focused their engagement primarily on religious, educational, and humanitarian support rather than direct political involvement. Saudi Arabia has the longest history of engagement, having supported Islamic education in southern Thailand for decades through scholarships to Saudi universities and funding for local Islamic schools. This educational support has significantly influenced religious practices and discourse in the region, creating networks of religious scholars

with connections to Saudi institutions (Salae, 2008). In the past, Saudi Arabia played a significant role in providing various forms of assistance: Previously aiding from Saudi Arabia through various organizations, even more than Türkiye, in education, schools, orphan assistance organizations. Saudi Arabia once played an important role in this area, in this country, and in the ASEAN region. (Informant 2, personal interview, December 2, 2021) The restoration of diplomatic relations between Thailand and Saudi Arabia in recent years has had significant implications for the southern border provinces:

The connection between Thailand, especially Muslims in the South, with Saudi Arabia has continuity, but Saudi Arabia's adjustment, Vision 2030, to speak frankly, will make everything more business oriented. I'm not sure if the relationship between Muslims in Thailand and Muslims in Saudi Arabia will be the same. (Informant 3, personal interview, December 25, 2023)

An informant explained the broader impact of Saudi Arabia's policy changes on the southern Muslim community:

In the case of Muwallad, the development and changes in Saudi Arabia have pushed and expelled these people to return to the country, because these people grew up in Saudi Arabia but cannot speak Thai, have never lived in southern border province society, and must come back, with a trend of increasing numbers in the thousands. (Informant 3, personal interview, December 25, 2023)

Qatar and Kuwait have become important humanitarian donors in recent years, aiding through both government channels and Islamic charitable organizations. These countries have funded mosque construction, supported orphanages, and various community development projects. The approach of these countries typically works through local partner organizations and Islamic organizations (Milton et al., 2023).

Iran's engagement differs from other countries due to sectarian differences:

Iran might help through the education system, but we don't know for sure. Saudi Arabia through the Ministry of Religious Endowments, which is the nature of Muslim countries worldwide. Coming in this way is also exporting their ideas, through cultural methods of each ministry, working in the area... just the methods and forms are different. (Informant 4, personal interview, March 20, 2022)

These differences in approach reflect the complex interplay of religious, political, and strategic factors shaping Muslim countries' engagement with Thailand's southern border provinces.

Impacts of Muslim Countries' Involvement:

The involvement of Muslim countries in Thailand's southern border provinces has created significant impacts on the southern border area, affecting everything from community perceptions to dialogue processes. These impacts vary across different stakeholder groups and have evolved over time as international engagement has deepened.

For Malay-Muslim communities in the southern border, the involvement of Muslim countries has noticeably influenced perceptions and expectations. Research indicates that local populations generally have positive views toward Muslim countries, especially those providing consistent support through humanitarian and educational programs. This positive perception partly stems from shared religious identity, creating a sense of connection and understanding that transcends national boundaries (Nakaurairat et al., 2019).

Humanitarian assistance provided by Muslim countries has helped build trust at the grassroots level. When tangible support reaches conflict-affected communities, whether through scholarships, medical assistance, or infrastructure development, it creates goodwill and strengthens connections between local people and these external

actors. This trust-building impact is especially important in a conflict context where confidence in domestic institutions may be limited (Anderson, 1999).

The involvement of Muslim countries has significantly influenced the formal peace process between the Thai government and movement representatives. Malaysia's role as the official facilitator has institutionalized international involvement in conflict resolution efforts. While limited and the talks still face numerous constraints, this facilitation has helped maintain momentum in the peace process.

The presence of observers and supporters from Muslim countries also affects negotiating positions and behaviors. For insurgent groups, international recognition and support provide legitimacy and potential leverage in talks with the Thai government. Conversely, the Thai government has incentives to demonstrate open engagement in the peace process partly to maintain positive relations with important Muslim allies like Malaysia and Indonesia.

