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The Malay-Muslim Insurgency in Southern Thailand

Understanding the Conflict's
Evolving Dynamic

Peter Chalk

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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Preface

This paper is part of the RAND Corporation's research project for the U.S. Department of Defense on how to improve U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) capabilities. It should be of interest to those concerned with issues arising from COIN and to scholars working in this field. It is one in a series of papers focusing on particular subjects. The project will culminate in a report that builds on these earlier efforts.

The RAND International Security and Defense Policy Center

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Summary

Current unrest in the Malay-Muslim provinces of southern Thailand has captured growing national, regional, and international attention due to the heightened tempo and scale of rebel attacks, the increasingly jihadist undertone that has come to characterize insurgent actions, and the central government's often brutal handling of the situation on the ground. Of particular note are growing concerns that the conflict is no longer purely local in nature but has been systematically hijacked by outside extremists to avail wider transnational Islamist designs in Southeast Asia.

There is (as yet) no concrete evidence to suggest that the region has been decisively transformed into a new beachhead for panregional jihadism. Although there is a definite religious element to many of the attacks that are currently being perpetrated in the three Malay provinces, it is not apparent that this has altered the essential localized and nationalistic aspect of the conflict. Equally, while it is true that the scale and sophistication of violence have increased, there is nothing to link this change in tempo to the input of punitive, absolutist external jihadist imperatives. Perhaps the clearest reason to believe that the southern Thai conflict has not metastasized into a broader jihadist struggle, however, is the fact that there has been neither a migration of violence north (much less to other parts of Southeast Asia) nor directed attacks against foreigners, tourist resort areas (such as Phuket), or overt symbols of U.S. "cultural capitalism."

Abbreviations

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
BRN	Barisan Revolusi Nasional
COIN	counterinsurgency
GMIP	Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Pattani
IED	improvised explosive device
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MITGT	Malaysia-Indonesia-Thailand Growth Triangle
MoI	Ministry of the Interior
MPRMP	Majelis Permesyuaratan Rakyat Melayu Patani
PPP	People's Power Party
PULO	Patani United Liberation Organization
RTA	Royal Thai Army
RTP	Royal Thai Police
SBPAC	Southern Borders Provinces Administrative Centre

Introduction

Separatist violence in the Malay-Muslim provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani is not new, with a history that goes back nearly half a century. However, unrest in this part of Thailand has captured growing national, regional, and international attention during the past several years due to the heightened tempo and scale of rebel attacks, the increasingly jihadist undertone that has come to characterize insurgent actions, and the central government's often brutal handling of the situation on the ground. In addition, there are growing concerns that the conflict is no longer purely local and at risk of being hijacked by outside extremists to avail wider transnational Islamist designs in Southeast Asia.

The present Malay-Muslim insurgency raises four important questions. First, what, precisely, accounts for the recent spike in attacks, and in what manner does the current bout of violence differ from that in the past? Second, what is the likelihood of the southern border provinces morphing into a new front for jihadist terrorism? Third, in what ways has the government's counterinsurgency (COIN) approach contributed to and exacerbated unrest in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat? And fourth, what are the prospects for future stability in the region following the September 2006 coup that ousted the hard-line administration of Thaksin Shinawatra?

This paper addresses each of these critical issues. It starts with a brief historical background of the root causes for Malay-Muslim discontent in southern Thailand. The paper then goes on to discuss the evolving nature of the insurgency, dividing the struggle into three distinct stages: 1960–1998, 1998–2004, and 2004 to the present. Having established a context for delineating the changing nature of rebel tactics and violence, the paper considers to what extent the altered and more acute nature of post-2004 unrest can be attributed to a growing external jihadist presence. This is followed by an analysis of the government's COIN response—gauged in terms of both military and political effectiveness—after which an overall assessment of the current standing of stability in the southern border provinces is provided. The paper concludes by highlighting several prescriptive recommendations that could be usefully employed in the immediate future to contain the Malay-Muslim separatist struggle and prevent it from going “critical.”

Background

Islamic fundamentalist violence in Thailand centers on the separatist activities of the Malay-Muslim population in the country's southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat.¹ Historically constituted as part of the former kingdom of Patani (Patani Darussalam),² three main pillars have traditionally underscored Malay separatist identity in this region: (1) a belief in the virtues and "greatness" of the kingdom of Patani, (2) an identification with the Malay race, and (3) a religious orientation based on Islam. These base ingredients are woven together in the tripartite doctrine of hijra (flight), imam (faith), and jihad (holy war), which collectively asserts that all Muslim communities have both a right and duty to withdraw from and resist any form of persecution that is serving to place their survival in jeopardy (see Bailey and Miksic, 1989, p. 151; Christie, 1996, p. 133).

The roots of indigenous Malay-Muslim dissatisfaction and perceived discrimination trace a history back to the establishment of the modern Thai state by the Chakkri dynasty in the 18th century, when a vigorous attempt was made to extend central control over Patani. Although the local population was initially able to resist external penetration, the entire kingdom had been brought under effective Siamese rule by the late 1700s. During the 19th century, increasingly uniform, centralized bureaucratic structures were introduced throughout the region to forestall the steady expansion of British colonial influence throughout the Malay peninsula. As part of this process, chieftains in the Patani rajadoms were absorbed into the salaried administration—effectively becoming Siamese civil servants. In addition, a conscious effort was made to reduce the range of issues with which Islamic law could independently deal by extending the jurisdiction and ambit of the Thai legal system (Leifer, 1996, p. 35; May, 1992, p. 403; Tugby and Tugby, 1989; Alagappa, 1987, p. 200; Mudmarn, 1994, p. 24; Farouk, 1984, pp. 235–236).

The pace of assimilation gathered strength during the 1930s, when several key changes were introduced. The old local-government structure, which had at least allowed some autonomous Malay political representation, was replaced by a simpler, more Bangkok-oriented system. In addition, three provincial units were carved from the original Patani region—Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—all of which were placed under the direct control of the Ministry of the Interior (MoI). A modernization program was also initiated to eliminate "backward" Islamic customs and dialects and enforce uniformity in language and social behavior.³ As part of this latter endeavor, Western cultural and customary habits were stressed, and steps were taken to completely phase out shari'a law (Christie, 1996, pp. 176–177; May, 1992, p. 403; Haemindra, 1976, p. 205; Thomas, 1982, p. 160; Pitsuwan, 1985, pp. 37–44; Wilson, 1989, pp. 59–60).

A military-orchestrated shift in political power toward overtly conservative and authoritarian elements in 1947 further entrenched the Thai government's resistance to any form of regional linguistic, cultural, or religious autonomy in the south. A policy aimed at concurrently severing the link between Malay ethnic and Muslim religious identity through a directed process of "Thaization" was duly instituted and, save for episodic (and, in most cases, symbolic)

¹ The population of these three provinces is roughly 1.8 million, of which approximately 79 percent are Muslim (interviews with journalists and academics, Pattani, September 2006).

² *Patani* was the kingdom's spelling before annexation in the 17th century. The present-day province is *Pattani*.

³ In 1939, Siam was renamed *Thailand*. This change was very much part and parcel of Bangkok's general integrationist push, essentially being designed to emphasize the oneness of Thai ethnic and national identity.

concessions, has remained in place ever since (Christie, 1996, pp. 185–187; Alagappa, 1987, pp. 204–207).

