# Jihadism in Southern Thailand:
# A Phantom Menace

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*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*

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# Principal Findings

**What's the issue?**  Media reports and some observers suggest growing potential for Islamic State (ISIS) activity in Thailand's southernmost provinces. Crisis Group argues that to date there is no evidence of jihadist inroads, partly because the insurgents are nationalists who aim to create an independent state.

**Why does it matter?**  While fears of jihadist activity are not irrational, they are, for now, misplaced. But an endless and expanding conflict could create opportunities for transnational jihadists to exploit.

**What should be done?**  There needs to be a negotiated resolution of the conflict between the Thai government and the separatist movement. A decentralised political system could help address the principal grievances in the south while preserving the unitary Thai state.

# Executive Summary

The decline of the Islamic State (ISIS) and the advent of ISIS-linked violence in South East Asia evince the possibility of a new era of transnational jihadist terrorism in the region. Recurring albeit unsubstantiated reports about ISIS activity in Thailand have prompted questions about the vulnerability of the country's Muslim-majority deep south and, in particular, its longstanding Malay-Muslim insurgency to jihadist influence. To date, there is no evidence of jihadists making inroads among the separatist fronts fighting for what they see as liberation of their homeland, Patani. But the conflict and a series of ISIS scares in Thailand are fanning fears of a new terrorist threat. Such fears are not irrational, though are largely misplaced and should not obscure the calamity of the insurgency and the need to end it. Direct talks between insurgent leaders and the government are a priority; a decentralised political system could help address the principal grievances in the south while preserving the unitary Thai state.

Al-Qaeda and ISIS have exploited protracted conflicts across the Muslim world to further their agendas, including in areas that are under the sovereignty of capable states but where central government authority is weak. During the ISIS era, transnational jihadism in South East Asia mostly has been a "bottom-up" phenomenon with pre-existing militant groups (for instance in Indonesia and the Philippines) proclaiming allegiance to ISIS. In these countries, as well as Malaysia and Singapore, individuals and small groups unaffiliated with a militant network have also sought to join ISIS or act in its name.

Yet such patterns of involvement with ISIS or other jihadist groups to date have not manifested themselves in southernmost Thailand. One reason is that Thailand's Malay-Muslim society is not a sympathetic milieu for transnational jihadism; the country's Muslim religious leaders, both traditionalists and reformists, overwhelmingly reject the Salafi-jihadist ideology espoused by ISIS and al-Qaeda. To be sure, this diminishes but does not remove the risk of some Malay Muslims turning to jihadism. Motivations for joining jihadist groups vary and frequently are not linked to ideology or religious conviction. Jihadist propaganda could potentially sway some individuals. However, those Malay Muslims motivated by desires for comradeship, identity or devotion to a cause – not to mention grievances against the Thai state – appear more likely to be absorbed by the Patani liberation movement, given its roots in local society, than by transnational jihadist groups.

Indeed, the Malay-Muslim insurgency is distinguished by its parochialism. The militant organisation pursues national self-determination over a specific territory, seeking to join, rather than destroy, the international system. Patani-Malay militant leaders are antagonistic to ISIS and similar groups and see their fronts as bulwarks against jihadist influence. They say that allying with ISIS or al-Qaeda, or emulating signature tactics such as suicide bombings and indiscriminate mass-casualty attacks, would cost them a claim to international legitimacy, erode their local support and invite hostile foreign intervention. Malaysia, contending with a domestic ISIS-inspired threat, is not likely to tolerate such an association among the Patani militant leadership in exile there.

This is not a reason for complacency. Continued stalemate, tactical reversals, impatience with, or opposition to the slow-moving peace dialogue process between Bangkok and some separatist fronts – or even broader frustration with the prevailing strategy – could arguably encourage a splinter group to employ extreme violence in a bid to gain leverage. The example, or support, of jihadists might be attractive to militants disaffected with their leaders.

But it is a reason to question some of the more alarmist voices. The Patani liberation movement has a history of factionalism, and the main militant front, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (Patani-Malay National Revolutionary Front, BRN), is highly secretive, yet there are no clear indications of acute generational or ideological divisions. Fears of jihadist influence based primarily on the argument that "things can change" must be weighed against evidence that there is no appetite among the leadership of existing militant groups for affiliation with ISIS or like-minded groups.

The priority for the Thai government and Malay-Muslim militants should be to end the conflict that has cost almost 7,000 lives since 2004, not to act on speculation regarding possible jihadist inroads. The longer the conflict continues, the greater the risk of increased polarisation, intensified insurgency that could spread outside the deep south, as well as miscalculations that transnational jihadists could exploit. The exodus of ISIS fighters from the Middle East, the propaganda victory of pro-ISIS fighters in the Philippine city of Marawi, Mindanao, and calls from ISIS and al-Qaeda to avenge the Rohingya who were forced to flee Myanmar represent a potentially volatile convergence for the region.

To address these multiple risks, Bangkok and the Patani-Malay National Revolutionary Front (BRN) should communicate clearly to constituencies in the deep south that they take seriously both broader social aspirations and concerns and the grievances of various insurgent fronts. Doing so will require Bangkok to re-energise the peace dialogue process and the BRN to engage in it, with the objective of devising a political solution for the deep south based on decentralisation. More generally, the government should return rights to free expression and political assembly so that people are able to articulate local preferences and peacefully effect change.

**Bangkok/Brussels, 8 November 2017**

# Jihadism in Southern Thailand: A Phantom Menace

## I.    Introduction

There are recurring reports of Islamic State (ISIS) activity and influence in Thailand, particularly in the Malay Muslim-majority southernmost provinces where separatists have waged a renewed insurgency since the early 2000s.[1] The rise and decline of ISIS have stimulated concerns about the prospect of a new era of transnational jihadist terrorism in South East Asia, especially Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines, where ISIS has inspired, directed and funded violence by local affiliates and sympathisers.[2] To date, there is no evidence of any association between Malay-Muslim insurgents and foreign jihadists, but southernmost Thailand appears on the surface to offer conditions favourable for jihadist expansion: a Sunni minority that constitutes a majority in the conflict zone; a Muslim insurgency with a narrative of dispossession at the hands of non-Muslim colonisers; and a protracted conflict with frequent repression and violence by Thai authorities. Thai officials, analysts, and even some in the militant movement have expressed concerns about prospects for jihadist influence.[3]

The distinction between "jihad" and "jihadism" is central to this report.[4] Malay-Muslim militants have long framed resistance to the Thai state as a jihad, though their aims are primarily nationalist. Theirs may be characterised as an irredentist or "nation-oriented" jihad, ie a fight against non-Muslims for a particular territory.[5]

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[1] For earlier Crisis Group work, see Asia Reports N°s 270, *Southern Thailand: Dialogue in Doubt*, 8 July 2015; 241, *Thailand: The Evolving Conflict in the South*, 11 December 2012; 181, *Southern Thailand: Moving Towards Political Solutions?*, 8 December 2009; 170, *Recruiting Militants in Southern Thailand*, 22 June 2009; 140, *Southern Thailand: The Problem with Paramilitaries*, 23 October 2007; 129, *Southern Thailand: The Impact of the Coup*, 15 March 2007; 105, *Thailand's Emergency Decree: No Solution*, 18 November 2005; 98, *Southern Thailand: Insurgency, Not Jihad*, 18 May 2005; and Briefings N°s 148, *Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: No Traction*, 21 September 2016; 113, *Stalemate in Southern Thailand*, 3 November 2010; 80, *Thailand: Political Turmoil and the Southern Insurgency*, 28 August 2008.

[2] Thomas Koruth Samuel, *Radicalisation in Southeast Asia: A Selected Case Study of* Daesh *in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines*, Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016; Greg Fealy and John Funston, *Indonesian and Malaysian Support for the Islamic State (Final Report)* (Arlington, VA, 6 January 2016); *The Failed Solo Suicide Bombing and Bahrun Naim's Network*, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, Report No. 30, 29 July 2016.

[3] Crisis Group interviews, Veera Urairat, deputy secretary general, National Security Council, Bangkok, 1 March 2017; Thai analyst, Bangkok, March 2017; BRN Information Department, June 2016, February 2017.

[4] Mark Sedgwick, "Jihadism, Narrow and Wide: The Dangers of Loose Use of an Important Term", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 2 (April 2015), pp. 34-41.

[5] Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005, pp. 14-15; Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism" in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York, 2009), p. 258.

"Jihadist", by contrast, is used here to refer to movements such as al-Qaeda, ISIS and their affiliates.[6] Most jihadists espouse Salafi-jihadism, a doctrine that rejects the nation-state as an affront to God's sovereignty, regards the rulers of states across the Muslim world as apostates and seeks, through revolutionary violence, to establish pure Islamic government in the form of a caliphate.[7] Malay-Muslim militants are, as a rule, not Salafis, but rather adhere to traditional forms of Sunni Islam of the Shafii school that is dominant in South East Asia.[8] Malay-Muslims do not often use the term "jihadist" to describe groups like ISIS or al-Qaeda, instead using "terrorists", "extremists" (*ekstremis* or *pelampau*) or the names of particular jihadist groups. Militants refer to themselves as *juwae*, or fighters, a word that implies the concept of jihad.[9]

ISIS and al-Qaeda have sometimes succeeded in affiliating with nationalist armed groups pursuing local agendas and have exploited conflict for their own ends, even within the peripheries of capable states.[10] This report examines factors that militate against this happening in southernmost Thailand, and assesses the

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[6] The Arabic root of "jihad" refers to striving in God's service. Many Muslims find its use in the political violence context imprecise and offensive, reducing a complex religious concept to war-making. In reference to violence, it can encompass insurgency and guerrilla war as well as terrorism. For the vast majority of Muslims, today's "jihadists" pervert Islam's tenets. But it is hard to escape the term. Groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS self-identify as "jihadist", and while jihad has long been an element of virtually all schools of Islam, a nascent "jihadist" ideology has emerged that is more than a reflection of this; ideologues borrow from other traditions and at times show frustration with Salafi doctrinal rigidity that could constrain fighting tactics. Though big differences exist, "jihadist" groups share some tenets: fighting to return society to a purer Islam; violence against rulers whose policies they deem in conflict with Islamic imperatives as they understand them; and belief in duty to use violence if Muslim rulers abandon those imperatives. This report's use of "jihadist" is not meant to add legitimacy to this interpretation or detract from efforts to promote alternative interpretations. It uses "terrorism" only to describe non-state actors' attempt to use violence or intimidation, especially of civilians, to achieve political goals. See Crisis Group Special Report N°1, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016.
[7] Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London, 2016), p. 11; Joas Wagemakers, "Revisiting Wiktorowicz: Categorising and Defining the Branches of Salafism" in Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Meron (eds.), *Salafism After the Arab Awakening* (London, 2017), p. 18.
[8] Salafism is a modernist reform movement founded in the Middle East in the late nineteenth century that invoked the "pious ancestors", notably the Prophet Mohammed and the first four Caliphs of the original Muslim community in seventh century Arabia to identify pure, fundamental Islamic principles. Since the 1970s, Salafism has been closely identified with severely puritan and backward-looking fundamentalism. Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit., pp. 10-11. Shafii is one of the four schools of Islamic law. Asked about the difference between Shafii and Hanbali, to which Salafis subscribe, a religious teacher said: "It's like football teams. We support our team, and even though it's the same game, we won't switch to support another team". Crisis Group interview, imam, Pattani, March 2017.
[9] Crisis Group correspondence, Hara Shintaro, independent analyst, September 2017.
[10] Crisis Group Special Report, *Exploiting Disorder*, op. cit., p. 28.

risk of jihadism taking root there.[11] It does not examine the situation of Muslims in other regions of Thailand.[12]

Jihadism's diverse forms complicate any assessment of its threat. ISIS, for example, has manifested as an insurgency; a quasi-state administering extensive territory; affiliated militant groups; clandestine terrorist cells; far-flung sympathisers; and an idea used to motivate and rationalise terrorism.[13] ISIS could seize territory in Iraq and Syria, and, on a smaller scale, other parts of the Muslim world, largely thanks to its exploitation of war and chaos. But its success in attracting and inspiring followers from Europe and other places that are neither ungoverned nor chaotic rests on very different and locally specific conditions.[14] "Radicalisation" is a problematic concept, but here refers to the turn to participation in jihadism by individuals or groups.[15] This report primarily examines the risk of existing militant groups affiliating with transnational jihadist organisations and, to a lesser extent, prospects for radicalisation.