Investments in development projects by Muslim countries have created tangible economic benefits in conflict-affected areas. Improvements in infrastructure, microfinance initiatives, and vocational training programs supported by countries like Türkiye and Qatar have helped address some of the economic grievances fueling the conflict. While these economic interventions don't resolve the fundamental political issues at stake, they help create conditions more conducive to peaceful development (Lederach, 1998). As John Paul Lederach (1988) argues, sustainable reconciliation requires that we look at the systems and relationships that have been broken and how they can be rebuilt. This means addressing both immediate needs and the long-term structural issues that contributed to the conflict.

Despite positive engagements, Muslim countries' involvement in Thailand's southern provinces faces significant challenges and limitations.

Political sensitivities regarding sovereignty remain paramount, with the Thai government cautious about internationalizing what it considers an internal matter. These sensitivities sometimes limit the scope and engagement of Muslim countries, particularly in the political dimensions of conflict resolution.

Coordination challenges between different Muslim countries and organizations sometimes lead to duplication of efforts or gaps. The varied motivations and approaches of these countries, from Malaysia's direct facilitation to Gulf states' focus on religious institutions, create a complex landscape of external support that isn't always well-integrated. These inconsistencies may limit the overall impact and coherence of international assistance.

The involvement of Muslim countries in Thailand's southern border provinces has generated significant debates among scholars, policymakers, and local communities. These debates reveal the complex dynamics at play and help explain both the achievements and limitations of international engagement in the conflict. This section synthesizes the key debates that shape how Muslim countries engage with Thailand's southern provinces, examining how they interconnect and influence one another across conceptual, strategic, operational, and practical dimensions.

Conceptual Debates Surrounding Muslim Countries' Involvement in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces

The "Muslim World" Concept:

The very concept of a unified "Muslim world" faces significant critique among observers of the southern Thailand conflict. As Informant 3 pointedly stated:

If we were truly brothers (brotherhood), we wouldn't be killed so much. (Informant 3, personal interview, December 25, 2023)

This critique directly challenges assumptions about unified Muslim country engagement in the southern Thai conflict and reveals how religious solidarity often takes a back seat to national interests.

This tension between transnational religious identity and state-centric interests manifests consistently across Muslim countries' engagement patterns. While the concept of Ummah (Islamic brotherhood) theoretically creates transnational solidarity motivating involvement despite geographical distance, practical engagement reveals significant variations based on national interests, sectarian differences, and geopolitical calculations. This explains why Sunni-majority countries like Saudi Arabia and Türkiye have more prominent roles than Shia-majority Iran, whose limited engagement stems directly from sectarian differences with the predominantly Sunni population in southern Thailand.

The sectarian dimension also creates both opportunities and limitations that directly connect to sovereignty debates. This religious dimension creates both opportunities and constraints, with sectarian differences determining which actors can effectively engage with communities in southern Thailand.

Sovereignty and Internationalization:

The tension between religious identity politics and state sovereignty forms one of the most critical intersections in the debate. Thai security agencies predominantly view the southern conflict as a domestic issue that should be handled internally without foreign interference. Informant 5 directly articulated this perspective:

The military government views the southern border issue as a pure security matter, so they don't want outside organizations or countries to participate. They have consistently maintained that this is an internal problem that doesn't require outside interference. (Informant 5, personal interview, January 24, 2023)

This sovereignty-focused position creates concrete operational difficulties for international organizations, which face strict reporting requirements and oversight:

International organizations coming to work in the southern border area must be heavily checked. They will be required to report every 3 months. (Informant 5, personal interview, January 24, 2023)

These sovereignty concerns directly influence how Muslim countries adapt their engagement strategies. Türkiye's carefully calibrated approach illustrates this adaptive response. This strategic positioning allows Türkiye to maintain humanitarian engagement while respecting sovereignty sensitivities.

The sovereignty debate connects directly to questions about facilitator neutrality. Malaysia's role as the official facilitator in peace talks since 2013 has been complicated precisely because its shared Malay-Muslim cultural identity with the population in Thailand's southern provinces creates sovereignty concerns for Thai authorities. As one informant observed regarding Indonesia's attempted involvement:

Being a facilitator is something recognized globally. Malaysia has played a role in Mindanao and Aceh, and other countries want to play a role as well. It's not surprising that Indonesia tried to take a second-place role, but ultimately other countries came in instead, which some parties were not very satisfied with. (Informant 2, personal interview, December 2, 2021)

Even funding assistance encounters sovereignty roadblocks tied to Thai government concerns about control:

There are obstacles in terms of policy. Even though we see from requests or various things, the process that would flow smoothly in approval doesn't happen. (Informant 4, focus group, July 25, 2024)

This illustrates how sovereignty debates directly impact resource allocation and program implementation.

