Faith and fear:
How religion complicates conflict resolution in Southeast Asia
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At a mid-January gathering of the Foreign Correspondents Club in Thailand, a well known and widely quoted expert on terrorism based in the United States presented his view that the resurgence of a long-running conflict in Southern Thailand was essentially a bid by the forces of global Islamic jihad to foment an Islamic revolution in the heart of Southeast Asia with a view to establishing a caliphate. On the same panel, a researcher from the International Crisis Group who has spent months watching the conflict in the South and made several trips to the field presented the polar opposite view—that in fact the drivers of the conflict were cultural and nationalist. Needless to say, media reports the following day highlighted the so-called terror expert's "jihadist" analysis and down played the more objective, and in this case accurate assessment.

This is just one example of how badly the current preoccupation with the global war on terror, which is focused on Islamic militancy, is complicating efforts to resolve armed conflicts in Southeast Asia. The same can be said of conflicts in the Southern Philippines, where a small splinter group of the Moro nationalists fighting for autonomy from the central government has attracted the attention not just of the media, but also a detachment of US special forces and several million dollars in aid to help track down and suppress what is thought to be a major source of support for Islamic militants operating elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

This paper will examine the ways in which the Islamic factor is having a distracting and distorting effect on conflicts that are quite local in origin, and perhaps prolonging them. It will also consider the role of local religious leaders and the way in which religious teaching and organization has affected these conflicts. The focus is on Southern Thailand, where the central clash is between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The stress is on field-level examples of how the religious factor has complicated efforts to mediate and prevented governments from adopting more enlightened policies.

The resurgence in 2001 of a conflict that dates back (in the modern period) almost sixty years in Southern Thailand coincided almost precisely with the outbreak of the global war on terror after the terrorist attacks on New York and

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Washington DC in September 2001. Initial reports from Thai official sources expressed puzzlement over who was responsible for the violence in the three provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Patani after a lull of almost a decade. It was assumed that the old nationalist group the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) established in 1968 had either disbanded or was too weak to mount a successful insurgent threat. The Thai authorities promoted the idea that lawless elements and a local mafia were behind the violence, and then switched abruptly to the notion that the upsurge in violence was religiously inspired and that the insurgency was based on a network of religious schools or Pondok.

The resurgence of the conflict in Southern Thailand started to hit radar screens well after September 2001, and drew attention from the small group of so-called experts on terrorism. For these terror analysts, the key question was whether links could be established to Jemaah Islamiyya or Al Qaeda. The Thai authorities were ambivalent; whilst eager to promote the idea of destabilizing Islamic militancy to seek support for a security crackdown, the government was not ready to attract more attention and possible international interference by allowing a regional or international link—so Bangkok denied the possibility even though two religious teachers from the South were arrested and charged with plotting terrorist acts in the teeth of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's 2002 visit to Washington DC. The two teachers were later acquitted on the basis of insufficient evidence against them. All the same, the experts pressed their case arguing that although "evidence pointing to JI links" was limited there are "reasons to be suspicious."[1]

Other so-called experts were already willing to put Southern Thailand in the same category as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Chechnya. "Their present tactical objectives seem to be to radicalize the local Muslim population, to promote feelings of Islamic solidarity and Islamic consciousness, to create a mental and emotional divide between the Muslims and the non-Muslims, mainly the Buddhists, and to prepare the ground for a sustained jihad."[2] A further, more nuanced line of argument was that if the insurgency is not contained, then it will develop regional and international linkages and pose a wider threat to security.[3]

The above-cited literature has come to dominate media and intellectual discussion of the conflict even though the research is largely based on very cursory fieldwork and mostly on security and intelligence sources. There are exceptions, like the Brussels based International Crisis Group and Jane's, but their readership is limited. Like so much of the work done by so-called terror experts on what

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1   Zachary Abuza (2005) A Conspiracy of Silence: Who is behind the Escalating Insurgency in Southern Thailand. Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor Vol. 3 Issue 9 May 2005. http://jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2369684

2   B.Raman (2005) Terrorism in Thailand: An Update. South Asia Analysis Group Paper No. 1501 http://saag.org/papers16/paper1501.html

3   Rohan Gunaratna Abarinda Acharaya and Sabrina Chua (2005) Conflict and terrorism in Southern Thailand. Singapore, Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005. ISBN 981-210-444-5

has been dubbed "terrorology", research is based on a closed loop of data that tends to reinforce a single pre-determined view. The researchers base their analysis on what they are told by intelligence and security officials, who almost never reveal their sources, and then the final product is fed back into the system as support for the government's security policy. This would be fine if the only collateral damage was a biased public view of the conflict. But this rather slant-ed view has embedded itself in the security forces because it helps intelligence and military thinkers avoid thinking about more costly solutions to the conflict. Moreover as Michael Connors from La Trobe University writes: "an intensifica-tion of the relationship between intelligence agencies and universities, ensures greater pressures to conform to state policies and agendas and a reluctance to raise issues of 'state terror.'"[4]

Religion mobilizes

The reality on the ground is that religion is a key factor in the chemistry of the Southern Thailand insurgency. But Islam is not the basis of the struggle, which has roots in the ethnic and cultural identity of the Malays and a deep sense of territorial attachment to the notion of a Kingdom of Patani. The term jihad is used to describe a struggle for self-determination by the ethnic Malays of Southern Thailand. What is striking also is that among those sympathetic to the insurgency, aspects of religion as a motive for the armed struggle is often not even raised.