The effort to draw southern Malay Muslims into the national Thai family has been singularly unsuccessful. During the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat existed as zones of dissidence characterized by, if anything, only sullen submission to Bangkok's rule. Over the past five years, the situation has further deteriorated to the extent that the so-called deep south is now in the throes of what amounts to a full-scale ethnoreligious insurgency. The reasons for the failure of Thai integrationist policies reflect a steely determination on the part of the local Malay-Muslim population to maintain their unique way of life—a resolve that has been, at least partly, amplified by the region's lack of economic development, corruption, arbitrary repression, and, at times, highly brutal internal security measures (including targeted killings and abductions).⁴

⁴ Interviews with journalists and academics, Pattani, September 2006.

The Insurgency

The insurgency can be divided into three broad phases: 1960–1998, 1998–2004, and 2004 to the present.

1960–1998

Between 1960 and 1998, a variety of militant separatist movements operated in the southern Thai provinces. While different ideological and operational outlooks characterized these groups, they were all motivated by a common desire to carve out an independent Muslim state with Pattani as the center. Violent action in pursuit of this objective typically fell into the classic pattern of low-intensity conflict, generally involving ambushes, kidnappings, assassinations, extortion, sabotage, and bomb attacks. The main aims were to present the southern provinces as an area that remained beyond the sovereign control of Bangkok, to create a sense of insecurity among ethnic Thais living in the region, and to place additional pressure on the central government to accede to the political demands of Malay-Muslim separatism. Three principal groups were at the forefront of this unrest: Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), and New PULO—all of which were rurally based and organized along conventional, hierarchical lines.¹

Barisan Revolusi Nasional

In 1960, Ustaz Haji Abdul Karim Hassan established BRN in response to a government education-reform program that forced the network of nominally independent religious boarding schools (or *ponoh*) in Pattani to take on a secular curriculum in addition to their Islamic studies. Retaining strong ties to the Communist Party of Malaya, the organization harbored avowedly panborder aspirations that were essentially based on three principles: anticolonialism and anticapitalism, Islamic socialism, and Malay nationalism defined in terms of the oneness of God and humanitarianism (ICG, 2005, pp. 7–8; Farouk, 1984, p. 239; May, 1992, pp. 404–405; and Mudmarn, 1994, p. 30).

From its inception, BRN was fully committed to armed struggle, vigorously rejecting the Thai constitution and its concomitant political system as both illegitimate and irrelevant. The group saw its objectives in two distinct phases: first, to bring about the complete seces-

¹ Several smaller organizations also operated in southern Thailand from the late 1960s, including Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani, Sabilillah (literally “the way of God”), Barisan Nasional Baru, Tantra Jihad Islam, and Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Pattani (GMIP). For more on these groups, see Indorf (1984, pp. 40–41); Farouk (1984, p. 241); and May (1992, pp. 403–404).

sion of the southern Muslim provinces to reconstruct Pattani as a sovereign state completely independent of Thailand; second, to incorporate this polity into a wider pan–Southeast Asian Malay-Muslim socialist nation governed by a single leader and united under one common flag (Farouk, 1984, pp. 239–240).

Benefiting from clear ideological objectives and with a solid operational base at its disposal, BRN emerged as a prominent threat to law and order and had, by the 1980s, demonstrated a proven ability to conduct operations throughout Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat as well as in Bangkok itself.² The group never managed to attain the type of critical mass needed to seriously challenge Thai central authority, however, largely because its left-wing platform did not sit well with the basically conservative sentiments of the Malay-Muslim population in the south. These difficulties became even more pronounced as left-wing ideologies began to lose their broader appeal (and credibility) during the latter years of the Cold War. Compounding BRN's problems was factional infighting and splits brought about by its own efforts to span the spectrum of nationalism, religion, and socialism—something that became particularly evident with the group's progressive and systematic disaggregation throughout the 1990s (Farouk, 1984, pp. 24–41; ICG, 2005, p. 8).

Pattani United Liberation Organization

PULO was the largest and most prominent of the various rebel groups active in southern Thailand between 1960 and 2000. It was formed in 1968 by Tengku Bira Kotanila (aka Kabir Abdul Rahman), an Islamic scholar who had become disillusioned with what he saw as the limited and ineffectual nature of the established Malay opposition in Pattani. PULO adopted a dual-track strategy of nonviolent and violent action. The former was directed at improving the standard of education among the southern Malay population as well as fostering and nurturing their political consciousness and ethnonational identity. The latter, militant track was essentially aimed at intensifying international publicity on the plight of the indigenous southern Thai population through armed action and was primarily the responsibility of a separate wing known as the Pattani United Liberation Army (Leifer, 1996, pp. 199–200; Farouk, 1984, p. 242; Ahmad, 1975–1976, pp. 116–117; ICG, 2005, p. 8).

At its height, PULO numbered approximately 350 hard-core cadres.³ Benefiting from safe haven in the northern Malaysian state of Kelantan (allegedly provided with the “blessing” of the ruling Parti Islam SeMalaysia), these militants carried out several prominent attacks against perceived symbols of Thai oppression, schools, teachers, local government officials, administrators, and Buddhist settlers. Improved border cooperation between Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur from 1998 onward, however, deprived PULO of this external sanctuary and resulted in the detention of several of the group's leading members, including chief of military operations Hayi Sama Ae Thanam. These setbacks triggered a major tactical reassessment on the part of PULO's mainstream membership, many of whom subsequently fled abroad or took advantage of a government-sponsored amnesty program and surrendered directly to the authorities (Noiwong, 2001, pp. 149–150; “Separatists Arrested in Malaysia,” 1998; “Secrets of the South,” 1998; “Arrests in South Boost Malaysian Ties,” 1998; “Terrorist Suspects Arrested

² Khan (1995, p. 1); Indorf (1984, pp. 40–41). A 150- to 300-person-strong military wing led by Jehku Baku (alias Mapioh Sadalah) carried out these actions.

³ PULO, itself, claimed a strength of 20,000 cadres (ICG, 2005, p. 7; Yegar, 2002, p. 147).

in the South,” 1998). The resultant internal hemorrhaging was decisive and had, by 2000, essentially crippled the group as a concerted insurgent entity.⁴

New PULO

New PULO emerged as a dissident faction of the original PULO in 1995. Established by Arrong Moo-reng and Hayi Abdul Rohman Bazo, the group pursued the goal of Pattani autonomy largely through a single-minded policy of militant action (as opposed to the dual-track violent/nonviolent agenda favored by its parent organization), focusing on attacks that were designed to perpetually harass the police and disrupt the normal course of social, political, and cultural interaction. A so-called Armed Force Council overseen by Haji Da-oh Thanam coordinated three sabotage wings to carry out these operations, each vested with a specific area of geographic concentration:

- the Sali Ta-loh Bueyor Group, which had responsibility for Narithiwat’s Ja-nae and Sri Sakhon districts
- the Maso Dayeh Group, which covered Yala’s Betong district
- the Ma-ae Tohpien Group, largest of the three, with a mandate for any district in Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani.⁵

According to the then Thai interior minister, Major General Sanan Kachornprasart, New PULO supplemented these units with part-time activists who were used to carry out rudimentary, ad-hoc missions, such as burning down bus depots. In many cases, petty thieves and young drug addicts were bribed to undertake these operations, with typical financial inducements generally in the range of 300–500 baht.⁶ Inducting this type of criminal element into the New PULO organizational structure offered the advantage of freeing up more professional cadres for higher-profile strikes. In addition, it conceivably helped to reduce the possibility that critical intelligence would be passed on to the security forces in the event that a saboteur was captured and made to confess.