As jihadism is not presently evident in southernmost Thailand, the report is inevitably partially conjectural. It draws on interviews conducted in Thailand's deep south and neighbouring countries from mid-2016, with members of BRN and other militant fronts, Muslim religious leaders, academics and professionals, government officials, military and police officers, students, and recent graduates, including several Malay-Muslim women. The interviews reflect a variety of religious, political and social perspectives from the deep south. We also spoke to Bangkok-based diplomats and other analysts.

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[11] The conflict largely has been confined to the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala, and the four south-eastern districts of Songkhla province: Chana, Na Thawi, Saba Yoi and Thepa. This report refers to this area variously as the "southernmost provinces", "deep south", "Patani" and "conflict zone". Patani, with one "t" is the Malay spelling, used to refer to the region that comprised the historical Patani sultanate. Pattani, with two "t"s is the transliteration of the Thai name for the province. The conflict zone's population is roughly two million, about 84 per cent Malay Muslim, the remainder mostly Thai or Sino-Thai Buddhists. Population statistics from The Peace Dialogue Panel, *The Peace Dialogue Process in Southern Border Provinces*, Bangkok, July 2017, p. 31.

[12] Estimates of Thailand's Muslim population vary widely. The National Statistical Office reports a Muslim population of 4.3 per cent of a 67.2 million total population in 2015. An older official source (c. 2005) reports 12 per cent of 62.5 million. The Pew Research Forum reported 5.8 per cent of the total population in 2009. *Report on Population Characteristics: The 2015-2016 Report on Population Change*, National Statistical Office (Bangkok, 2016); Royal Thai embassy in Riyadh website, "Muslim in Thailand", www.thaiembassy.org/riyadh/th/organize/29025-Muslim-in-Thailand.html. Pew Research Center, *Mapping the Global Muslim Population*, October 2009, p. 29.

[13] Al-Qaeda is similarly variegated. Crisis Group Special Report, *Exploiting Disorder*, op. cit.

[14] Crisis Group Special Report, *Exploiting Disorder*, op. cit.

[15] "Radicalisation" has been used in the West since the 2003 invasion of Iraq primarily to address the issue of second or third-generation members of Muslim diasporas in Europe engaging in terrorism. Radicalisation models often assume that religious ideology is a determining factor, and tend to focus on the individual, while neglecting social, historical and political context. Studies of radicalisation often suffer from a methodological defect, examining only cases in which individuals became terrorists, raising questions about the reliability and generalisability of their findings. Alex Schmid, *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, The Hague, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, March 2013, pp. 19, 25; Mark Sedgwick, "The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2010), pp. 480-481; Arun Kaundani, *A Decade Lost: Rethinking Radicalisation and Extremism*, Claystone (2015), pp. 11, 14-15; Tinka Veldhuis and Jørgen Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model* (The Hague, 2009), pp. 17-20.

## II.    The Spectre of Jihadism in Southern Thailand

### A.    *A Parochial Insurgency*

The insurgency in southernmost Thailand is waged primarily by the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (Patani-Malay National Revolutionary Front, or BRN), a militant front founded in 1960 to seek independence for Patani. Fractured and weak in the 1980s, the BRN began to reorganise in the 1990s, building a clandestine network throughout the southernmost provinces before launching a series of attacks in the early 2000s, marking a new phase in the decades' long insurgency. BRN commands the overwhelming majority of Malay-Muslim insurgent fighters in Thailand.

The resurgence of violence in the deep south in late 2001 coincided with the advent of the so-called global war on terrorism and raised concerns among terrorism analysts that the region could become a new battleground for al-Qaeda and its Indonesian affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).[16] Revelations that the 2002 Bali bombing had been planned in Thailand and the capture of Jemaah Islamiyah operative Riduan Isamuddin, aka Hambali, in Ayuthaya province in central Thailand in August 2003 highlighted the country's role as an unwitting haven for foreign terrorists and intensified speculation about possible ties between Malay-Muslim militants and international jihadist groups.[17] In reality, Malay-Muslim militants, suspicious of foreign operatives, rejected overtures from JI as well as a proposal to attack tourist sites in Thailand.[18] A senior BRN member recalled being approached by three JI members during a sojourn in Indonesia in 2006. He turned down their request to go to Patani and an invitation to meet JI leader Abu Bakar Bashir. He said: "Our field of struggle is different from theirs".[19]

The Malay-Muslim militant movement's difference with jihadist groups is clear. It is based on a Malay-nationalist narrative of resistance to Thai colonialism and a struggle for self-determination. Militant rhetoric casts the demand for self-rule as one for independence, a clear goal demanding risk-taking and sacrifice. Bangkok has eschewed assimilationist policies since the 1980s, but BRN continues to harness disaffection with the state arising from the latter's rigid emphasis on Thai national identity, centralised political control and a sense of second-class status among

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[16] See Crisis Group Asia Reports N°63, *Jemaah Islamiyah in South-East Asia: Damaged but Still Dangerous*, 26 August 2003, and N°43*, Indonesia Backgrounder: How the Jemaah Islamiyah Terrorist Network Operates*, 11 December 2002.

[17] The 12 October 2012 car bombings at Kuta, Bali, perpetrated by members of Jemaah Islamiyah, killed 202 people and wounded 209. Several JI members who passed through Thailand, including Hambali, Muhklas, Azahari Husin and Noordin Mohammad Top, contacted "Abdul Fatah", an Islamic school owner in Narathiwat. Fatah refused to participate in proposed JI operations and had no known links to the insurgency. Hambali failed to recruit local Muslims for attacks in Thailand; he said: "They did not agree with the targets". Crisis Group Reports, *Insurgency, Not Jihad*, op. cit., pp. 37-38, and *Thailand's Emergency Decree*, op. cit., p. 21, footnote 170.

[18] Crisis Group Report, *Insurgency, Not Jihad*, op. cit., pp. 37-38; Joseph Chinyong Liow and Don Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts: Thailand's Shapeless Southern Insurgency*, Lowy Institute Paper 30, 2010, pp. 71-72.

[19] Crisis Group interview, senior BRN member, February 2017.

Malay Muslims. Popular support is difficult to gauge, but the insurgents' ability to sustain operations over thirteen years in the face of countermeasures is telling.[20]

After the May 2014 coup that brought the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) to power, the military government pledged to continue a dialogue with separatist militants initiated by the previous government in February 2013. The Majlis Syura Patani (Patani Consultative Council, MARA Patani) umbrella body established in 2015 to negotiate with Bangkok brings together representatives of five militant groups.[21] BRN is not part of the dialogue process, although its members hold the top three positions in MARA Patani. BRN has stated that those of its members in MARA are freelancing and do not speak for the organisation. The dialogue remains unofficial, as Thailand has not agreed to Terms of Reference to govern talks. Nor is there much substantive common ground. Bangkok prioritises its national sovereignty and does not entertain any administrative changes to the region. In contrast, MARA Patani maintains sovereignty is its ultimate goal, even if independence is an issue that must be resolved through negotiation.[22]

## B.   *ISIS in South East Asia*

To date, the model in South East Asia has been one of existing militant groups and extremist networks seeking to align themselves with ISIS.[23] Many militant groups in Indonesia and the Philippines have sworn allegiance to ISIS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi since 2014.[24] Local jihadists have served to "repackage ISIS and make it relevant to local issues".[25] In both countries and Malaysia existing organisations and longstanding networks have inspired, recruited and funded militants

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[20] Crisis Group Briefing, *No Traction*, op. cit., p. 3.

[21] MARA Patani nominally brings together five groups: BRN, Barisan Islam Pembebesan Patani (Islamic Liberation Front of Patani, BIPP), two factions of the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO) – PULO-MKP (Majlis Kepimpinan Pertubuhan, Party Leadership Council) headed by Kasturi Makhota, and PULO-DSPP (Dewan Syura Pimpinan Pertubuhan, Consultative Council Leadership Party) headed by Noor Abdurahman, until his death in late October 2017 – and Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani (Patani Islamic Mujahidin Movement, GMIP). A third PULO faction, PULO-4P (Pertubuhan Persatuan Pembebasan Patani, Patani United Liberation Organisation) headed by Samsudin Khan, did not sign the founding agreement and withdrew from MARA Patani in June 2015.

[22] Crisis Group interviews, BRN Information Department, June 2016, February 2017. Crisis Group Briefing, *No Traction*, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

[23] Joseph Chinyong Liow, "ISIS in the Pacific: Assessing Terrorism in Southeast Asia and the Threat to the Homeland", testimony before U.S. House of Representatives, 27 April 2016; *ISIS in Ambon: Fallout from Communal Conflict*, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, Report No. 28, 13 May 2016; Fealy and Funston, op. cit., pp. 12, 16, 20.

[24] At least four groups in Mindanao have pledged oaths of allegiance to ISIS: an Abu Sayyaf Group faction led by Isnilon Hapilon; Dawlah Islamiyah Ranao, also known as the Maute group, led by brothers Abdullah and Omar Maute; a faction of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters; and Ansarul Khalifa Philippines (Supporters of the Caliphate in the Philippines). In Indonesia, a series of mass oaths of allegiance took place throughout the country in July 2014. *Marawi, the "East Asia Wilayah" and Indonesia*, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, Report No. 38, 22 July 2017, p. 2; *The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia*, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, Report No. 13, 24 September 2014, pp. 11-12.

