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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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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."