As with PULO, New PULO cadres benefited greatly from the provision of an external safe haven in northern Malaysia to plan and prepare for attacks as well as to escape the dragnet of Thai security forces. This tactical advantage was similarly lost in 1998 in line with improved border-security cooperation, which, as in the case of PULO, also resulted in the capture of a number of key individuals, including, notably, Rohman Bazo and Haji Thanam (“Terrorist Suspects Arrested in the South,” 1998; “Terrorist Suspect Has Violent Past,” 1998; “Malaysians Hand Over Separatists,” 1998; “Terrorists Asked to Surrender in a Month’s Time,” 1998). These losses had a highly significant impact on New PULO’s standing morale and long-term strategic calculations, galvanizing a membership exodus that was as absolute as the one that had occurred with its parent movement.⁷

⁴ Interview with a Thai journalist, Pattani, September 2006.

⁵ Interviews with Thai military intelligence personnel, Bangkok, July 1997. See also “Terrorist Suspect Has Violent Past” (1998); “Plague of Terrorism Ruins Thai Economic Growth” (1998); “Secrets of the South” (1998).

⁶ Interviews with Thai military intelligence personnel, Bangkok, July 1997. See also “Violence in South Seen as Drug-Related” (1998); and “Motives Behind Violence in the South” (1998).

⁷ It should be noted that PULO and New PULO both retained a fairly extensive presence overseas, with lobbying offices in Saudi Arabia, Libya, Egypt, Iran, and Syria. However, neither group was ever able to translate this international exposure

Bersatu

BRN, PULO, and New PULO never made any really concerted attempt to coordinate their operational activities largely due to their different ideological outlooks. That said, the three groups did briefly agree to form a tactical alliance in mid-1997 in an attempt to refocus national and regional attention on the “southern question.” Operating under the banner of Bersatu⁸ (literally “solidarity”), BRN, PULO, and New PULO carried out a coordinated series of bombing, incendiary, and shooting attacks—code-named Falling Leaves⁹—that resulted in nine deaths, several dozen injuries and considerable economic damage. At the time, the jointly orchestrated strikes marked the most serious upsurge in Malay-Muslim separatist activity since the early 1980s (Chalk, 1998, p. 122; “Chronology of Southern Violence,” 1998; ICG, 2005, p. 14; “Plague of Terrorism Ruins Thai Economic Growth,” 1998; “Teachers Rush to Find Passage Out of Troubled South,” 1998; “Chronological List of the Events,” 1998).

Although Falling Leaves was certainly successful in heightening the overall visibility of the Muslim cause in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, it also dramatically increased regional pressure on Malaysia to step up cross-border cooperation with Thailand (on the grounds that the attacks would not have been possible in the absence of a secure militant safe haven in Kelantan). As noted, Kuala Lumpur duly responded with several high-profile arrests of PULO and New PULO members, marking a major shift in the government’s hands-off stance to what it had traditionally referred to as a purely domestic Thai problem. The change in policy—which came with the specific approval of Mahathir bin Mohamad¹⁰—was decisive in its effects, essentially marking the demise of the PULO, New PULO, and (to the extent that it still existed) BRN separatist campaign (“Separatists Hold Urgent Talks,” 1998a; “Net Closing in on Rebels in Malaysia,” 1998; “Malaysians Hand Over Separatists,” 1998; “KL Decides It Is Time to Help,” 1998). As one Thai intelligence official remarked at the time, “[Because] Malaysia has shifted its policy and [is denying] the separatists sanctuary, it will undoubtedly cause them more trouble. . . . The movements simply cannot survive militarily [without the benefit of] Malaysian . . . support” (“Separatists Hold Urgent Talks,” 1998b).

1998–2004

The scale of unrest in the southern provinces dropped markedly in the late 1990s. Certainly, the effective demise of New PULO and, especially, PULO was highly relevant in this regard. Just

into concrete diplomatic and political gains to support and legitimate the Malay-Muslim struggle in Thailand.

⁸ Bersatu has also been referred to as *Majelis Permesyuaratan Rakyat Melayu Patani* (MPRMP, or the Patani Malay People’s Consultative Council).

⁹ This code name was reputedly chosen because the intent of the attacks was to kill off state workers one by one in the same manner that leaves fall off trees.

¹⁰ Mathathir’s willingness to quickly crack down on PULO and New PULO activists in Kelantan almost certainly reflected his awareness of the need to maintain cordial relations with Bangkok in order to protect the much touted (and publicized) Malaysia-Indonesia-Thailand Growth Triangle (MITGT). Indeed, the arrests came on the heels of earlier visits by the Thai interior minister, foreign minister, deputy foreign minister, and chief of police—all of whom specifically warned that, unless Kuala Lumpur stepped up efforts to control violence in the south, closer cross-border economic cooperation (which was critical to the success of the MITGT) would be curtailed. See, for instance, “Border Breakthrough” (1998); “PM: Peace in South Vital to Growth Triangle” (1998); “Is It So Hard to Be a Good Neighbor?” (1998); “Malaysia’s Policy Shift to Benefit South” (1998); and “Surin Set to Seek Malaysian Help in Curbing Terrorists” (1998).

as importantly, however, were signs (albeit short lived) that the Thai government was beginning to show somewhat more sensitivity to the lack of economic and administrative development in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. Not only did Bangkok pledge to promote the region's natural resources and invest greater sums in occupational training for local Malays, moves were also made to enhance police, military, and political understanding of the unique Malay-Muslim way of life (see, for instance, "Islam," 1998, p. 452). Much of this latter endeavor was directed through the Southern Borders Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC), which had first been established in 1981 under the MoI to educate bureaucrats and security officials in cultural awareness and the local Pattani language (known by Thais as Yawi) as well as to formulate broad-ranging policies for ameliorating the conflict (ICG, 2005, pp. 11, 34–35).

The respite in violence proved to be only temporary, however, largely because the Thai government failed to capitalize on the insurgents' disarray by quickly winning over the local population through the initiation of a genuine hearts-and-minds campaign. Undertakings to lift the overall economic and unemployment situation of the south were largely not carried through, nor were there any directed efforts to increase Malay-Muslim participation in local business and administration.¹¹ Equally important, on assuming power in 2001, the newly elected government of Prime Minister Thaksin dismantled the SBPAC¹²—the one multi-agency mechanism that had begun to demonstrate at least a partial track record in conflict resolution¹³—and transferred internal security responsibilities in the south to the police, an institution that is generally regarded as being heavier-handed than the army.¹⁴

The first signs of a return to violence surfaced at the end of 2001, when five well-coordinated attacks on police posts in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat left five officers and one village defense volunteer dead. The level of unrest gathered pace during the subsequent two years—rising from 75 incidents in 2002 to 119 in 2003—dramatically escalating in early 2004 with a series of highly audacious operations (ICG, 2005, p. 16; Davis, 2004c). January saw one of the most brazen robberies ever to have taken place in the south, involving a group of roughly 100 unidentified Muslims who raided a Thai army camp in Narathiwat and made off with more than 300 weapons, including assault rifles, machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades. Two equally bold operations quickly followed suit. The first occurred on March 30 and involved masked gunmen who descended on a quarry in the Muang district of Yala and successfully stole 1.6 tonnes of ammonium nitrate, 56 sticks of dynamite, and 176 detonators. The second, known

¹¹ In 2002, for instance, Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani still had a per-capita income roughly 7,000 baht less than neighboring provinces did; some 80 percent of the civil service for the administration of the region were non-Malay (a ratio that largely exists to this day), while the majority of the local political economy remained in the hands of Chinese officials (interviews with Thai journalists and academics, Pattani, September 2006).