[25] Samuel, op. cit., p. 116.

to join ISIS in the Middle East and to stage attacks in their home countries. South East Asians who have joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq have supported – mostly rhetorically but in some cases with funds – affiliates and sympathisers in the region.[26]

ISIS has not recognised a province in South East Asia, but in January 2016 ISIS designated Isnilon Hapilon, leader of an Abu Sayyaf Group splinter, as *amir* (commander) and urged other groups that had pledged allegiance to ISIS to follow him.[27] In June 2016, an ISIS video featuring an Indonesian, a Malaysian and a Filipino, called on followers to launch attacks in South East Asia and to join fighters in Mindanao.[28] In November 2016, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appealed to "soldiers" to initiate attacks outside Iraq and Syria, citing Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Philippines, but not Thailand. Foreign fighters and ISIS funding directly supported the seizure of Marawi in Mindanao by pro-ISIS groups, including Hapilon's, in May 2017.[29]

With ISIS collapsing in Syria and Iraq, some fighters may try to get to Mindanao.[30] Regional governments are concerned that returning fighters with combat experience and technical expertise will make local militant groups more dangerous.

## C.    *Thailand's ISIS Scares*

Since late 2015, there have been recurring reports about ISIS threats to Thailand and activity in the southernmost provinces. These reports overwhelmingly proved to be without substance. The media record of ISIS scares seems to indicate competing imperatives for Thai officials. On one hand, they wish to minimise terrorist threats in order to project an image of stability. On the other hand, bombings in recent years have led some officials to publicise security threats lest terrorist attacks materialise and their failure to warn of such attacks undermine the image of their agencies.[31]

On 21 January 2016, Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha told reporters that authorities were investigating reports that three foreigners with ISIS links had visited

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[26] Roughly 1,000 South East Asians are believed to have joined ISIS in the Middle East, including women and children. More than half came from Indonesia, followed by Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. Shashi Jayakumar, "The Islamic State Looks East: The Growing Threat in Southeast Asia", *CTC Sentinel*, 22 February 2017; Zachary Abuza, "Jihadism back from the dead in Southeast Asia", *East Asia Forum*, 19 August 2017.

[27] *Marawi, the "East Asia Wilayah" and Indonesia*, op. cit., p. 2.

[28] Phuong Nguyen, "Recalibrating the Islamic State threat in Southeast Asia", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 7 July 2016.

[29] *Marawi, the "East Asia Wilayah" and Indonesia*, op. cit., pp. 8-9.

[30] Senior Philippines security officials confirmed the presence of foreign fighters in Marawi. On 1 June, soldiers reportedly killed eight foreign fighters: two Arabs, two Malaysians, two Indonesians, one Yemeni and one Chechen. On 23 June, the armed forces of the Philippines reported that around 40 foreign fighters were in the country, including Malaysians, Indonesians, Saudis, and Yemenis. "AFP chief: 40 foreign terrorists in PH; more may arrive in coming months", CNN Philippines, 24 June 2017.

[31] A bombing at Bangkok's Erawan Shrine on 17 August 2015 killed twenty people, including fourteen foreigners, and wounded 125. Two ethnic Uighur suspects are standing trial in Bangkok Military Court. On 11-12 August 2016, seventeen coordinated bomb and arson attacks in tourist destinations in seven provinces of the upper south killed four and wounded 35, including twelve foreign tourists.

a religious school in Sungai Kolok district, Narathiwat province, late in 2015. Media reports, citing anonymous security officials, stated that the ISIS-linked individuals met with imams, donated money and asked that students be taught about ISIS. The school owner told army officers that an Indonesian and Malaysian who had visited the school in December 2015 were former students and there was no discussion of ISIS.[32] Prayuth and the 4th Army Region commander, responsible for the southern provinces, also knocked back rumours that ISIS suspects had been arrested in Narathiwat.[33] A local army commander said that security forces had not detected any ISIS-linked activities.[34]

On 22 November 2016, Police General Srivara Ransibhramanakul, deputy national police chief, told reporters that a number of Thais, including some in the deep south, had visited Syria and provided financial support to ISIS, and that more than 100,000 Thais had visited ISIS-related websites, citing a report from the Australian Federal Police.[35] Officials quickly walked back Srivara's claims. The following day, a deputy prime minister said there was no evidence of funding flowing from Thais to ISIS, and a police spokesman said an initial enquiry found no links between Thai internet users and ISIS. Srivara explained: "It was [the Australians'] information, not ours".[36] Australian officials said the information in the report had been misconstrued.[37]

In early February 2017, media reports claimed that one of seven people arrested in Malaysia's Kelantan state, bordering Narathiwat province, was a Thai national suspected of supporting ISIS. The suspects were accused of preparing improvised explosive devices.[38] Thailand's army chief said: "Links to ISIS could be at many levels.

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[32] "Report ties IS suspects to South", *Bangkok Post*; "Govt on the lookout for Islamic State activists in the deep South", *The Nation*; "แม่ทัพ 4 รับผู้ต้องสงสัยโยงไอเอสเข้านราฯ นายกฯไม่ปฏิเสธ อ้างเรื่องลับความมั่นคง", ศูนย์ข่าวอิศรา ["4th Area commander admits IS suspects entered Nara, PM doesn't deny, cites national security for secrecy", Isra News Centre], all 22 January 2016.

[33] The 4th Army Region, headquartered in Nakorn Sri Thammarat, is responsible for the fourteen southern provinces of peninsular Thailand. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd Army Regions cover the central region, north east and north, respectively.

[34] "Has IS established a foothold in the Deep South?", Isra News, 24 January 2016.

[35] "Pol Gen Srivara says thousands of Thais are supportive of ISIS", Thai PBS, 22 November 2016.

[36] "Thai links to IS denied, despite heavy Facebook, online activity", *The Nation*, 24 November 2016; "Authorities play down fears of ISIS in Thailand", *Khaosod English*, 24 November 2016.

[37] Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Bangkok, January 2017. The number of visits to purported ISIS-related internet content from Thailand was derived from web scraping, an automated data-extraction process; it is not possible to determine from such data the intent of those accessing particular websites.

[38] The arrests resemble those of suspected Thai Malay-Muslim bomb makers in the same town, Pasir Mas, in December 2009, where Malaysian police raided a rented house expecting to find drugs. Instead, they found a large cache of materials used to manufacture improvised explosive devices. Three Thai nationals, all Muslims from Narathiwat, were arrested and later charged with possession of firearms and ammunition and possession of explosives. Malaysian courts acquitted all three suspects in 2012, citing insufficient evidence. Anthony Davis, "Borderline Support: Malaysia and Indonesia aid Thai insurgency", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 2010; Crisis Group Report, *The Evolving Conflict*, op. cit., p. 22, footnote 155.

It might be at the level of receiving ideas through propaganda from social media".[39] Again, the early identification of an ISIS connection turned out to be erroneous. The suspects are all Thai citizens and suspected members of BRN.[40]

In early May, Malaysian authorities reported that counter-terrorism police earlier had arrested six people with alleged links to ISIS in the states of Johor, Kelantan, Malacca, Pahang and Penang. A seventh suspect, Muhammad Muzaffa Arieff Junaidi from Kelantan, reportedly fled to Thailand on 22 March. Malaysian police said Junaidi was part of a ring that had been smuggling small arms from southern Thailand for roughly a year in preparation for attacks in Malaysia. On 3 May, Prime Minister Prayuth urged reporters not to "play up" the story, which could cause fear and panic.[41] Thai authorities said immigration records showed Junaidi left Thailand at the Sungai Kolok checkpoint in Narathiwat on 21 April.[42] Junaidi turned himself in to Malaysian police on 23 May.[43] The 4th Army Region commander said there was no evidence to prove Malaysian claims that Junaidi had smuggled weapons from Thailand.[44]

Online developments have contributed to perceptions of an ISIS threat to Thailand. In late November 2015, two ISIS propaganda videos were posted online carrying Thai-language subtitles. That the subtitles were Thai rather than Malay suggests that Malay-Muslims were probably not the primary intended audience. On 28 November, a four-minute video titled "No Respite" from al-Hayat, the ISIS media wing, appeared on the Millah Ibrahim YouTube account, with Thai-language subtitles.[45] Authorities blocked the video the following day, but it appeared on Pulse of the Islamic World, a Thai-language Facebook page, on 30 November, along with "From Inside Halab", another video with Thai subtitles.[46] In April 2016, an image posted to the Pulse of the Islamic World Facebook page showed a black ISIS flag superimposed on a map of southernmost Thailand. This image, of unknown origin, became a point of departure for an analysis suggesting that ISIS could exploit the insurgency.[47]

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[39] "Thais said to be among suspected ISIS militants arrested in Malaysia", *Khaosod English*, 7 February 2017; "มาเลย์จับคนไทยพันBRNรัฐบาลประสานขอตัวกลับ", *ไทยโพสต์* ["Malaysia arrests Thai linked to BRN, gov't coordinating extradition request", *Thai Post*], 8 February 2017.

[40] Thai security sources said the arrests in Kelantan – what amounts to a BRN safe haven – as well as the attribution of an ISIS connection, were a result of rifts within Malaysian Special Branch Police and an effort to distract local media from the Malaysia Development Berhad corruption scandal in which Prime Minister Najib Razak has been embroiled since mid-2015. Crisis Group interviews, police officer, Pattani; army officer, Narathiwat, both March 2017.

[41] "Malaysian IS suspect 'may have fled to far South'", *Bangkok Post*, 3 May 2017; "ISIS cell found smuggling weapons into Malaysia", *The Straits Times*, 5 May 2017.

[42] "Malaysian linked to IS left Thailand on April 21", Benar News, 6 May 2017.

[43] "Busted: ISIS cell smuggling arms into Malaysia", *The Straits Times*, 28 May 2017.

[44] "Thai officials deny Malaysian allegations of IS-linked arms smuggling", Benar News, 30 May 2017.

[45] "ISIS spillover unlikely in Thailand, but can't be ignored, experts say", Prachatai, 4 December 2015. The Millah Ibrahim website carried the Indonesian-language versions of *Dabiq*, an ISIS magazine. Fealy and Funston, op. cit., p. 20.

[46] "Islamic State supporters in Thailand launch online blitz", Benar News, 2 December 2015.

