

Carlyle Thayer of Australia National Defense University, an expert on terrorism in Southeast Asia, is concerned that a general misunderstanding of global terrorism may lead to underestimating the complexity of the threat.

Thayer pointed out that there were incidents of terrorism prior to 9/11, but after those events, people turned to regional experts to figure out how something like that “could happen.” The American public, in particular, craved information to explain who was responsible, and why.

The information that emerged and the way it has been presented by the media, said Thayer, had a profound effect on the way everyone discusses terrorism: many believe that everything is supposed to connect back to Al Qaeda. In reality, however, he argued that there are several disparate groups that have little or no connection to Al Qaeda, who may be equally as or more dangerous...the primary connection between these groups is a mutual willingness to use violence to spread their particular political message.

This popular way of thinking about terrorism has caused many regional specialists to talk about “old” and “new” terrorism, probing at length to find connections: groups that were once thought to be independent in their motivations, ideology and politics are now thought to be part of a new, international network of violence.

Thayer said that initially, regional experts who were consulted on terrorism reaffirmed that terror groups were independent and denied the international nature of “new” terrorism. Issues of agency and the media’s general dislike of complicated international relationships eventually made it difficult to argue this view, said Thayer, especially when the media prefers a simplified view that stretches to link all terror groups to Al Qaeda. For example, it is his belief that terror groups in Southeast Asia act independently, even if there are very loose connections with Al Qaeda, which is thought to have trained some members of groups like Jemaah Islamiah or Abu Sayyaf.

Thayer said that the many definitions of terrorism have also made it difficult for experts to discuss the complicated nature of terrorist activity: the United Nations’ definition differs from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which is different than the way the President or the State Department characterizes political terrorism. Both artificial connections and different understandings of terrorism have made it difficult for scholars to conduct meaningful analyses on the subject.

Speaking specifically about Southeast Asia, Thayer said that it is necessary for those seeking to understand terror groups in the region to realize that for some organizations, violence and militancy resulted from a history of religious oppression as a religious minority. For example, the Muslim Abu Sayyaf operates in the predominantly Christian Philippines, and Thayer said that the foundations of Jemaah Islamiah can be traced back to a debate over the creation of a secular or non-secular state.

Thayer concluded by saying that he thinks the largest global terror threat will be the militant Islamic groups in Indonesia. The operations in Afghanistan destroyed the center

of Al Qaeda, and the destruction of this core sent militant fighters fleeing. The international foundations of this group and the spread of its fighters—some dangerous professional fighters who will likely join up with other terror groups with little concern about the ideology of the group—may make Indonesia a likely home for many of Al Qaeda's displaced combatants. He did say, though, that the philosophies of a group like Jemmah Islamia may make them more inclined to seek political power and use their forces for those reasons than for political terrorism.