¹² Thaksin's decision to dismantle the SBPAC reportedly reflected his concern that the center was staffed by officials whose loyalties flowed primarily to the opposition Democrats rather than to him and his government. In addition, it was predicated on the assumption that the collapse of PULO and New PULO had dealt a death blow to insurgent activities in the south. The SBPAC was reestablished following the military coup that ousted Thaksin in 2006. (Davis, 2004a, p. 24; ICG, 2005, pp. 33–34; "Cabinet to Dissolve Two Security Agencies," 2002).

¹³ Although the SBPAC was slow and bureaucratic, the institution served its purpose—acting as a forum in which both sides (Malays and Thai officials) could come together and acknowledge their cultural and ethnic differences. In addition, the center helped to engender a sense of ownership among local elites—of both their problems and their solutions—and provided a formalized adjudicatory structure through which complaints concerning corrupt or incompetent officials could be aired and ruled on (interviews with Thai security officials, journalists, and academics, Pattani, September 2006). See also ICG (2005, pp. 34–35).

¹⁴ Interviews with Thai journalists, September 2006.

as the Krue Se Siege, took place on April 28, when machete-wielding militants attempted to overrun a string of police positions and military armories in Pattani, Yala, and Songkhla. One hundred eight attackers were ultimately killed in the incident, 31 of whom were shot after seeking refuge in the central Krue Se mosque.¹⁵

The events in early 2004 heralded the onset of the most recent and bloodiest stage of the insurgency—forcing Bangkok to accept that it was now confronting a concerted ethno-religious insurgency with explicit political underpinnings.¹⁶

2004–2006

Between January 2004 and the end of August 2007, 7,743 incidents were recorded in southern Thailand, leaving 2,566 dead (which equates to an average of 58 per month or roughly two a day) and a further 4,187 wounded. While civilians have been the hardest hit (accounting for more than 70 percent of all fatalities), both the police and military have also suffered significant losses with respective casualty counts amounting to 711 and 689. Most attacks have taken the form of drive-by shootings and assassinations (3,253), acts of arson (1,298), and bombings (1,189) using improvised explosive devices (IEDs).¹⁷ For a population that numbers only 1.8 million, these figures represent a considerable toll.

Unlike the earlier phases of violence, there does not seem to be a centralized organizational nucleus of defined groupings behind the current bout of insurgent and terrorist activity. According to most commentators, attacks are the work of an amalgam of militants drawn from the decimated ranks of New PULO, PULO, and BRN as well as emergent ad-hoc Islamist entities, such as GMIP and the Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani,¹⁸ combined with an amorphous collection of disaffected youths; out-of-work farmers, laborers, and tradesmen; and co-opted criminal elements.¹⁹

Estimates of the number of people actively engaged in violent attacks vary greatly from 5,000 to 6,000 to as many as 20,000 to 30,000—although most informed sources tend toward the lower end of the numerical spectrum.²⁰ According to Thai police officials, the militant base is loosely organized around urban-based cells,²¹ each numbering between three and four cadres that are then grouped together to form independent teams of between 16 and 18 operatives

¹⁵ Interviews with Thai police and investigative journalists, Pattani, September 2006. See also ICG (2005, pp. 17–23) and Davis (2005c, p. 27).

¹⁶ Prior to 2004, the Thai government had dismissed violence in the south as simple banditry and criminality that could be addressed through normal law-enforcement channels.

¹⁷ Interviews with Thai academics, Pattani, September 2007.

¹⁸ These militants have variously referred to themselves by the 1997 designation Bersatu as well as Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Koordinasi (National Revolutionary Front Coordinate).

¹⁹ Interviews with Thai and Western analysts and journalists, Bangkok, November 2005 and April 2006. See also Davis (2005a, p. 14). According to one Western diplomat in Bangkok, it is the disillusioned youth who are currently acting as “the major hired guns in the south.”

²⁰ Interviews with Thai and Western security and counterterrorism analysts, Pattani and Bangkok, September 2006. See also “Suspects in Bank Attacks Identified” (2006).

²¹ Most local commentators in the south estimate that 90 percent of the villages in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat have at least one established militant cell within their confines.

that function at the tambol, or subdistrict, level.²² Actual recruitment is left up to respective unit leaders, but most cadres that have been co-opted into insurgent ranks tend to be working-class males between 16 and 24 years old who are generally religiously pious and relatively well educated.²³

Armed actions are reportedly carried out by dedicated (team) military wings known as Runda Kumpulan Kecil (or small patrol groups),²⁴ the members of which are reputedly trained in unarmed combat, weapon handling, bomb making, and sharp-shooting.²⁵ Available weapons for these squads include IEDs, knives, machetes, pistols, and automatic rifles and grenade launchers—most of which are locally made, stolen from the security forces, or procured from former PULO, New PULO, and BRN stocks.²⁶

The ostensible goal of the current manifestation of the insurgency appears to be the creation of a separate Malay-Muslim state within five years (dating from January 1, 2004). The supposed 1,000-day plan was discovered during a 2006 search at an Islamic school in Pattani and was allegedly developed by Masae Useng, a former BRN member who is wanted in connection with an arms robbery in Narathiwat (“Suspects in Bank Attacks Identified,” 2006). Beyond this basic objective, the insurgency does not seem to be guided by any overarching strategy other than fostering communal hatred between Muslims and Buddhists and making the southern Malay provinces ungovernable.²⁷

Despite lacking clear organizational coherence and strategic direction, Malay-Muslim rebels currently operating in southern Thailand have clearly taken their campaign of violence to a level of sophistication and, at times, ruthlessness not seen in the past. Besides the higher intensity of attacks noted, there are indications that militants now possess the means to both produce and deploy relatively large bombs. One IED that was detonated on the Thai-Malay border in February 2005, for instance, weighed 50 kg, which stands in stark contrast to earlier versions that were typically in the 5- and 10-kg range and packaged in simple everyday items, such as shopping bags, plastic lunch boxes, and PVC tubing.²⁸ Apart from size, the makeup of bombs is also more sophisticated than in the past. This has been most apparent with cell phones, which are now routinely used to trigger IEDs.²⁹ These mechanisms are generally recognized as being far more effective than the older, Chinese-made analog clocks on which southern Thai extremists traditionally relied, not least because they allow for external detonations in clear line of sight of a specific target and at a particular time (Davis, 2005c, p. 27; “250 Detonators Found,” 2005).

²² While strike teams act independently of one another, deciding for themselves what target to hit and when, leaders will occasionally meet and decide to carry out large-scale, coordinated attacks.