[47] "Whatever may be the case, the post has, for the first time, raised the real possibility of ISIL's hijacking the Southern Thai insurgency". Vikram Rajakumar, "Insurgency in Southern Thailand: What Does ISIL's Black Flag of Pattani Portend?", S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

## D.    *The View from Bangkok*

The Thai government's overriding concern is to protect the economy from the damage that international terrorism could inflict on the tourism industry, which indirectly contributes more than 20 per cent to Gross Domestic Product (GDP).[48] This means not only preventing attacks, but also publicly downplaying threats and keeping terrorism out of the headlines.[49] Thailand is not a member of the U.S.-backed coalition to defeat ISIS, in part to avoid becoming an ISIS target.[50]

Thailand's immediate problem is jihadist operatives' use of the country for transit, refuge and logistics. An open-door visa policy to encourage tourism and an active market in fraudulent identification documents make Thailand a useful destination.[51] Analysts have said Thailand's role as a convenient place for non-state actors to lay low and transact business serves the country's security interests, reasoning that these groups would not wish to disrupt their access by targeting Thailand.[52]

Fighters from Asia and Australia have transited Thailand on their way to and from Syria, some embarking for Turkey directly from Bangkok, others first proceeding to third countries.[53] ISIS reportedly has rewarded fighters with trips to Thailand for rest and recreation.[54] Four ethnic Uighurs arrested in Poso, Indonesia, in 2014 as part of the ISIS-linked Santoso Group had fake passports acquired in Thailand.[55] Operatives with direct links to ISIS members in Indonesia, the Philippines and Turkey reportedly attempted to assist a Uighur who escaped from a detention facility in North East Thailand in September 2016.[56] Al-Qaeda and ISIS seek to exploit the plight of the Rohingya, which has inflamed Muslim sentiment throughout South East Asia, and have called for retribution against Myanmar.[57] Given Thailand's role

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(RSIS) Commentary No. 78, 7 April 2016. See also Anthony Davis, "Media-driven panic fueling fears in Southeast Asia", *Bangkok Post*, 22 September 2016.

[48] Tourism's indirect contribution to Thailand's GDP, including "effects from investment, the supply chain and induced income impacts", is expected to reach 21.9 per cent in 2017. Tourism's direct contribution to GDP was 9.2 per cent in 2016. *Travel & Tourism Economic Impact 2017: Thailand*, World Travel & Tourism Council, March 2017, p. 3.

[49] Crisis Group interview, Thai security official, Bangkok, April 2017.

[50] Crisis Group interview, Thai official, Bangkok, March 2017.

[51] Crisis Group interviews, diplomat, Bangkok, March 2017; Veera Urairat, deputy secretary general, National Security Council, Bangkok, 1 March 2017. "Probe into terror links in Thailand-based fake passport racket", *The Straits Times*, 6 October 2016. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2016 - Thailand*, 19 July 2017.

[52] In the 1980s and 1990s, the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka), an Indonesian armed insurgency, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a separatist armed group in Sri Lanka, among others, used Thailand as a safe haven and to procure weapons. Anthony Davis and John Cole, "Thailand's terrorism nexus", *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, 29 March 2012.

[53] "Thailand watchful of Islamic State movements", Benar News, 10 June 2015.

[54] Crisis Group interviews, government official and diplomat, both Bangkok, February and April 2017.

[55] "กระแสผวา 'ไอเอส' ลามหลังอินโดฯจับ 'อยกูร์' ใช้พาสปอร์ตปลอมจากไทย" ["Shocking news: IS spreads to Indo, Uighurs arrested with fake passports from Thailand"], Isra News, 18 September 2014.

[56] *Marawi, the "East Asia Wilayah" and Indonesia*, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, Report No. 38, 22 July 2017, pp. 18-19.

[57] "Al Qaeda warns Myanmar of 'punishment' over Rohingya", Reuters, 13 September 2017; "Malaysians in Rakhine to fight army: KL top cop", *Straits Times*, 20 September 2017. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°283, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, 15 December

as a logistics hub and its proximity to Myanmar, jihadist activity in Thailand could increase.

Officials and security officers emphasise that the insurgency in the deep south is unrelated to transnational jihadism, but they are concerned about ISIS influence in the region and the threat it may pose to Thailand.[58] A senior government advisor said: "The south has some sort of immunity against radical ideas. The question is, how long can it remain that way?".[59] Thai officials pay special attention to roughly 7,500 Thai-Muslim students overseas.[60] Thai embassies in the Muslim world maintain close links with Thai-Muslim student associations seeking, authorities say, to ensure the students' welfare. There is a program to match them with jobs when they return.[61]

Rivalry between the police and military, coupled with politicisation of the police force, have hindered the flow of intelligence, a situation not improved by three years of military rule. The military government dedicates resources to monitoring the regime's domestic political opponents that could otherwise be used for counter-terrorism. Despite this, Western diplomats suggest that Thai counter-terrorism capabilities are good, provided potential threats are brought to the attention of authorities. Thai officials maintain that they would benefit from international assistance, particularly training on countering transnational crime and screening international arrivals. But Thailand has not yet accepted technology offered by the U.S. as part of its Aviation and Border Security Program that would give immigration officers at international airports access to INTERPOL's foreign terrorist and Stolen and Lost Travel Documents databases.[62]

Thailand is party to nine of fourteen international conventions related to suppressing terrorism and amended its Criminal Code (Section 135/2) in 2003 to comply with UN Security Council Resolution 1373, which allows for charges on preparatory offences. It has not drafted laws specifically aimed at offences related to foreign terrorist fighters, including financing or facilitating travel or recruitment of foreign fighters, at least in part due to concerns about a possible adverse impact on tourism.[63]

2016 and Crisis Group Statements, "Myanmar Tips into New Crisis after Rakhine State Attacks", 27 August 2017 and "The Rakhine State Danger to Myanmar's Transition", 8 September 2017.

[58] Crisis Group interviews, army general, Hat Yai, January; senior police officer, Bangkok, February; Veera Urairat, deputy secretary general, National Security Council, Bangkok, 1 March, all 2017.

[59] Crisis Group interview, Bangkok, January 2017.

[60] "Thai security agency dismisses allegation about Thai Muslim students abroad", Bernama, 18 June 2016; "Egypt ranks the most favoured destination for Thai Muslim students", Isra News, 19 June 2015.

[61] Crisis Group interviews, Veera Urairat, deputy secretary general, National Security Council, 1 March; Thai officials, April, both Bangkok, 2017. Thai embassies in Cairo, Istanbul, Islamabad, Jeddah and Jakarta in particular are active in these efforts.

[62] Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Western security official, security analyst, Thai officials, March, April, June, July, all Bangkok, 2017.

[63] Crisis Group interviews, terrorism analyst, February; diplomats, March, both Bangkok, 2017. Kitti Jayangakula, "A Critique on Thailand's Law on Terrorism as a Tool to Combat International Terrorist Activities", *EAU Heritage Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1 (January-April 2014), p. 6.

## III.  **Factors Militating against Jihadist Influence**

To date, there has been no confirmed case of a Thai citizen joining ISIS.[64] Nor have any Patani-Malay militant groups shown interest in affiliating with ISIS, al-Qaeda or jihadist networks in South East Asia. On the contrary, the militant fronts are anxious to avoid association with such groups. Several factors have hindered the influence of transnational jihadism within Thailand's Malay-Muslim society and militant fronts.

### A.  *Freedom of Religion*

Muslim religious leaders and academics believe that Salafi-jihadist ideology currently has poor prospects in Thailand, in part because the state protects freedom of religion and does not interfere with Muslims' religious practices – despite support in some quarters for making Buddhism the state religion. As a result, any narrative centred on religious repression of Muslims is, for now, unlikely to find purchase. While the 2016 constitution mandates that the king be a Buddhist, he is also the defender of all faiths.[65] The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, in which Thailand has had observer status since 1997, has not condemned Thailand's handling of the insurgency or declared that Malay Muslims in the country are systematically persecuted.[66] In short, no credible argument exists that the Thai state seeks to suppress the practice of Islam in the southernmost provinces or elsewhere in the country.[67]

### B.  *Islam in Southernmost Thailand*

Islamic practice in Thailand's Malay-majority region may be classified into three categories: traditionalist, reformist (or modernist) and revivalist.[68] These categories correspond to the local form of Sunni Islam, Salafism and missionary movements

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[64] Crisis Group interviews, Veera Urairat, deputy secretary general, National Security Council, Bangkok, 1 March 2017; Western diplomat, Bangkok, 17 August 2017. "Security authorities emphasized there was no confirmed evidence of Thai citizens joining ISIS, and denied any evidence of operational linkages between ethno-nationalist Malay Muslim insurgent groups in southern Thailand and international terrorist networks". U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2016 - Thailand*, 19 July 2017.

[65] Section 7, Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2016. Section 31 enshrines freedom of religion, and Section 67 enjoins the state to promote and protect Therevada Buddhism.

[66] "OIC head praises govt on South", *Bangkok Post*, 13 January 2016.

[67] Crisis Group interview, member, Pattani Provincial Islamic Committee, Pattani, February 2017. Another interlocutor illustrated growing tolerance for Islam by noting that in the past there were no prayer rooms in the petrol stations between Pattani and Hat Yai, the largest city in the lower south, whereas today they are ubiquitous, even in Buddhist-owned stations. Crisis Group interview, Salafi civil-society activist, Pattani, February 2017.

[68] Christopher M. Joll, "Islamic Diversity in Thailand's Far South", paper presented at the International Conference on "Religion, Business and Contestation in Southeast Asia", University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 27-28 June 2012, pp. 2-5.

such as Tablighi Jamaat, respectively.[69] A small number of Shia also live in the region.[70]

The distinction between traditionalist and reformist does not always do justice to complexities on the ground as the substance and meaning of these terms has shifted over time.[71] Local people employ these categories, however, and they remain useful for analytical purposes.[72] Reformist influence has been so widely felt over the past thirty years that many Malay Muslims identify themselves on a traditionalist-reformist spectrum.[73]

### 1.    Traditionalist

The great majority of Malay Muslims in Thailand follow what is commonly called traditional or "old school" Islam. As in the rest of South East Asia, Sunni Islam of the Shafii school of jurisprudence is dominant. Old school Islam in Patani incorporates folk beliefs, some pre-Islamic, known as *adat*, or custom.[74] These practices include making merit for the dead (accruing benefits for oneself and one's deceased relatives by performing good deeds), maintaining shrines and consulting village shamans, or *bomoh*. Traditional Islamic practice "was ritualistic, mystic, and for the most part, undertaken as an expression of personal piety".[75]

Malay identity is central to the practice of customary Islam in Patani; the ethnic and religious elements are intertwined, if not inextricable. The extent of the identification of ethnicity with religion is expressed in the local term for conversion to Islam, *masok nayu*, "to be become Malay".[76] Certainly, the meaning of "Malayness" is elusive; only in the mid-20th century did "Patani-Malay" begin to describe a

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[69] Tablighi Jamaat in Thailand is resolutely apolitical and is not discussed further here. See Ernesto Braam, "Travelling with the Tablighi Jamaat in South Thailand", *International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) Review*, no. 17 (2006); Alexander Horstmann, "The Inculturation of a Transnational Islamic Missionary Movement: Tablighi Jamaat al-Dawa and Muslim Society in Southern Thailand", *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2007).

[70] There are no official estimates of the Shia population in the southernmost provinces, but Shia constitute less than 1 per cent of Thailand's Muslim population and most live in the central region. Pew Research Center, *Mapping the Global Muslim Population*, October 2009, p. 41.

[71] "Distinguishing between the old and the new was fraught with practical as well as theological difficulties, and in practice many Malay Muslims embraced hybridized beliefs, practices and identities". Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand* (Cornell, 2008), p. 25.

[72] Crisis Group Report, *Recruiting Militants*, op. cit., p. 16.