Top-Down vs. Grassroots Engagement:

The sovereignty debate connects directly to operational questions about whether peace efforts should focus on high-level negotiations or community-based initiatives. While formal dialogue between the Thai government and insurgent representatives continues with Malaysia's facilitation, the effectiveness of this approach faces increasing skepticism. Civil society emerges as a crucial bridge between top-down and bottom-up approaches, potentially resolving tensions between sovereignty concerns and community needs. This intermediary role offers a pathway for Muslim countries to engage meaningfully without triggering sovereignty concerns.

The effectiveness of civil society approaches directly connects to questions about coordination and sustainability:

For civil society, they might need to work together in one way, because each group has its own expertise. Another thing is working in coordination with each other. (Informant 2, focus group, July 25, 2024)

This coordination challenge reflects broader debates about how to structure international involvement effectively within sovereignty constraints.

Religious Support vs. Development Assistance:

A significant operational debate about the type of assistance Muslim countries should prioritize connects directly to questions about long-term impact and effectiveness. Traditionally, many Muslim countries have focused on religious education and support, but this approach faces increasing criticism as outdated and insufficient. Informant 6 offered a particularly pointed critique:

We've been like this for fifty, sixty years. The Muslim world has been aiding Thailand as a country that weak in religion, so they only give religious matters. Until now, I think Muslims in Thailand are ahead already, but they are still giving only religious matters. (Informant 6, personal interview, June 20, 2023)

The debate about assistance types connects directly to questions about sustainable impact. As Informant 6 recommended:

I view that the Muslim world in ASEAN, like Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, should play a more important role in interacting with people in the area, and participating in development, being partners in human resource development, elevating people in the area to have more knowledge and abilities. People in the southern border provinces already have language skills or Malay identity, but they need opportunities. (Informant 5, personal interview, June 20, 2023)

This emphasis on comprehensive development reflects an emerging consensus that religious support alone cannot address the complex factors driving conflict.

Perhaps the most forward-looking debate concerns how the southern border region should be perceived and positioned internationally. Currently, many Muslim countries approach the area primarily as a recipient of humanitarian aid rather than a potential investment partner. Informant 7 frankly described this perception problem:

We are a lower-tier area, an area where they donate, not an area where they invest in business. (Informant 7, focus group, July 25, 2024)

This perception directly impacts the sustainability and effectiveness of international engagement. A charity-based approach creates dependency and limitations, while investment-centered engagement could generate self-sustaining

development. The proposed Halal City project exemplifies this potential strategic shift:

We expect that Halal City will happen in an area...OIC or Muslim countries should give this opportunity, it's considered jointly developing Thailand. (Informant 2, focus group, July 25, 2024)

Repositioning the region as an investment destination connects directly to broader regional economic integration efforts, particularly with neighboring Malaysia:

For the three provinces area, we need groups of people coming in, such as Malaysians coming in now, should be viewed as an opportunity... This is a policy that the Thai government should continue to support. (Informant 4, focus group, July 25, 2024)

This economic integration perspective offers a potential resolution to the tension between sovereignty concerns and international engagement by framing involvement as mutually beneficial economic cooperation rather than external interference.

The investment and development approaches also directly address the limits of traditional religious engagement. As Informant 6 observed:

If talking about providing benefits to people in the southern border provinces, they have been giving continuously through charitable organizations, providing assistance, religious propagation all along, even when Thailand and Saudi Arabia had poor relations with each other...People who will benefit from this new relationship are those working in business and trade, who see opportunities from this new relationship, although in Muslim society in the southern border provinces, there may be very few people in this group. (Informant 6, personal interview, June 20, 2023)

This insight highlights the need to develop business capacity alongside religious support.