²³ Interview with a Thai police official, Pattani, September 2006. See also Davis (2006c). It is not known whether a higher leadership structure exists above the strike teams to provide overall guidance and direction for the insurgency as a whole; as one official remarked, “This is the key unknown that the security and intelligence services have still to uncover.”

²⁴ This name is thought to derive from a basic training curriculum of the same name used by the Indonesian military (interview with Thai security analyst, Bangkok, April 2006).

²⁵ According to Thai sources, much of this training is provided by commandos, who number only between 100 and 200 and are graduates of more-advanced combat courses.

²⁶ Interviews with Thai security officials and journalists, Pattani, September 2006; Davis (2006c).

²⁷ Interviews with Thai journalists, Pattani, September 2006.

²⁸ Interview with a Thai journalist, Bangkok, November 2005. See also Davis (2005c, p. 26) and “Thailand” (2005).

²⁹ According to one analyst in Bangkok, 96 percent of bomb attacks during 2005 were detonated using cell phones.

The ability to pull off audacious and complex operations has equally expanded. Most attacks are now integrated and executed along a full modality spectrum—often embracing explosions, arson, assassinations, and random shootings—to maximize overall impact.³⁰ Coordinated bombings are also surfacing with more regularity. One notable case occurred in April 2005, when simultaneous explosions struck Hat Yai International Airport, the French-owned Carrefour supermarket, and the Green Palace World Hotel in Songkhla.³¹ The attacks generated widespread concern—both in Thailand and regionally—not least because they represented the first time that Malay extremists had struck outside the insurgent-plagued provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat.³² Another highly publicized incident involved coordinated bombings that targeted 22 commercial banks in Yala during August 2006 (“Bombs Hit 22 Branches in Yala,” 2006; “Suspects in Bank Attacks Identified,” 2006; “Suspect Was ‘Paid to Put Bomb in Yala Bank,’” 2006). Interestingly, two of the facilities that were struck were Muslim owned, which surprised a number of observers. However, the fact that both were Thai-created would seem to suggest that the motivation was still related to the basic Malay ethnonationalist struggle against Bangkok, in the sense that the banks were seen as symbolic of a repressive Thai-Buddhist polity.

Finally, the current bout of instability in the south has been marked by an explicit religious, jihadist undertone of a sort not apparent in past years. Reflective of this have been frequent attacks against drinking houses, gambling halls, karaoke bars, and other establishments associated with Western decadence and secularism; the distribution of leaflets (allegedly printed in Malaysia) specifically warning locals of reprisals if they do not adopt traditional Muslim dress and fully respect the Friday holiday; and the increased targeting of monks and other Buddhist civilians—often through highly brutal means such as burnings and beheadings (between January 2004 and the end of August 2006, 16 decapitations were recorded in the region)³³—in an apparent Taliban-style effort to destroy the societal fabric by fostering religious-communal fear, conflict, and hatred.³⁴

³⁰ Interviews with Thai and Western security and counterterrorism analysts, Bangkok, November 2005 and September 2006.

³¹ It should be noted that Hat Yai has long acted as a magnet for crime groups dealing in drugs, prostitution, and illegal gambling; the possibility that the explosions were connected to syndicate turf wars has, as a result, never been fully discounted. Thai intelligence officials, however, are of the opinion that the attacks were the work of Malay rebels and probably designed to act as a statement of extended regional capability more than a concerted attempt to kill en masse (the bomb at the airport, for instance, was relatively small—about 3 kg—and placed in an area that was not crowded). Interviews with Thai academics and journalists, Pattani, September 2007.

³² Interviews with Thai security officials and academics, Pattani, September 2006. See also “Blasts Hit Airport” (2005); “PM Vows Justice for South” (2005); and “Tighter Security at Airports” (2005).

³³ Interview with a Thai academic, Pattani, September 2006.

³⁴ Interviews with Thai and Western security officials and journalists, Bangkok, November 2005 and April 2006. See also Davis (2006a, p. 21).

A New Front in the Global Jihad?

Several Western and regional commentators have expressed concern that the altered and more acute nature of post-2004 unrest in the Malay-Muslim provinces is indicative of a growing penetration involving radicals with links to (the Indonesia-based) Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and, through this movement, to the broader global jihadist network. In particular, a fear remains that a process of fanatical Arabization, similar to that which has occurred in the outlying areas of the Philippine archipelago, may now be taking place in Thailand's deep south, possibly heralding the emergence of a new tactical center for anti-Western attacks in Southeast Asia.¹

Compounding these fears are reports that money from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan is increasingly being channeled to fund the construction of local Muslim boarding schools, private colleges, and mosques dedicated to the articulation of hard-line Wahhabist and Salafist teachings. A number of prominent clerics alleged to be connected to international Islamist elements have been tied to these institutions, including Ismail Luphi, who is known to have met with convicted 2002 Bali bombers Ali Ghufron and Ali Amrozi bin Haji Nurhasyim.² A 2004 assessment by Thai military intelligence that was leaked to the press suggests that there are at least 50 educational establishments scattered throughout Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat that Islamist forces have decisively penetrated to recruit and train students for holy war (Davis, 2004b, pp. 12–16).

It is certainly reasonable to speculate that at least some outside Islamist entity has attempted to exploit the ongoing unrest in southern Thailand for its own purposes. To be sure, gaining an ideological presence in this type of opportunistic theater is a well-recognized and -established practice of the JI movement and one that was integral to the institution of the mantiqi cell structure that characterized its operational development from the late 1990s onward.

That said, there is (as yet) no concrete evidence to suggest that the region has been transformed into a new beachhead for panregional jihadism. Although there is a definite religious element to many of the attacks that are currently being perpetrated in the three Malay provinces, it is not apparent that this has altered the essential localized and nationalistic aspect of the conflict. At root, the objective remains very much focused on protecting the region's unique

¹ Comments to this effect were repeatedly made during the Terrorism in Southeast Asia conference. Similar sentiments were expressed to the author during interviews with Western security analysts, Bangkok, April and September 2006.

² Interviews with Thai journalists and Western security analysts, November 2005. See also ICG (2005, pp. 21, 32). It should be noted that Luphi, while very much a Wahabi, is a fully committed Malay nationalist. Although he is known to have met with Ghufron and Amrozi, the contact was more the initiative of the latter two individuals, who wanted to establish links with well-known Islamist figures in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Indeed, according to police and intelligence sources in Bangkok, Luphi is very much on the Thai side when it comes to transregional terrorism and does not share (or accredit) the jihadist ideology and objectives of groups, such as JI.

identity and traditional way of life—both from the (perceived) unjust incursions of the Thai-Buddhist state and, just as importantly, the unprecedented influx of cross-border movements of trade, commerce, and people.³ As one Western diplomatic official in Bangkok remarked,

There is absolutely no sign that the south is emerging as a new JI-jihadist hub: Violence and insurgency to the extent that it exists as an organized phenomenon still revolves around the protection of the unique Malay-Muslim way of life and [continues to be] directed toward the attainment of autonomy or independence. Although the militants will adopt the rhetoric of regional jihad as a tool, they do not yet appear to be evolving along the same extremist lines as [Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Rajah Solaiman Movement] terrorists in the southern Philippines.⁴