[73] Crisis Group interview, imam, Pattani, March 2017. Marte Nilsen, *Negotiating Thainess: Religious and National Identities in Thailand's Southern Conflict*, Lund University, 2012, p. 167; McCargo, *Tearing Apart*, op. cit., p. 25.

[74] Worawit Baru (Ahmad Idris), "Tradition and Cultural Background of the Patani Region", in Volker Grabowski (ed.), *Regions and National Integration in Thailand, 1892-1992* (Wiesbaden, 1995), p. 208.

[75] Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Muslim Identity, Local Networks and Transnational Islam in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces", *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 6 (2011), p. 1,389.

[76] Crisis Group interviews, civil-society activists, Pattani, February and April 2017; member, Pattani Provincial Islamic Council, April 2017; Imtiyaz Yusuf, "The Southern Thailand Conflict and the Muslim World", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 2 (August 2007), p. 325.

political identity.[77] In practice, local Malay Muslims maintain multiple identities conditioned by circumstances: Thai citizen; Malay (Patani Malay: *nayu*); Muslim; etc.[78] The amorphousness of Malay identity has not prevented the militant organisations from using it as a core tenet of their ideology. The insurgency has heightened the salience of Patani-Malay Muslim and Thai-Buddhist identities.

Many local Muslim religious leaders, academics, activists and militants see traditionalist Islam and Patani identity as bulwarks against jihadist ideology. A Salafi university lecturer argued that a Patani native would have to spend decades abroad and, in essence, abandon Patani-Malay culture before they could be influenced by the likes of ISIS.[79] Some see local Islamic education as another obstacle to jihadist influence; the depth of knowledge and understanding of Islam imparted in local religious schools means that even if students are exposed to jihadist ideas, they will not be swayed.[80] A senior Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO) member said that Shafii teachings handed down in local Islamic schools offered an "immune system" to local people: "Their faith is the firewall against extremists' influence".[81]

Some Malay Muslims, including militant leaders, perceive ISIS as un-Islamic due to its intolerance and brutality.[82] They believe the cruelty with which ISIS has treated prisoners and carried out attacks on civilians transgress Islamic principles and the bounds of jihad, and damages Islam's image.[83] A religious teacher noted that while prayers in local mosques are regularly extended to mujahidin in Palestine and Afghanistan, and to the Rohingya, "the name of ISIS has never been mentioned".[84]

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[77] Patrick Jory, *From "Melayu Patani" to "Thai Muslim": The Spectre of Ethnic Identity in Southern Thailand* (Singapore, 2007).

[78] For studies of Malay identity in southernmost Thailand, see: Soroja Dorairajoo, "'No Fish in the Sea': Thai Malay Tactics of Negotiation in a Time of Scarcity", Ph.D. Harvard University, 2002; Anusorn Unno, "We Love 'Mr. King': Exceptional Sovereignty, Submissive Subjectivity, and Mediated Agency in Islamic Southern Thailand", Ph.D. University of Washington, 2011; Christopher Joll*, Muslim Merit-Making in Thailand's Far-South* (Dordrecht, 2012); Michiko Tsuneda, "Navigating Life on the Border: Gender, Migration, and Identity in Malay Muslim Communities in Southern Thailand", Ph.D. University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2009; Pierre Le Roux, "To Be or Not to Be ...: The Cultural Identity of the Jawi (Thailand)", *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 57, no. 2 (1998); Nilsen, op. cit.

[79] Crisis Group interview, lecturer, Prince of Songkhla University College of Islamic Studies, Pattani, February 2017.

[80] Crisis Group interviews, Malay-Muslim student activist, Pattani, February 2017; imam, Pattani, March 2017.

[81] Crisis Group interview, senior PULO-MKP member, March 2017.

[82] Crisis Group interviews, Malay-Muslim woman journalist; Salafi academic; Salafi civil-society activist; senior BRN member, all February 2017.

[83] Crisis Group interviews, Ahmad Omar Chapakia, vice president, Fatoni University; Abdulqahar Awaeputeh, director, Muslim Attorney Centre; Muslim woman civil-society activist; member of Pattani Provincial Islamic Committee; all Pattani, February 2017.

[84] Crisis Group interviews, ustaz (religious teacher) and member of the Malay Language Council of Thailand, Pattani, February 2017; former inmate at Pattani Central Prison, Pattani, April 2017.

## 2.    Reformist

While the majority of rural Malays follow traditional Islam, many well-educated, urban Malay Muslims are adherents of reformist, or "new school", Islam.[85] Salafi reformism in Thailand dates to the 1920s, and succeeding waves of reformism have transformed Islam in the deep south.[86] Reformists constitute a small but influential minority, representing roughly 10 per cent of Muslims in the region.

Many prominent Salafis are associated with Fatoni University, formerly the Yala Islamic College, founded in 1998. They are politically quietist and broadly aligned with the state. The best-known reformist is the university's founder and rector, Dr. Ismail Lutfi Japakiya.[87] Lutfi was educated in Saudi Arabia and became the foremost exponent of Salafism in Thailand.[88] He has publicly shunned the insurgency and cooperated with the Thai state.[89] Salafis tend not to align with the militant movement, which emphasises Malay identity (see Section III. C.1 below).[90] In Salafi forums, participants mainly use Thai rather than Malay. Locals recognise Salafis for their work on education and social and economic development.[91]

Salafis seek to cleanse local Islamic practices of parochial and mystical traditions they deem heretical innovations (*bidaa*). The reformist project in Patani gained ground in the 1980s and 1990s, reflected, for example, in Arabisation of the religious lexicon and adoption of hijab and even *niqab* (full-face veil) by some women.[92] The spread of reformist, conservative Islamic thought in the region over the past 30 years generated acrimonious debates between Salafis and traditionalist leaders. Traditionalists refer to Salafis as "Wahhabis", which Salafis regard as pejorative.[93] Conversely, the perceived self-righteousness of reformists did not sit well with many local people.[94] This led to rifts within communities, and the proliferation of new mosques to serve reformist congregations.[95] It also led to some uncertainty

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[85] Duncan McCargo, *Mapping National Anxieties: Thailand's Southern Conflict* (Copenhagen, 2012), p. 55.

[86] An Indonesian exile, Ahmad Wahab, settled in Bangkok in 1926 and founded Thailand's first Islamic reform association, *Ansorisunnah*. Raymond Scupin, "The Politics of Islamic Reformism in Thailand", *Asian Survey*, vol. 20, no. 12 (1980), p. 1,225.

[87] Crisis Group Report, *Insurgency, Not Jihad*, op. cit., p. 32; Christopher Joll, "Religion and Conflict in Southern Thailand: Beyond Rounding Up the Usual Suspects", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2010), p. 264.

[88] Lutfi holds a doctorate in comparative Islamic jurisprudence from the Islamic University of Al-Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud in Riyadh.

[89] Lutfi wrote a rebuttal of a tract, *Berjihad di Patani* (*The Struggle for Patani*), found among militants killed in April 2004 that offered religious justifications for violence. He also served as an appointed senator following the September 2006 coup. King Maha Vajiralongkorn, then crown prince, visited the Yala Islamic College in 2004. Liow, "Muslim Identity", op. cit., p. 1,411.

[90] Crisis Group interviews, former militant; religious teacher, both Pattani, April 2017.

[91] Crisis Group interviews, PULO-DSPP member No. 2, March 2017; member, Pattani Provincial Islamic Committee, Pattani, April 2017.

[92] Joll, "Usual Suspects", op. cit., p. 265.

[93] Old-school adherents also call reformists *ore ngaji mudo* (Patani Malay: those following the new teaching) or *ore Brao* (Patani Malay: people from Brao); Brao, a village near Pattani town, is Lutfi's ancestral home. Joll, "Islamic Diversity", op. cit., p. 3.

[94] Crisis Group interview, Thai academic, Bangkok, March 2017.

[95] McCargo, *Tearing Apart*, op. cit., pp. 28-30.

about religious authority and Malay identity, as reformers disputed the propriety of cultural practices and challenged traditional religious leaders.[96]

Faced with resistance from traditionalists, who saw reformism as a threat to Malay ethnic identity, Salafis began to attenuate their approach, emphasising *wasatiyyah*, the middle way.[97] One scholar described a process of "localization of Wahhabism".[98] Thus, certain practices once prohibited by Salafis as *bidaa*, such as veneration of shrines, were later condoned under certain circumstances.[99] For example, although strict Salafis reject *mawlid*, celebration of the Prophet Mohammed's birthday, Lutfi has contributed to an annual volume published by the Islamic Center of Thailand that commemorates the occasion.[100]

Some locals, including many Salafis, see ISIS as a creation of the West, particularly the U.S., the product of international machinations that have nothing to do with protecting Islam or enhancing the welfare of Sunni Muslims.[101] In this regard, some liken ISIS to al-Qaeda, which they also see as a creature that turned on its creator.[102] A book on ISIS published by Fatoni University advances this argument.[103] A Salafi academic explained, "I find the ISIS ideology is incompatible with the local people's culture. It doesn't reflect anything Islamic, but rather the original Arab barbarian culture before the advent of Islam".[104]

## C.    *Patani-Malay Militant Organisations*

Patani militants eschew jihadism for ideological and practical reasons.[105] The militant groups purport to fight for an independent Islamic, Patani state and have declared their opposition to jihadist ideology. BRN and other Patani militant groups have significant ideological, political and religious differences with ISIS and al-Qaeda. Contrary to ISIS, Patani militants do not reject the existing international system but instead seek a state within it.[106] The main militant fronts were founded in the 1960s, long before al-Qaeda, ISIS or the Abu Sayyaf Group, and their leaders are not

[96] Yusuf, "Faces", op. cit., p. 13; Joll, "Usual Suspects", op. cit., p. 265.

[97] Crisis Group interviews, Salafi university lecturer, Pattani, February 2017; Thai analyst, Bangkok, March 2017. Joll, "Islamic Diversity", op. cit., p. 5; McCargo, *Tearing Apart*, op. cit., pp. 25-27.

[98] Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Islamic Education in Southern Thailand: Negotiating Islam, Identity, and Modernity", in Robert Hefner (ed), *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 2009), p. 163.

[99] Crisis Group interview, Christopher Joll, research associate, Religious Studies Program, Victoria University of Wellington, Bangkok, 7 April 2017.

[100] Liow, "Islamic Education in Southern Thailand", op. cit., p. 163.

[101] Crisis Group interviews, Malay-Muslim woman community activist, Pattani, February 2017; Salafi and civil-society activist, Pattani, February 2017; senior PULO-MKP member, March 2017.

[102] Crisis Group interviews, senior BRN member, February; senior PULO-MKP member, March; BIPP leader, March, all 2017. For example, several militants noted that ISIS has never attacked Israel.

[103] Crisis Group interview, former inmate at Pattani Central Prison, Pattani, April 2017.

[104] Crisis Group interview, Salafi academic, Pattani, February 2017.