Historically the insurgent movement was launched by an Islamic religious teacher, Haji Sulong, who first led the rebellion against Bangkok's authority after the last member of the royal house of Patani withdrew from political life at the end of the Pacific War. Southern Thailand is a Muslim Malay society in which identity as a Muslim and ethnic Malay is inseparable. Islamic terms like "jihad" and notions of Islamic law and statehood figure in the struggle literature, but do not dominate. In the absence of creditable or charismatic political leaders, reli-gious teachers play a critical role as community leaders. Whilst it may be true that insurgent movements are drawing increasingly on religion as a motivation-al tool to mobilize support, they do not seem to be closely coordinated with any kind of global movement—even though such linkages were attempted in some cases.

In fact, those in contact with members of the insurgency on the ground, across the border in Malaysia and overseas suggest that for the insurgent movement Islam is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, religion has clearly been a suc-cessful motivating factor swelling ranks and boosting motivation. But, it has also served to make younger members of the movement more militant and often dif-ficult to control.

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[4] Michael K. Connors (2006) Review Essay: War on Error and the Southern Fire: How Terrorism Analysts Get it Wrong.

There is alleged to be a division in the ranks of the Southern Thai insurgency, which is generally stratified by age and location. Older members of the movement, whether members of PULO or other defined political groupings, and mostly living overseas, tend to have a more secular nationalist outlook and favour dialogue with the Thai authorities. Younger members of the movement who are more actively involved in insurgent operations relate more closely to their religious teachers or "ustaz" who in the absence of legitimate political leaders play the role as pillars of society. Many of these religious teachers are highly motivated and favour complete independence from Thailand.

This situation has intensified since the Thai army assault on a mosque in April 2004, followed by the death of more than 80 young Malay demonstrators, who were mostly suffocated on their way to detention after demonstrating outside a police station in tak Bai in October 2004. Since late 2004, the security forces have focused their strategy of arrest and questioning on religious schools and the teachers who are so important in Malay society. Insurgent groups and religious leaders allege that dozens off religious teachers have been detained and some have disappeared. Media reports based on official Thai figures suggest as many as 900 people are in detention.

Creating a sub-text of this conflict, therefore, Islam has become an emotive symbol of struggle for the insurgents, even though the conflict is carried out in the name of an ethnic group with clearly defined territorial aims. Religious freedom has never been an issue for the Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand who are given complete freedom of worship. But for the authorities in Bangkok, the religious issue, reinforced by media reports, helps stir fear in the hearts of the rest of the population and dampens criticism of harsh security methods. The result of course is deadlock.

What has not developed, at least so far, is any credible linkage between the insurgents and regional or global jihadist militants. There are frequent assertions that the insurgents have linked up with militants from Pakistan, Indonesia and Bangladesh. But there is scant evidence of this, even if it is a constant worry for the Thai intelligence services. What is clear is that Malay Muslims from Southern Thailand enjoy close links with the Arab Middle East, Pakistan and Indonesia. There are sizable communities of students in Cairo, Damascus, and Khartoum, as well as at the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Some students are funded by religious foundations. According to B.Raman of South Asia Analysis Group "Many of these Thai Muslims have enrolled themselves in the madrasas of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan, which are the hotbed of the activities of the Taliban and the Wahabi-Deobandi organizations of Pakistan. Some of them have also undergone training in the jihadi training centres of the Taliban and Gulbuddin Heckmatyar's Hizbe Islami (HEI) and have been participating in the current Taliban-HEI-Al Qaeda offensive in Afghanistan from sanctuaries in the NWFP and Balochistan."[5] Raman offers no evidence or

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[5] Ibid. B.Raman

proof of this assertion, which doesn't sound implausible and so creates a perception of truth.

There is concern about small numbers of radicals who may have returned to Patani with militant Islamic notions and links. But none has so far managed to gain any traction in organizational terms or popular support. Early in 2005 it was believed that one such group had set up a small Pondok in Songkhla province. There was also said to be a militant group of Patani students operating out of Khartoum University. But again, there is no evidence that they are involved in any of the insurgent activities, which increasingly is seen as falling under the control of older established and secular nationalist groups like PULO and BRN. These organizations have more established roots in older pre-Islamist movement liberation organizations like the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and, in the case of BRN, the Communist Party of Malaya.

Where religion does play a critical role is in helping to create the networks and support for recruiting new members of the insurgency. The military wing of BRN Coordinate, a relatively new insurgent group founded by a prominent political activist in the 1970s and credited by the Thai authorities with the most number of insurgent attacks, was more recently reportedly led by a religious teacher who used a large state-approved school as a recruiting ground. Perhaps this is a logical and effective military tactic. It is clear that overseas student populations are the most effective incubators of separatist sentiment. Organizations like PULO use donations to fund students and create a sense of obligation to the organization, and since many if not most of the students are religious teachers they use the pondoks as a base of operations since they are only qualified to become religious teachers.

It would seem safe to draw conclusions, one about the nature of the insurgency in Southern Thailand and a broader one about how mediators can help preventing religion becoming an obstacle to conflict resolution. First, it would seem that Islam is a strong but nuanced factor in the conflict in Southern Thailand. Religion is more a tactical rather than strategic asset for the insurgents; it helps recruit and motivate members, but does not appear to be an important ideological underpinning or long term objective. For the mediator, it would seem axiomatic that religion points the way to understanding the network that sustains the insurgency. From the great carpeted colonnades of Al Azhar to the palm-fringed compounds of small private pondoks in remote parts of Southern Thailand, the youth of Pattani are being drawn into another period of sustained conflict. They are returning home from overseas imbued with a great passion for their homeland and hopes of independence. In seeking to address this grievance it would be best for mediators to focus on getting the government to find ways of reaching these students, of fulfilling their aspirations and not alienating them because of suspicions that they are connected with militant Islam.