Moreover, precisely because Thailand's southern border provinces continue to be characterized by an extremely strong sense of Malay-Muslim self-identity, they have a built-in barrier against external penetration. Journalists, academics, security officials, and religious elders universally agree that it would be extremely difficult for a group, such as JI, to come to the region and introduce (much less entrench) its ideology, simply because the indigenous population would reject any sort of proselytism that emphasized that there was a better or purer form of Islam than the one being practiced on the ground.⁵ To cite the words of one senior and well-respected Pattani pondok guru, "Our people may not be educated in the formal sense, but they have an unshakable understanding of their faith."⁶

While it is also true that the scale and sophistication of violence has increased, there is nothing to link this change in tempo to the input of punitive, absolutist JI ideological imperatives. Certainly, there is no indication that the ethos of suicide terrorism—a hallmark of Islamist extremism in Indonesia—has taken hold in the south. Indicative of the general sentiment among local extremists toward martyrdom was the following answer given by one captured militant who was approached by a JI recruiter and asked whether he was prepared to blow himself up in the name of Allah. The youth said, "Yes, but only after you show me how." Local sources universally agree that the mindset of rebels on the ground is such that they want to live to witness the fruits of their struggle.⁷

Far from JI-instigated, most informed commentators tend to interpret the heightened intensity of attacks as merely reflective of learning and development on the part of indigenous rebel groups, possibly combined with the infusion of an increasingly competitive criminal interplay involving gambling syndicates, drug lords, and corrupt members of the security forces and political elite.⁸ Moreover, these same sources are quick to point out that, unlike the situations in Mindanao and Indonesia, there is no established expanse of rebel-held territory in

³ Interviews with Thai commentators, security analysts, and Western diplomats, Bangkok and Pattani, September 2006.

⁴ Interview with senior Western diplomatic official, Bangkok, April 2006.

⁵ Interviews with Thai journalists, security officials, and Muslim academics and religious elders, Pattani, September 2006.

⁶ Interview with Islamic religious elder, Pattani, September 2006. According to this guru, only 5 percent of the Malay community in the south are predisposed to Wahhabist teachings of the sort that JI favors.

⁷ Interviews with police official, journalists, and academics, Pattani, September 2006.

⁸ Observations made during the American Chamber of Commerce Security and Overseas Security Advisory Council committee meeting, Bangkok, April 18, 2006.

Pattani, Yala, or Narathiwat that external extremists could actually use to institute a concerted regimen of international terrorist and doctrinal training.⁹

Perhaps the clearest reason to believe that the southern Thai conflict has not metastasized into a broader jihadist struggle, however, is the fact that there has neither been a migration of violence north (much less to other parts of Southeast Asia), nor have there been directed attacks against foreigners, tourist resort areas (such as Phuket), or overt symbols of U.S. cultural capitalism (such as McDonalds, Starbucks, or the Hard Rock Cafe). Indeed, there appears to have been a deliberate, strategic decision on the part of militants on the ground to explicitly not tie the Malay cause to wider Islamic anti-Western or secular designs for fear that this will both undermine the perceived credibility of their local commitment (and thereby threaten popular support) as well as prompt the international community to crack down on the insurgency as a manifestation of panregional jihadist extremism.¹⁰ In the words of Kasturi Mahkota, the self-defined foreign-affairs spokesperson of PULO, “There is no interest in taking operations to Bangkok or Phuket. We do not need to be on anyone’s terrorist list. Once we are on that list, it is all over” (Davis, 2006b, p. 54).

While there is no indication yet that southern Thailand has metastasized into a new front for global jihad, are there any conditions under which such a transformation could take place? In answering this question, it is useful to consider the issue from the perspective of both local insurgents and outside extremists.

With regard to the former, there are conceivably two situations that might cause the rebels to redefine their objectives from local autonomy to more-grandiose regional or international designs. First would be the influx of a cadre of influential religious radicals who had been Talibanized abroad and who manage to persuade a sufficient number of their brethren at home that the best way to reenergize the southern Thai struggle is to make it more relevant to the Muslim world by specifically linking the conflict to broader Islamist goals. A precedent for such a transformation does exist in the guise of ASG, which, under the combined leadership of Khaddafy Janjalani and Jainal Antel Sali (both now dead),¹¹ between 2004 and 2007 progressively sought to cultivate its image as a bona fide jihadist organization committed to transborder imperatives.¹² It is also worth noting that periodic reports arise of fraternization between Thai Muslims, the Taliban, and remnants of al Qaeda in Pakistan. Assuming that these contacts are helping to foster greater motivation and feeling for Islamic solidarity, it is

⁹ Interviews with Thai and Western security officials, Bangkok, September 2006.

¹⁰ Interviews with security officials, journalists, and Western diplomats, Bangkok, November 2005 and April and September 2006.

¹¹ Khaddafy died after sustaining serious injuries during a firefight with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) on September 4, 2006. Suleiman was killed by a special forces unit on January 16, 2007. Both had carried US\$5 million bounties on their heads (Abuza, 2007b, p. 13; “Philippines,” 2007).

¹² Interviews with police and military intelligence officials, Manila and Singapore, March and April 2005. See also Cruz (2005); and Davis (2005b, pp. 10–11). In fact, indications of a possible ASG ideological reorientation and organizational reordering had begun to emerge as early as mid-2003. On April 26 of that year, Janjalani reputedly issued a statement beginning “In the Name of Allah the Beneficent and Merciful” and going on to emphasize the group’s search for kaadilan (or justice) and called on all Muslims to lay aside their differences and feuds and avenge the oppression, capricious ambitions, and arbitrary claims that the Christian Liberation Army imposed on the southern Philippine Islamic community.

conceivable that these same individuals could act as a conduit for exporting similar sentiments to Bangkok's deep south.¹³

Second would be a change in existing bilateral military cooperation arrangements between Thailand and the United States. If these were to result in increased foreign internal defense aid that was then used to step up Royal Thai Army (RTA) operations in the southern border provinces, they could well prompt rebels on the ground to conceive their enemy in far as well as near terms. Such a cognitive shift would be especially likely to arise should another Krue Se-type of incident take place under conditions of enhanced Thai-U.S. security collaboration. As one religious elder remarked to this author during interviews in Pattani,

There is a general awareness of issues currently going on in the Middle East and concern about U.S. policies in the region. However, these [actions] are not impacting on our unique way of life. But if any outside group [in this context, the United States] tried to come in and threaten our religion, we would rise up against them—naturally.¹⁴

Turning to the latter, any change of the sort discussed here would be liable to resonate with external militant strategic calculations as the potential scope for co-opting local insurgent support would be that much greater. It is unlikely that outside Islamists would pass up an opportunity of this sort. Indeed, Thailand's free-wheeling capitalist economy and willingness to cater to Western decadence make it a logical target for jihadist aggression. Moreover, because there is not a sizable Muslim province outside the southern Malay provinces, far more functional latitude is available for carrying out large-scale assaults without the attendant risk of these affecting wider Islamic interests (something that has negatively affected JI in Indonesia). Put simply, an already amenable local rebel context would provide transregional terrorists with an ideal vehicle for carrying out "justifiable" acts of indiscriminate civilian violence that could then levered to operationalize a new hub for southeast-Asian extremism.