[105] For discussion of reasons why local militant groups choose to affiliate to transnational jihadist movements and why those movements seek or accept such affiliations, see Daniel L. Byman, *Breaking the Bonds between Al-Qaida and Its Affiliate Organizations*, Brookings Analysis Paper No. 27, August 2012.

[106] Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, op. cit., p. 11.

inclined to subordinate their struggle to the interests of outsiders.[107] Many militants see the Patani nationalist movement as a bulwark against jihadism.[108]

### 1.    Ethnic nationalism

Cultural identity and ethnic nationalism are at the core of militant ideology.[109] BRN and PULO embrace ideologies based on religion, ethnicity and territory, expressed in Malay as *agama* (religion), *bangsa* (nation) and *tanah air* (motherland).[110] The perception that the state does not recognise or respect Malay identity is a grievance widely felt in Patani-Malay society.[111]

The militants are fighting for what they see as self-determination over a geographically delimited area and restoration of their rights. They are, in their view, anti-colonial fighters. For militant leaders, the identity of the colonisers is incidental. Their fight is not based on antipathy toward a particular religious or ethnic group. Some have articulated the aim of a multi-ethnic state that protects the rights of non-Muslims: "We regard those Buddhists who were born in Patani, who live in Patani and who are ready to accept Islamic governance as our people".[112] Support for such pluralism does not always extend to the rank-and-file, but it is another indication of fundamental differences with transnational jihadists.[113]

Militant parochialism can at times verge on Patani chauvinism, such that non-Patani natives, even Malay speakers, are excluded from their ranks. One BRN member, for example, struggled to gain the trust of the organisation, despite having been born in Pattani, because his parents had moved to the region from central Thailand. He spoke Malay, was descended from Patani war captives transported to Bangkok at the end of the 18th century, and his father had founded an Islamic school, but the fact that his family spoke Thai at home meant he was suspect.[114] A religious teacher observed, "The door of BRN is not open to foreign influence".[115]

Malay-Muslim militants are engaged in a geographically bounded struggle for territory on the Malay Peninsula that now constitutes Thailand's southernmost

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[107] Crisis Group interviews, army general, Hat Yai, January 2017; BIPP leader, March 2017; Crisis Group correspondence, BRN Information Department, June 2017.

[108] Crisis Group interviews, BRN Information Department, February 2017; PULO-DSPP member No. 2, March 2017.

[109] Crisis Group interviews, senior BRN member, February; PULO-DSPP member No. 1, March, both 2017.

[110] These three concepts are represented by the first three letters of the Arabic alphabet, *alif*, *ba*, and *ta*. PULO added a fourth element, *perkemanusiaan* (humanitarianism). Crisis Group interview, former inmate at Pattani Central Prison, Pattani, April 2017; Crisis Group Reports, *Recruiting Militants*, op. cit., pp. 10-17; *Evolving Conflict*, op. cit., p. 3; *Insurgency, Not Jihad*, op. cit., p. 8.

[111] "Our ethnicity has never been acknowledged. I have no problem with Thai nationality, but my ethnicity isn't Thai, it's Malay. ... Ignoring our ethnicity and restricting use of our language are ... violations of our human rights". Crisis Group interview, Malay-Muslim woman journalist, Pattani, February 2017.

[112] Crisis Group interviews, senior PULO-MKP member; BIPP leader, both March 2017.

[113] According to a BRN member: "Some of our men just want to attack Siamese. It's wrong. Our enemy is not the Siamese, because each ethnic group was created by God". Crisis Group interview, February 2017.

[114] Crisis Group interview, BRN member, December 2016.

[115] Crisis Group interview, Muslim religious teacher, Pattani, February 2017.

provinces.[116] BRN indoctrination emphasises Bangkok's efforts to promote a Thai national identity at the expense of Patani-Malay identity and involves a process of linking historical, nationalist and religious factors to Patani territory.[117] BRN's constitution reportedly identifies "the area of struggle [as] the entire region of Malay Muslims under Siamese colonization".[118] Other militant groups also maintain that their fight is for a delimited space that, by right, belongs to the Patani people.[119] Many Malay-Muslims outside the movement share this conception of a struggle defined by history, geography and ethno-nationalist aims.[120] A religious leader said: "Even if ISIS is trying to infiltrate into this region, and recruit the local people, it must be extremely difficult, because we already have the existing organisations. What the local people need and what ISIS needs are different. The struggles are in different contexts".[121]

Militants' rejection of ISIS is part of a tradition of Patani separatist suspicion of outsiders, stemming in part from a desire to maintain security and avoid entanglements.[122] According to a senior PULO member:

> There's no need to steal ideologies from others, and we have no need to resort to radicalism … . Our own problems have never been solved. There's no reason for us to be involved in others' struggles. ISIS is fighting for a course different from ours, whereas we are fighting for the good governance of Patani based on justice and humanity.[123]

The militant fronts have not articulated detailed plans for the government of an independent Patani state. This vagueness serves to minimise potential rifts and preserve the putative unity of the Malay-Muslim community.

## 2. Religion

Islam is a marker of Malay identity and a constituent part of the self-determination struggle. Traditionalist religious leaders and separatists have long employed appeals

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[116] Crisis Group interviews, PULO-DSPP member No. 2, March 2017; senior BRN member, February 2017.
[117] Sascha Helbardt, *Deciphering Southern Thailand's Violence: Organization and Insurgent Practices of BRN-Coordinate* (Singapore, 2015), pp. 120-122.
[118] Crisis Group interview, senior BRN member, February 2017. Some early Patani liberation movements included the west coast province of Satun in their conception of Patani territory. Satun is majority Muslim, but most do not speak Malay. Satun was not part of the historical Patani sultanate, and the insurgency does not extend there. It is not typically considered part of Patani. See Thomas I. Parks, "Maintaining Peace in a Neighbourhood Torn by Separatism: The Case of Satun Province in Southern Thailand", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2009).
[119] Crisis Group interviews, senior PULO members, March 2017.
[120] Crisis Group interviews, Malay-Muslim woman doctor; member, Pattani Provincial Islamic Committee; religious teacher, all Pattani, February 2017.
[121] Crisis Group interview, member, Pattani Provincial Islamic Committee, Pattani, February 2017.
[122] Crisis Group interview, senior BRN member, February 2017. Astri Suhrke and Lela Garner Noble, "Muslims in the Philippines and Thailand" in Suhrke and Noble (eds.), *Ethnic Conflict in International Relations* (New York, 1977), p. 208.
[123] Crisis Group interview, senior PULO-MKP member, March 2017.

to Islam and jihad to validate the Patani nationalist struggle.[124] A PULO member, interviewed in 1971, said: "[The people] must be taught Islam first, and when they are strong in Islam we teach the history of our region and the needs for the future".[125] Late-1970s PULO leaflets cited the Quran to assert Muslims' obligation to fight against *kafir* (unbeliever) rulers and to designate Muslims who refuse to fight as *munafik*, or "hypocrites".[126]

The self-determination struggle is cast as a religious obligation. According to a senior PULO member: "If we run away from this struggle, we shall be asked questions on the Day of Judgement". He also said that Islam prohibits waging war against another religion and that the fight is for survival of Patani-Malay people.[127] A religious scholar noted that "fighting for Malay nationalism automatically means a struggle for Islam" because Malay ethnicity and Islam are "two sides of one coin".[128] Contemporary insurgents do not rely on renowned clerics to provide exegesis of the Quran or written theological justifications for jihad. Rather, the impetus comes directly from local religious teachers to their students.[129] The aim of the insurgency remains Patani self-determination.[130]

### 3.    Costs of affiliation or emulation

The Patani militant fronts recognise that affiliation with ISIS or al-Qaeda would be damaging, even self-defeating, and likely cost them popular support at home and legitimacy abroad. This is one reason militants are hostile to the idea of foreign jihadist intervention in southern Thailand.[131]

A decision to affiliate with global jihadists would invite international efforts against the militants and deprive them of any chance of gaining the recognition and support from the international community necessary to achieve their aim of self-rule.[132] It would also cost the movement access to its de facto safe haven in northern Malaysia, which is unlikely to tolerate ISIS or al-Qaeda activity within its

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[124] Crisis Group reports, *Insurgency, Not Jihad*, op. cit., pp. 21, 22, and *Recruiting Militants*, op. cit., pp. 14-15; Astri Suhrke, "The Thai-Muslim Border Provinces: Some National Security Aspects", in Robert Ho and E. C. Chapman (eds.), *Studies of Contemporary Thailand* (Canberra, 1973), p. 310; Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand* (Boulder, 1985), pp. 116-117, 246-247; Wan Kadir Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of the Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Singapore, 1990), p. 174.
[125] Astri Suhrke, "Loyalists and Separatists: The Muslims in Southern Thailand", *Asian Survey*, vol. 17, no. 3 (March, 1977), p. 245.
[126] Chaiwat Satha-anand, *Islam and Violence: A Case Study of Violent Events in the Four Southern Provinces, Thailand, 1976-1981*, USF Monographs in Religion and Public Policy, 1987, pp. 30-35.
[127] Crisis Group interview, senior PULO-MKP member, March 2017.
[128] Crisis Group interview, member, Pattani Provincial Islamic Committee, Pattani, April 2017.
[129] Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Ideology, Religion, and Mobilization in the Southern Thai Conflict", in Scott Helftsen (ed.), *Radical Islamic Ideology in Southeast Asia* (West Point, 2010), p. 82.
[130] Virginie Andre, "Violent Jihad and Beheadings in the Land of Al Fatoni Darussalam", *Religion*, vol. 6 (2015), p. 1,207.
[131] Crisis Group interviews, BRN Information Department, June 2016, February 2017. "ISIS spillover unlikely in Thailand, but can't be ignored, experts say", Prachatai, 4 December 2015.
[132] "If we follow [ISIS's] way, there's no hope for us to be supported by the outside world". Crisis Group interview, PULO-DSPP member No. 1, March 2017.

borders.[133] A Malay-Muslim academic noted: "If Malaysia closed its door to the movement, would they still be able to operate as they do now? For this reason, it's very important for them not to be seen as extremists".[134]

Affiliation with ISIS or al-Qaeda would also lead to a loss of popular support for the movement. Any boost to capabilities would be more than offset by a loss of legitimacy. A civil-society activist said: "When [the militants] are seen as ISIS, they will immediately lose the legitimacy of their struggle".[135]

For similar reasons, the Malay-Muslim fronts are also unlikely to adopt signature tactics of foreign jihadists, such as suicide bombings and attacks aimed at mass casualties. Militants, officials and locals alike assert that indiscriminate mass-casualty attacks would cost the movement popular support and a claim to international legitimacy.[136] BRN representatives said that they would not employ indiscriminate mass-casualty attacks because the group requires cooperation from the local Muslim population.[137] A PULO leader said that their struggle shielded Patani from jihadism, because "as soon as our operations show the smallest indication of influence from ISIS, the superpower will intervene … . [M]ass destruction is not beneficial for our struggle, but rather devastating to it".[138]

This is not to say that militants are always scrupulous in their targeting or hesitant to kill civilians, including Muslims. While BRN does not issue claims of responsibility for attacks, and thus attribution is difficult, the conflict has been marked by atrocities, including murders of civilians, beheadings (post-mortem), burning of bodies and indiscriminate bombings against official or Buddhist civilian targets.[139] A daytime bomb attack on the Big C hyper-mart in Pattani on 9 May 2017, which wounded 80 people, including Muslim women and children, appeared to demonstrate a greater willingness to risk indiscriminate Muslim civilian casualties. Still, as several Malay-Muslims noted, BRN appears to weigh popular perceptions of insurgent violence in its planning. Popular disapproval and religious edicts have resulted in militants reducing or ceasing controversial forms of violence such as beheadings and attacking Buddhist monks.[140]

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[133] Crisis Group interview, Ahmad Omar Chapakia, vice president of Fatoni University, Pattani, February 2017; Liow, "Muslim Identity", op. cit., p. 1,419; see also Jason Johnson, "Faint ISIS footprint in Thailand's deep south", *Asia Times*, 8 March 2017.