Conflict Fatigue and Sustainability Challenges:

A final critical debate concerns the sustainability of international engagement in protracted conflicts. After nearly two decades, evidence suggests diminishing international attention to the southern Thailand conflict. Informant 3 directly observed this pattern:

In the early period when situations were new, it felt like the Muslim world led by the OIC was trying to help or come to assist in negotiations, research, or things like that... The first 10 years seemed okay, but in the latter 10 years, in my feeling, I see both sides retreating, because the conflict became prolonged, causing fatigue, boredom, or it dragged on. (Informant 6, personal interview, December 25, 2023).

This "conflict fatigue" phenomenon connects directly to shifting international priorities. This perspective aligns with the concept of "post-ideological international politics" where economic interests and security increasingly trump ideological or religious solidarity.

The sustainability challenge connects directly to the need for new approaches that can maintain international engagement despite fatigue. As Informant 7 recommended:

Civil society groups must create new criteria, in terms of developing existing human resources, networks of new generations to play more roles. (Informant 7, focus group, July 25, 2024)

This generational renewal perspective offers a potential solution to combat declining international interest.

These debates – spanning identity politics, sovereignty concerns, operational approaches, assistance strategies, economic positioning, and sustainability challenges – collectively shape how Muslim countries engage with Thailand's southern border provinces. Rather than functioning as isolated issues, these debates form an interrelated system where changes in one area directly impact others. For instance, the shift in Saudi Arabia's approach under Vision 2030 connects identity

politics, development assistance, and economic investment debates. However, this same shift creates potential economic opportunities:

Benefits will be for Muslims who can adapt. Adapting here means adapting to the trading system, modern economy, communication technology, which is very rare in the southern border provinces. (Informant 3, personal interview, December 25, 2023)

Similarly, the OIC's evolving approach demonstrates how operational approaches and development strategies interconnect. Its initial stance of engaging only with Muslim representatives has evolved toward government coordination. This evolution reflects pragmatic adaptation that balances religious solidarity with diplomatic realities.

Understanding these interconnected debates provides crucial insight into both current limitations and future opportunities for international support in the peace process. As these debates evolve, they will continue to influence the effectiveness and sustainability of Muslim countries' contributions to peacebuilding in southern Thailand. The most effective future engagement strategies will likely be those that address multiple dimensions simultaneously, balancing religious solidarity with pragmatic cooperation, high-level diplomacy with grassroots engagement, and humanitarian assistance with quality of life and economic development.

Conclusion

The involvement of Muslim countries in Thailand's southern border provinces has significantly impacted peacebuilding efforts in the region. This study has demonstrated that these countries engage through various channels and with different motivations, ranging from religious solidarity to geopolitical interests and international image-building. Malaysia's role as an official facilitator in peace talks stands as the most prominent example of formal diplomatic engagement, while

countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait have focused more on humanitarian assistance and educational support.

The research highlights the importance of identity politics in shaping these international engagements. Shared religious identity creates bonds of trust that facilitate cooperation between Muslim countries and local communities in southern Thailand. At the same time, this study reveals the complex interplay between identity factors and more pragmatic considerations of national interest and regional stability.

Looking ahead, there are significant opportunities to leverage these international relationships more effectively for peacebuilding. Stronger coordination between different Muslim countries could enhance the coherence and impact of their support. The Thai government might consider expanding the scope for international involvement while maintaining appropriate safeguards regarding sovereignty. Civil society organizations could play an important bridge role between international donors and local communities.

While challenges remain, including concerns about sovereignty and religious influence, the overall contribution of Muslim countries to addressing the conflict in Thailand's southern border provinces has been positive. Their diverse forms of support—diplomatic, humanitarian, educational, and developmental—provide valuable resources and perspectives that complement domestic peacebuilding efforts. Future research should continue to examine how these international engagements evolve and how they might be better harnessed to support sustainable peace in the region.

Declaration of AI Assistance

AI technology was utilized in the preparation of this article. Specifically, Claude.ai was employed solely to assist with language enhancement and editing. The AI tool helped refine the writing style and improve clarity of expression, while all

data analysis, research methodology, intellectual contributions, interpretations, and conclusions were exclusively conducted and developed by the human author(s). The AI's role was limited to language assistance only, with all substantive content originating from human expertise.

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