A tactical decision by outsiders to radicalize and gain the upper hand in southern Thailand could also occur in the event that other operational environments in Southeast Asia become less accessible. An intensified legal crackdown on domestic extremist elements in Indonesia could certainly precipitate moves in this direction.¹⁵ And should theater conditions in Mindanao decisively change—either as a result of a peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)¹⁶ or as a by-product of the U.S.-Philippine Balikatan (literally "shoul-

¹³ Rahman (2005). Olivier Roy has done some interesting work on the issue of Islamic versus jihadist identity, focusing in particular on the processes by which second-generation Muslims reject their parents' brand of Islam in favor of more-extreme variants, such as militant Wahhabism. See, for instance, Roy (2004).

¹⁴ Interview with a Malay mufti, Pattani, September 2006.

¹⁵ Although a number of high-profile Islamist extremists have been killed or arrested in Indonesia since 2006—particularly at the hands of the police's elite Detachment 88—conviction rates continue to be a problem, reflecting the general weakness of the country's legal system (interviews with U.S. Department of State officials, Washington, D.C., December 2007).

¹⁶ JI has long sought—and gained—access to MILF camps in Mindanao. A permanent cease-fire between MILF and Manila—at the time of this writing, the basic parameters of a final peace agreement were already in place—would almost certainly curtail any such usage in the future.

der-to-shoulder¹⁷) exercises—groups, such as JI, might very well be forced to reevaluate the relative utility of this region in comparison to such areas as Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat.

Government Response: The Thaksin Administration

It is only since 2004 that the Thai government moved to develop a concerted strategy for dealing with the conflict in the south. Prior to this, the central administration tended to portray unrest in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat largely as an issue of law and order, which—while periodically serious in its manifestation—was one that could be essentially dealt with through the normal recourse to police and judicial channels. Between 2004 and 2006, however, the growing tempo and scale of violence forced Bangkok to confront the reality that it faced an entrenched Islamo-separatist insurgency in the south and that more directed action was needed.¹⁸ The thrust of the ensuing response saw a more conspicuous deployment of the army as well as a growing presence of specialist paramilitary police units and civil-defense militias.

During Thaksin's rule, 24,000 security-force personnel were deployed in the south, 10,000 from the Royal Thai Police (RTP), 10,000 from the RTA's 4th Command (who are rotated on an annual basis), and 4,000 from the newly created 15th Light Infantry Division, which will act as a permanently deployed force for the Malay border provinces.¹⁹ Several specialized squads were also active in the region, including, from the RTP, the Police Special Task Force and the Police Border Patrol (which operationally falls under the army)²⁰ and, from the RTA, detachments from the Special Warfare Command Center and the Santhi Suk Force (as a dedicated psychological-operation unit).²¹ Supplementing these professional combat teams were 5,000 paramilitary rangers (due to expand to 8,000 by 2009), 2,200 full-time village defense units (known as Or Sor),²² 67,400 part-time village defense volunteers (known as Chor Ror Bor),²³ a separate contingent of 9,541 village defense volunteers sponsored by the queen (known as Or Bor Chor), and a 1,400-strong teacher-protection battalion (which is scheduled to be expanded to around 2,840 by 2009).²⁴

¹⁷ These exercises have been ongoing since 2002 and have been aimed primarily at enhancing the AFP's ability to root out traditional ASG strongholds in Basilan and Sulu. For more on U.S. military operations and cooperation in the Philippines, see Feickert (2005, pp. 9–12).

¹⁸ Interviews with Thai security officials and journalists, Bangkok and Pattani, November 2005 and September 2006. See also Davis (2004a, p. 20).

¹⁹ The 15th Light Infantry Division is scheduled to be expanded to around 9,000 personnel by 2009 (interviews with military officials, Pattani and Yala, September 2007).

²⁰ The special task force acts as a rough equivalent to U.S. SWAT teams and is used mostly to quell riots and break sieges. The border patrol is primarily responsible for monitoring Thailand's northern and southern frontiers and is probably among the best trained (and toughest) of the police units currently deployed on an active basis.

²¹ Interviews with military officials, Pattani and Yala, September 2007.

²² Or Sor fall under MoI authority.

²³ Village defense volunteers come under MoI control but are trained by the military.

²⁴ Interviews with military officials and academics, Pattani, September 2007. In addition, there are at least 4,500 community peace-building and development volunteers scattered across the southern border provinces who, since 2006, have come under the authority of (the reinstated) SBPAC.

For the most part, the preferred policy of the Thaksin government was to confront the insurgents with directed force rather than to seek a negotiated political settlement to the conflict. In 2004, the 4th Army established a forward headquarters—complete with five company-sized task forces backed by attack and transport helicopters—to help coordinate military operations throughout the southern border provinces. That same year, martial law was imposed across Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, allowing troops to make arrests without a court warrant and extending their rights of search and preemptive detention (Davis, 2004a, p. 21). Thirty-six hundred members of the RTP also received dedicated training in small-team tactics, long-range reconnaissance, and siege tactics, extending their traditionally community-oriented defensive role to one that has a far more explicitly offensive character.²⁵

Several interrelated factors greatly hindered the effectiveness of the military approach. First, the government's response suffered from an extremely weak intelligence infrastructure. Symptomatic of a wider malaise in the Thai security community, the inability to first gather and then collate information into an actionable product reflects several institutional and personnel problems:

- a complete lack of trust both between and within police and military ranks, with inter-agency rivalries, jurisdictional conflicts, and data stovepiping more the rule than the exception
- the absence of a viable central mechanism to coordinate the intelligence activities of the numerous agencies on the ground
- insufficient training, particularly in terms of analytical techniques (in this sense, the 2002 dissolution of the SBPAC, which did perform a useful analysis role, proved to be extremely costly)
- inadequate linguistic preparation—very few Thai Buddhists posted to the south possessed even a basic (let alone working) knowledge of the Malay dialect (Davis, 2004a, pp. 24–25; ICG, 2005, pp. 34–35; Rahman, 2005).

Second, the hard military track was not accompanied by a softer, more nuanced policy line to win popular support. The Thai government made virtually no effort to address the poverty, underdevelopment, and general alienation that fuels Malay-Muslim discontent, paying scant attention to educational, cultural, and economic initiatives that could build community trust. As one Western diplomat remarked,

Bangkok does not appear to be overwhelmingly concerned with looking at new ways of solving the southern conflict, always defaulting to a position of brute force. [Measures] such as expanding Malay-Muslim education in state-run schools remain at marginal levels while pledges to institute civic [infrastructure] and development projects have yet to translate into meaningful action.²⁶

Third, the security forces engaged in several actions that fundamentally destroyed their perceived legitimacy among the wider civic population. In the opinion of most local com-

²⁵ Interviews with security officials and academics, Pattani, September 2006. See also “Police in Southern Thailand Receive Counter-Insurgency Training” (2006).

²⁶ Interview with a Western diplomatic official, Bangkok, September 2006.

mentators, it was not so much that indigenous Malays actively supported the insurgents or shared their aspiration for an independent state; it was just that they feared and resented the police and military more.²⁷ Two incidents, in particular, are universally recognized as having had an especially serious impact in terms of engendering negative public sentiments. First was the April 2004 storming of one of the most revered Islamic religious sites in Southeast Asia, the Krue Se mosque. The assault left an indelible mark on the local Muslim psyche, impressing a perception of the RTA as little more than an uncaring, outside occupier.²⁸ Second was the highly brutal manner by which the military dealt with a Malay protest in the Tak Bai district of Narathiwat province seven months later. Not only was the crowd fired on with live ammunition, some 1,300 demonstrators were subsequently rounded up and stacked in trucks up to five or six layers deep for transport to an RTA detention camp. By the time the vehicles arrived at their destination, 78 of the demonstrators had died of asphyxiation, and several dozen others had broken or dislocated limbs or were suffering from serious dehydration (ICG, 2005, pp. 27–29; “Death Toll ‘Could be Far Higher,’” 2004; “C-inC’s Olive Branch Anathema to CEO,” 2006).