[134] Crisis Group interview, Ahmad Omar Chapakia, vice president of Fatoni University, Pattani, February 2017. See also comments by Chamroon Den-Udom, chairman, Southern Islamic Culture Foundation, in "ISIS' Malay-language media unlikely to win hearts, minds in deep south", *Khaosod English*, 13 July 2016.

[135] Crisis Group interview, Muslim woman civil-society activist, Pattani, February 2017.

[136] Crisis Group interviews, Malay-Muslim lawyer, Pattani, February; Muslim official, Yala, March; Veera Urairat, deputy secretary general, National Security Council, Bangkok, 1 March, all 2017.

[137] Crisis Group interview, BRN Information Department, February 2017.

[138] Crisis Group interview, PULO-DSPP member No. 2, March 2017. In 2006, a PULO leader observed: "Once we are on that [terrorist] list, it is all over". "Interview: Kasturi Mahkota, foreign affairs spokesman, Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO)", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 9 September 2006.

[139] Crisis Group Report, *Recruiting Militants*, op. cit., p. 14.

[140] Crisis Group interviews, Malay-Muslim woman doctor, Pattani, February 2017; member, Pattani Provincial Islamic Committee, Pattani, February 2017; Thai-Muslim government official, Yala,

## IV.   "Hell in South East Asia"? Risks of Jihadist Influence

In spite of the factors militating against jihadist influence expounded above, there is a persistent fear that jihadist ideology could gain currency in the region under certain circumstances. Asked about this possibility, a BRN member quoted Tengku Mahmud Mahyiddin, son of the last Patani sultan, circa 1945: "'If the Patani issue is not resolved soon, it will become a hell in South East Asia'". The BRN member continued:

> In the past, these words seemed far removed from reality. But today, the situation has changed. External elements are trying to push hard to enter the conflict, and these are elements that no one wants, like terrorist ideologies, global terrorism. What I'm trying to say is that it could be a hell in South East Asia. It's not impossible that this could happen. BRN is not able to hold off these terrorist elements on its own.[141]

This warning reflects two concerns about jihadism most commonly expressed by local people, militants, Thai officials and foreign observers. First, that young Muslims, particularly those not belonging to the established militant organisations, could be radicalised by online propaganda. Second, that a protracted insurgency could open the door to transnational jihadist extremism, particularly if some militants perceive the current model of insurgency as inadequate.

### A.   *Radicalisation?*

Some Malay Muslims in the deep south appear ambivalent about ISIS, likely a function in part of ignorance.[142] Indeed, several interlocutors said that they lacked

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March 2017. Don Pathan, "Thai military and insurgents change tack in southern provinces", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 15 August 2016.

[141] Crisis Group interview, BRN Information Department, June 2016.

[142] A series of surveys conducted in the deep south returned disturbing but anomalous results. The first, conducted in 2015, asked if respondents knew of ISIS and if they agreed with ISIS treatment of enemy prisoners: 49 per cent were aware of ISIS and 10.9 per cent agreed with its treatment of prisoners. A consortium of fifteen Thai research institutes conducted other surveys. Asked if respondents agreed with ISIS operations, 15.8 per cent agreed or strongly agreed; in July-August 2016, asked if ISIS treatment of prisoners and opponents was appropriate, 19.3 per cent agreed or strongly agreed; 41.9 per cent responded "do not know" and 11 per cent preferred not to answer. The Center for Conflict Studies and Cultural Diversity (CSCD) surveyed 2,014 people in the three southernmost provinces in 2015. A consortium of fifteen Thai research organisations conducted three "Peace Surveys" – February-March 2016, July-August 2016, and April-May 2017 – with sample sizes of 1,560, 1,570 and 1,583, respectively. Respondents were selected from the southernmost provinces and four southeastern districts of Songkhla using stratified random sampling. Crisis Group correspondence, CSCD, April 2017; รายงานผลการสำรวจความคิดเห็นของประชาชนต่อกระบวนการสันติภาพในจังหวัดชายแดนภาคใต้ ครั้งที่ 1 กุมภาพันธ์ – มีนาคม 2559 [*Report on the Results of the Public Opinion Survey toward the Peace Process in the Southern Border Provinces No. 1, February-March 2016*] (Bangkok, 2016), p. 31; "การแถลงข่าวผลการสำรวจความคิดเห็นประชาชนต่อกระบวนกา-รสันติภาพจังหวัดชายแดนภาคใต้/ปาตานี ครั้งที่ 3" [Announcement of Results of the Public Opinion Survey of People toward the Peace Process in the Southern Border Provinces/Patani No. 3], Deep South Watch, 24 September 2017.

sufficient knowledge of ISIS.[143] A Malay-Muslim activist faulted local intellectuals and academics for failing to discuss ISIS publicly, but she acknowledged that their reticence likely stems from fear: "They might think that just talking about ISIS, they will be regarded as ISIS [by the authorities]".[144] Some imams tend to minimise the issue of jihadism; young people with questions about it may not know where to turn for answers.[145] A student in Indonesia said that Thai students there have greater access to information about ISIS, all of it negative: "The situation in Patani is more dangerous because information on ISIS is so limited".[146] These interlocutors believe that greater public discussion of jihadism would help inform local people and dispel misperceptions.

Thai authorities and some militants caution that young people could fall prey to jihadist ideology propagated via social media. There is particular concern about young Malay Muslims who have come of age amid an apparently unending conflict.[147] A Malay-Muslim activist observed: "Some people can be motivated only by hearing the word 'Islam', and become supportive of all Muslim struggles. This is a risk factor that might open up a way for extremism".[148] The fear that exposure to online propaganda will result in "radicalisation" among young Muslims is widespread but largely unsupported.[149] Moreover, so few Muslims turn to violence that it is difficult to accurately draw linkages that help identify social groups vulnerable to radicalisation; indeed attempting to do so would likely prove counterproductive, by unfairly stigmatising those groups.[150]

There is little to indicate that ISIS has won support or sympathy for its cause in southernmost Thailand through social media.[151] In 2014-2015, some Patani-Malay youths posted ISIS symbols, especially its black flag, on their Facebook pages and other social-media platforms. There are no reliable estimates of how widespread this practice was, but local interlocutors noted two qualifying factors. First, the use of ISIS imagery was most widespread following ISIS's 2014 battlefield victories, and the appeal appears to have been primarily that of proclaiming solidarity with conquering Muslim underdogs. The practice waned as ISIS atrocities gained wider

[143] Crisis Group interview, member, Pattani Provincial Islamic Committee; Malay-Muslim woman journalist; Malay-Muslim woman physician, all Pattani, February 2017.

[144] Crisis Group interview, Muslim woman civil-society activist, Pattani, February 2017.

[145] Crisis Group interview, analyst, Bangkok, March 2017.

[146] Crisis Group interview, Malay-Muslim student, Pattani, February 2017.

[147] Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Thai officials, Bangkok, March, April 2017; BRN Information Department, June 2016, February 2017. "'ไอเอส' เกิดยาก ไทยไม่ใช่เป้าหมาย" ["'IS' unlikely, Thais not the target"], *Post Today*, 28 May 2017; "Thailand's Deep South not suitable for ISIS: experts", Prachatai, 25 January 2016. Unpublished focus-group research, conducted by Virginie Andre of Deakin University in 2015 and 2017, found a degree of "fascination and curiosity" about ISIS among young Thai Muslims throughout Thailand. Crisis Group interview, Virginie Andre, Bangkok, 17 March 2017.

[148] Crisis Group interview, Malay-Muslim student activist, Pattani, February 2017.

[149] Kate Ferguson, *Countering Violent Extremism Through Media and Communications Strategies*, Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research, 1 March 2016, pp. 10-11.

[150] Veldhuis and Staun, op. cit., pp. 64-66.

[151] Tracking jihadist social media is difficult as sites and channels are frequently closed and re-opened. Diplomats report that there are relatively few (fewer than ten) jihadist sites directed at Thai Muslims. Crisis Group interviews, Bangkok, April, August 2017.

media coverage and might well wane further as ISIS faces defeat in Iraq and Syria. Secondly, the ISIS flag is emblazoned with words familiar to Muslims that are neither radical nor objectionable: "There is no god but Allah", and "Allah, Mohammed, Messenger".[152]

Representatives of BRN's Information Department have expressed concern that young people in the region, especially those affected by the conflict, could be influenced by online jihadist propaganda:

> In terms of appeal, ISIS propaganda is very clever in how they portray links between the enemy and suffering. Because every day, young people in Patani witness Siamese oppression. So, this propaganda resonates. The risk for young people outside the Party [BRN] is that they are not mature from a religious or political standpoint, so they may be drawn to it.[153]

BRN believes the problem can be contained, but expressed interest in working with the international community to build bulwarks against jihadism in the region. The BRN representatives were not specific about what they envision, but said that with greater political space for dialogue and international cooperation, BRN would be in a better position to defend Patani from these external influences.[154]

In the absence of specifics, and with BRN representatives only recently and hesitantly emerging from the shadows, this appeal for international cooperation is open to interpretation. The concern about foreign jihadist influence may be genuine. But it is also possible that BRN sees the international community's focus on ISIS – and thus its own efforts to highlight the threat – as an opportunity to build advantageous external relations and bolter its argument that, should its demand go unmet, the Thai state might soon be facing a far more ominous foe.

B.    *Protracted Conflict*

The insurgency's protraction and intractability are dynamics that arguably could spur shifts within the militant movement or create opportunities for foreign jihadists to exploit. This is a catch-all concern, covering, for example, a sense of hopelessness among Malay Muslims, a splintering among militant groups, or a resort by the state to iron-fisted tactics that could provoke an extremist backlash. More broadly, protracted conflict means more weapons, more specialists in violence and hardening of sectarian and ethnic boundaries.