Finally, there was no strategic framework to guide the RTA and RTP and ensure that their actions were instrumental in providing for the full stabilization in the south. In many ways, Thai authorities remained blind to the evolving nature of the Malay-Muslim insurgency, believing only what they wanted to believe (namely that the current crop of rebels is no different from those of the past) and conceiving of victory not so much in terms of true national reconciliation as merely capping violence by returning to the old status quo.²⁹ This attitude was perhaps best reflected in the following analogy given by one senior official serving in Pattani to a Western diplomat in Bangkok: “I look at the deep south like an old broken-down car; while it can be fixed, it will still be an old car. Right now all we are trying to do is to get the south back to where it was. This is not a fully stable region, but at least [it is] one that is functioning.”³⁰

Assessment

The situation in southern Thailand remains highly worrying. The scope and tempo of violence continue to register at extremely high levels (as do popular perceptions of marginalization and discrimination), and rebels on the ground are demonstrating a proven and more consistent ability to carry out large-scale, coordinated attacks. Although there does not appear to be a concerted overall strategic agenda driving the insurgency, most commentators agree that militants are actively seeking to drive a wedge between Muslims and Buddhists to make the southern border provinces as ungovernable as possible and that their actions in this regard are fundamentally altering the social fabric of the region and eroding prospects for economic and wider civic development.

²⁷ Interviews with Thai and Western security officials, diplomats, and analysts, Pattani and Bangkok, November 2005 and April and September 2006.

²⁸ Interview with a Thai journalist, Pattani, September 2006. See also ICG (2005, pp. 26–27) and AI (2004).

²⁹ Interview with a Thai police official, Pattani, September 2006.

³⁰ Interview with a Western diplomatic official, Bangkok, September 2006.

Compounding matters has been the nature of Bangkok's response to the insurgency, which has essentially attempted to solve the problem at its end rather than at the root. The conflict revolves around perceptions of ethnoreligious alienation, discrimination, and marginalization, and these cannot be defeated by force. The key will be to change the mindset of the communities in the south—to foster peaceful coexistence between Buddhist Thais and Malay Muslims. This will require a far more nuanced and multifaceted civic educational-oriented approach than the central government has traditionally been prepared to enact. Just as important, it is essential that Thailand's other 73 provinces appreciate that assimilation policies dictated by Bangkok will never work in the southern border provinces and accept that the local (Islamic) communities in Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani will accept their integration into the country's wider polity only if they are allowed to do so on their own terms.

Despite its seriousness, there is no indication (yet) that the insurgency is on the verge of morphing into a mass-based conflict. Although Malay Muslims are certainly resentful of the Thai presence, the bulk of the local population does not seem to want an independent state and largely rejects the extreme and arbitrary nature of militant attacks. The one factor that could change this dynamic would be a major crackdown by the security forces that results in large-scale casualties or a resumption of (pro-Buddhist) cultural integrationist policies.

There is also currently little evidence to suggest that southern Thailand is emerging as a new front for transnational jihadism. The focus of local militants remains firmly fixed on specific Malay-Muslim concerns, and they certainly have not shown any interest in extending their ideological or tactical agenda to take on a broader national or regional footing. As noted, this dynamic could change in reaction to the influx of cadres indoctrinated abroad or as a result of U.S.-Thai security cooperation. At the time of this writing, however, neither scenario seemed probable. The indigenous population—including elements that harbor extremist tendencies—jealously guards its own distinct religious self-identity and, thus, tends to be highly suspicious of externally propagated suggestions that there might be a better way. Also, Bangkok has consistently rejected any question of seeking outside assistance to help contain the southern insurgency, insisting that the matter is a purely internal affair that the government's own police and armed forces are perfectly capable of handling.³¹

In the absence of a decisive shift in the thinking of local insurgents, there is little prospect that extremist entities, such as JI, will be able to radicalize Islamic sentiment in the Malay-Muslim border provinces for their own strategic purposes. Moreover, while changing conditions in Indonesia or the Philippines might prompt external militants to try to move independently into the south, the region's unique language, culture, and ethnic makeup would make it extremely difficult for them to establish a concerted operational presence under their own auspices.³²

³¹ Interviews with U.S. government officials, Bangkok, September 2006.

³² Interviews with Thai security analysts and journalists, Pattani, September 2006.

Conclusion: Future Prospects

It remains to be seen how the new political environment that has been brought about in Thailand as a result of the September 2006 army coup and subsequent institution of a civilian-led government under the People's Power Party (PPP) will affect Bangkok's overall response to the insurgency. Encouragingly, General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, who orchestrated the military takeover and who was instrumental in appointing new members of an interim administration, immediately signaled that he was ready to negotiate with rebels in the south. Just as significant, his designated prime minister, Surayud Chulanont, issued a public apology for past hard-line government policies and, in November 2006, specifically affirmed that Islamic law should be given a bigger role in the south and explicitly recognized the need for a long-term strategy that combines three main strands: (1) reconciliation, (2) security (split 50/50 between hard and soft approaches), and (3) dialogue.¹ These various gestures represented an abrupt change in tack from the policies of the previous Thaksin administration, which consistently refused to engage in talks with the insurgents, much less grant them concessions.² At the time of this writing, this broad-based policy mix remained in place under the PPP.

There are several immediate measures that the present government could usefully undertake to fully capitalize on this promising start, including

- working with local Muslim leaders to proactively identify and manage communal-religious tensions and flash points before they erupt
- prioritizing the development of sustainable conflict-resolution mechanisms that are adequately equipped to address both real and perceived Malay-Muslim grievances
- coupling hard COIN approaches with more-explicit components that focus on human-rights training, socioeconomic development, furthering harmonious civil-military relations, and fostering a better understanding of rules of engagement
- spearheading public diplomacy, exchange, and educational efforts to foster greater cultural and ethnic awareness between Muslims and non-Muslims in the south, including members of the security forces.

If vigorously pursued, these types of nuanced, balanced measures could provide a viable foundation for more appropriately identifying, understanding, and rectifying the drivers underpinning the current conflict. However, if the military merely returns to its traditional

¹ Interviews with military officials and Thai academics, Bangkok, Yala, and Pattani, September 2007. See also "Thai Advocates Islamic Law for Far South" (2006).

² Thaksin himself disparagingly referred to rebels in the south as nothing more than "two-bit bandits."

default position of “might is right,” there is a genuine chance that an already aggrieved local population may decide to throw in its lot with the insurgents, abandon its hitherto preference for autonomy, and support outright secessionism (Abuza, 2007a).

Security analysts often talk about a “tipping point” when assessing future prospects for stability and peace. There is a sense that the insurgency in southern Thailand is fast approaching such a juncture and that 2008 will be a critical year for determining its outcome: Either the conflict will be contained, or it will be allowed to simply spiral out of control.

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