Lack of an inclusive peace dialogue process, or failure to generate momentum in talks, likewise could increase the likelihood that militants resort to more spectacular violence to put pressure on Bangkok. There are indications that inhibitions within the militant movement on attacks outside the four southernmost provinces and

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[152] Crisis Group interviews, Malay-Muslim students, Pattani; member, Malay Language Council of Thailand, Pattani; senior PULO-MKP member, all February and March 2017. Hara Shintaro, "Bin Laden was everywhere", Prachatai, 22 March 2016.
[153] BRN Information Department, June 2016.
[154] Crisis Group interviews, BRN Information Department, June 2016 and February 2017.

causing civilian casualties may be breaking down.[155] Some argue that if BRN is marginalised by the peace process – one that it currently shuns but has not rejected in principle – or otherwise driven to desperation, it could turn to outside actors to achieve its aims.[156]

More plausible, though still unlikely, is the emergence of splinter groups, perhaps along generational lines, that may see advantages in aligning with jihadists. Stasis in the insurgent campaign or dialogue process could strain the militant fronts. A former inmate of Pattani Central Prison said that several imprisoned insurgents expressed a sense of comradeship with ISIS, as fellow Muslim fighters: "But asked if they wanted to join ISIS, they answered that it was impossible because the struggle for their own people and motherland wasn't over yet: 'Why should we go to their place, when the struggle in our place isn't finished?'".[157] A veteran security analyst noted that any Malay-Muslim splinter groups adopting terrorist tactics are likely to espouse Patani-nationalist, rather than jihadist ideology.[158]

Another speculative concern is that increased violence or repeated attacks on civilians outside the deep south could fuel anti-Muslim sentiment and militant Buddhist nationalism, creating distrust and enmity between Muslim and Buddhist communities throughout the country.[159] In turn, moves by the state to reintroduce policies perceived as unfair to Muslims would generate feelings of religious persecution; several interlocutors mentioned a return of the hijab ban, which was lifted in the 1980s, though such a policy has not been mooted.[160] Ill-conceived proposals, such as one to build a Buddhist park in Pattani, risk deepening alienation and perceptions of discrimination among Malay Muslims, sentiments that in other places have sometimes driven increased sympathy for transnational jihadist movements that claim to defend Muslims.[161]

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[155] A partial list of attacks outside the deep south includes: a small bomb near Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok in May 2013; an undetonated truck bomb in Phuket, discovered in December 2013; a car-bomb explosion in a shopping centre car park in Koh Samui, April 2015; and the 11-12 August 2016 bombings of tourist areas in the upper south.

[156] Crisis Group interviews, BRN Information Department, February 2017; Salafi civil-society activist; member of Pattani Provincial Islamic Committee, all Pattani, February 2017; Thai analyst, Bangkok, March 2017. BRN has stated that it is not a party to the MARA-Patani dialogue process. As conditions for dialogue, BRN demands an impartial mediator, third-party observers and a process designed by the negotiating parties. Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu (BRN), Press Release, 10 April 2017.

[157] Crisis Group interview, former inmate at Pattani Central Prison, Pattani, April 2017.

[158] Crisis Group interview, security analyst, Bangkok, February 2017.

[159] Crisis Group interviews, army officer, Narathiwat, March 2017; Buddhist community leader, Yala, April 2017. "ISIS spillover unlikely in Thailand, but can't be ignored, experts say", Prachatai, 4 December 2015; "Thailand: Buddhists cite violence fears in bid to withhold mosque permit", Benar News, 7 June 2017; Panu Wongcha-um, "In conflict-hit southern Thailand, Buddhist nationalism is on the rise", Channelnewsasia.com, 18 June 2017.

[160] Crisis Group interview, Salafi civil-society activist, Pattani, February 2017.

[161] The Pattani provincial government, with support from the Network of Buddhists for the Protection of Buddhism, proposed construction of a large Buddhist park in Muang district. Local Muslims objected and the proposal was scrapped. "Thailand's Deep South not suitable for ISIS: experts", Prachatai, 25 January 2016; "Muslim leaders question Buddhist park plan in Pattani", *Bangkok Post*, 17 January 2017.

Finally, there is the risk of spillover from ISIS supporters in Malaysia. Southern-most Thailand could serve as a haven for Malaysian jihadists, given the porous border and abundance of weapons in the region. According to Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, ISIS supporters have crossed from Thailand into Malaysia and from Malaysia into Thailand in transit to third countries. Thai Prime Minister Prayuth has acknowledged the need to resolve the problems in the deep south so as to deny violent outside groups an opportunity to intervene in the conflict.[162]

Despite these concerns, southernmost Thailand for now remains an unfriendly environment for groups like ISIS or al-Qaeda. But while the insurgency persists, so too does the risk that splinter groups or others come to see benefits in aligning with transnational jihadists. Ending the conflict should be a priority for both the government and militants; primarily to end the human suffering and disruption it already causes, but also to mitigate against such a threat. Direct talks between Bangkok and BRN and readiness to compromise on both sides are priorities in this respect.

For BRN, this means reconciling with an end state that preserves Thailand's territorial integrity. For Bangkok, it means recognising that the political status quo is unlikely to lead to an end to violence. A decentralised political order that respects Malay-Muslim identity and affords the opportunity to realise local aspirations while protecting the rights of local Buddhists remains the best hope for a resolution of the conflict. The international community can help by encouraging both sides to talk, providing good offices when appropriate, and assisting militants to build the capacity to engage in constructive dialogue. They must certainly avoid casting the insurgency as a problem of "violent extremism".[163] Conflict resolution should be the overriding imperative.

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[162] "Cross-border crime, counterterrorism among key issues in Zahid's visit", *New Straits Times*, 4 August 2016; "'บิ๊กตู่'ปัดไฟใต้เชื่อมโยง'ไอเอส'", *คมชัดลึก* ["'Big Tu' denies the southern situation is linked to 'IS'", *Khom Chad Leuk*], 30 May 2017.

[163] For a longer exploration of the risks of the Countering or Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE) agenda more broadly, see Crisis Group Special Report, *Exploiting Disorder*, op. cit.

## V.   Conclusion

The insurgency waged by members of a Malay-Muslim minority against the Thai state appears to some observers as a possible opening for transnational jihadists to expand their influence. There undoubtedly are cases in which militants with local agendas see advantages in affiliating with transnational jihadist groups. But, so far at least, in southernmost Thailand local nationalism remains fundamentally at odds with such groups' methods and aspirations. Thailand lacks a tradition of jihadist movements and networks that, elsewhere in South East Asia, have pledged allegiance to ISIS and al-Qaeda. The leaders of existing militant fronts are antagonistic to these groups and their South East Asian affiliates because they see association with international terrorists as a threat to their goal of Patani self-determination. Adopting tactics associated with jihadist groups would also cost local support and international legitimacy, while inviting international hostility.

All of which means that, for now, jihadist expansion in southernmost Thailand is at most a potentiality. Still, it would be a mistake to dismiss categorically the possibility that jihadists could sway individuals or small groups or even disaffected factions of existing militant groups. There are no clear signs of this happening, and a host of factors militate against it, but motivations for participation in jihadist violence are diverse and often divorced from religious or ideological convictions.

Malay-Muslim militants and the Thai state have a common interest in keeping out ISIS and other jihadist groups. While for now, the conflict has not led to the pervasive disorder that jihadists have exploited elsewhere, it could evolve in ways that generate more promising conditions for jihadist intervention. Stalemate or miscalculation could lead some militants to employ more spectacular violence, which in turn could lead to a rise in anti-Muslim sentiment in Thailand, and a broader sectarian conflict. To avert this, and to fulfil their obligations to the people of southernmost Thailand, Bangkok and the militant fronts should seek compromise and a negotiated end to the conflict.

**Bangkok/Brussels, 8 November 2017**

## Appendix A: Map of Thailand

International Crisis Group/KO/Sept 2016. Based on UN map no. 3853 Rev. 2 (July 2009).

## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Its Vice Chair is Ayo Obe, a Legal Practitioner, Columnist and TV Presenter in Nigeria.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations from 2000-2008, and in 2012, as Deputy Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on Syria. He left his post as Deputy Joint Special Envoy to chair the commission that prepared the white paper on French defence and national security in 2013.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in ten other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Kabul, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Sanaa, Tblisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Defence, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Henry Luce Foundation, Humanity United, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Oak Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

**November 2017**

## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2014

### Special Reports

*Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action*, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

### North East Asia

*Old Scores and New Grudges: Evolving Sino-Japanese Tensions*, Asia Report N°258, 24 July 2014 (also available in Chinese).

*Risks of Intelligence Pathologies in South Korea*, Asia Report N°259, 5 August 2014.

*Stirring up the South China Sea (III): A Fleeting Opportunity for Calm*, Asia Report N°267, 7 May 2015 (also available in Chinese).

*North Korea: Beyond the Six-Party Talks*, Asia Report N°269, 16 June 2015.

*Stirring up the South China Sea (IV): Oil in Troubled Waters*, Asia Report N°275, 26 January 2016 (also available in Chinese).

*East China Sea: Preventing Clashes from Becoming Crises*, Asia Report N°280, 30 June 2016.

*China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan*, Asia Report N°288, 10 July 2017.

### South Asia

*Policing Urban Violence in Pakistan*, Asia Report N°255, 23 January 2014.

*Afghanistan's Insurgency after the Transition*, Asia Report N°256, 12 May 2014.

*Education Reform in Pakistan*, Asia Report N°257, 23 June 2014.

*Afghanistan's Political Transition*, Asia Report N°260, 16 October 2014.

*Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan*, Asia Report N°262, 28 October 2014.

*Sri Lanka's Presidential Election: Risks and Opportunities*, Asia Briefing N°145, 9 December 2014.

*Mapping Bangladesh's Political Crisis*, Asia Report N°264, 9 February 2015.

*Women, Violence and Conflict in Pakistan*, Asia Report, N°265, 8 April 2015.

*The Future of the Afghan Local Police*, Asia Report N°268, 4 June 2015.

*Revisiting Counter-terrorism Strategies in Pakistan: Opportunities and Pitfalls*, Asia Report N°271, 22 July 2015.

*Sri Lanka Between Elections*, Asia Report N°272, 12 August 2015.

*Winning the War on Polio in Pakistan*, Asia Report N°273, 23 October 2015.

*Nepal's Divisive New Constitution: An Existential Crisis*, Asia Report N°276, 4 April 2016.

*Political Conflict, Extremism and Criminal Justice in Bangladesh*, Asia Report N°277, 11 April 2016.

*Sri Lanka: Jumpstarting the Reform Process*, Asia Report N°278, 18 May 2016.

*Pakistan's Jihadist Heartland: Southern Punjab*, Asia Report N°279, 30 May 2016.

*Pakistan: Stoking the Fire in Karachi*, Asia Report N°284, 15 February 2017.

*Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Government*, Asia Report N°285, 10 April 2017.

*Sri Lanka's Transition to Nowhere*, Asia Report N°286, 16 May 2017.

*Sri Lanka's Conflict-Affected Women: Dealing with the Legacy of War*, Asia Report N°289, 28 July 2017.

### South East Asia

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## Appendix D: International Crisis Group Board of Trustees