

## **In search of Dar-us-Salaam: Ethno-religious Insurgency in Southern Thailand**

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### **Abstract**

This article will examine an ethno-religious insurgency that aspires to create an Islamic state (Dar-us-Salaam) in Southern Thailand. The increasing Salafism-Wahhabism has spawned the growth of many insurgents and terrorist organizations that consider their violent campaigns as 'jihad' against the forces of unbelief. Salafism-Wahhabism is a fundamentalist movement seeking to purify the Muslim spirit and eradicate all innovations to Islam. It is responsible for the violence that Western countries and Middle Eastern states have been experienced for the past two decades. Furthermore, the Southern Thailand insurgents are mostly members of religious organizations with strong attachments to Salafi-Wahhabi ideology. Salafism-Wahhabism shares an excessive intolerance towards infidels and a strong tendency to label Muslims who disagree with their understandings of Islam as betrayers. It is seen as a key element of re-radicalisation in order to maintain the insurgents' political objective to convert Southern Thailand into an independent Islamic State. Although the creation of an Islamic State has not gained traction nationwide, it can be fitted in the forms of good governance, law enforcement and development programs implemented by the Thai government. This may contribute to the appropriate means to lessen socio-economic disparities, raise political- participation and decrease fear and distrust of security forces among the local population in Southern Thailand. Therefore, the arrangements created by the government need to be built on legitimacy and the awareness of the troubled history of the region from both sides

Keywords: Dar-us-Salaam, Autonomy, Ethno-religious, Salafism-Wahhabism, Jihad

## **Introduction**

An ethno-religious insurgency that aspires to create an Islamic state (Dar-us-Salaam) in Southern Thailand, a region comprising of four provinces: Songkhla, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. The Southern Thailand insurgency erupted in 2004, after armed groups attacked a Thai military depot killing and wounding several soldiers. The insurgency escalated rapidly and led to tough counter-insurgency (COIN) operations by the Thai military. The COIN operations had limited success against the insurgents and led to a further worsening of human security in the region.

After a decade of insurgency-counterinsurgency conflict, which has resulted in over six thousand fatalities, the situation is at a stalemate today. Several scholars and humanitarian organisations have called for an amicable settlement of the conflict through some form of autonomy arrangement for Southern Thailand. However, the autonomy argument seems to have gained traction in the region too with several groups and organisations putting forward different models of autonomy as a way forward from the current situation.

## **Theoretical/Literature Review**

Considerably, most scholars writing about Southern Thailand have tended to view the history of conflict in the region as a function of separate ethno-nationalist identity by a small Malay ethnic minority group politically asserting itself periodically in an assimilationist and highly centralised state.

From this perspective, the distinct Malay ethno-nationalist identity became politicised as a result of the region's forcible and unjust annexation by Siam through the 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty, the region's deep socio-economic backwardness and neglect over the years, the Thai state's repressive and assimilationist policies and the Malay people's strong sense of ethno-religious distinctiveness from the majority Thai-Buddhist population (Teeuw & Wyatt, 1970, pp. 4; Aphornsuvan, 2007, pp. 31-32; Yusuf, 2007, pp. 5; Sugunnasil, 2005, pp. 3; Pasuk & Baker, 1995, pp. 270; Pitsuwan, 1985, pp. 64; Suhrke, 1977, pp. 238; Noi Wong, 2012, pp. 69; McCargo, 2009, pp. 3).

People living outside Western countries are identified with the religion that given them at birth. In this case, religion is implied an integral part of their identity as well as for some convoluted element of their sense of peoplehood (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 50). With few exceptions, in contrast, John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed (2007, pp. 1) describe that the Muslim identity has repeatedly been reproduced by the Western media, which has been

vaguely discussed about Islam and Muslim culture centering on religious extremism and global terrorism.

Jihad has always been a vital part of the Islamic tradition, in recent years some Muslims have maintained that it is a universal religious obligation for all true Muslims to join the jihad to promote a global Islamic revolution (Esposito, 2002, pp. 26-27).

For instance, the ideology of global jihad articulated by Bin Laden and his group serves as a promoter for 30-40 Asian, Middle Eastern and African jihad groups and for several cells in Western countries (Gunaratna, 2005, pp. 2). The term of jihad does not mean 'holy war' as it has been explained by non-Muslims. Jihad means striving and not necessarily war (Ferguson, 1977, pp. 130). Originally, jihad has three meanings: a battle against the wicked within oneself (personal jihad), a struggle against evils within Muslim community (ummaic jihad) and a combat in defence of the belief and the community against tyrants oppressing Muslims within a nation (Husain, 1995, pp. 37).

Jihad ideology can effectively lie dormant into three positions: the personal jihad, ummaic jihad and martial jihad. The personal jihad or jihad-i-akbar, is the most important jihad for Muslims. It represents the struggle necessary for Muslims to control their instincts: greed, racism, jealousy, revenge, hypocrisy, hedonism, lying, cheating and calumny. These must each be driven from the soul of believer by waging jihad-i-akbar, combating against the lower nature and leading a principled life (Gerges, 2009, pp. 5). Nevertheless, ummaic jihad is defined as non-violent struggle for freedom, justice and truth within the Dar-us-Salaam.

Lastly, martial jihad is defined as jihad-i-asghar and it means a battle against aggressors who are not practicing Islam. Martial jihad is not considered as the sixth pillar of Islam and it should be promoted in the name of Allah only, never for self-aggrandizement. It should be used to protect the integrity of Islam and to defend the Muslim community against unbelievers.

Hence, the use of force in martial jihad has to be authorized and conducted only by the umma or in the name of the umma (Husain, 1995, pp. 38). Muslim cannot wage martial jihad on an unbeliever without a permission of the umma. Islam does not allow waging on martial jihad of Muslim against Muslim, but only non-violent ummaic jihad is allowed applying within the Muslim community against practicing Muslims when the highest jihad is a word of justice addressed to an unjust ruler. Thus, in ummaic jihad there is no mention of war (Husain, 1995, pp. 38).

Insurgents in Southern Thailand are identified as members of religious organisations with strong attachment to Salafi-Wahhabi ideology, which is led by Al Qaeda and expanded in Southeast Asia through Jemaah Islamiyah's will to establish global Islamic states (Byman, 1998, pp. 149; Helbardt et al., 2013, pp. 19; Rahimmula, 2003, pp. 105-107; Smith, 2005, pp. 23-24; Chalk, 2008, pp. 7; Sugunnasil, 2007, pp. 125; Abuza, 2003, pp. 21). The tiny radical Muslim groups in Southern Thailand, the WaeKaRach (WKR) and the GuraganMujiheddin Islam Pattani, were attached in an enlarged Jemaah Islamiyah called the RabitatulMujiheddin.

The head of the WRK was sent to training in Afghanistan and the group is assumed to earn 10 million baht or roughly US\$ 225,000 per year engaged in killings (Abuza, 2003, pp. 21). A few Indonesian militia (Laskar) groups have been training for the insurgents from the Southern Thailand and have shown their interest in participating in jihad in Southern Thailand (Gunaratna and Acharya, 2012, pp. 162).

Malay-Muslim insurgents found it relatively easy to procure weapons, funding and diplomatic and ideological support from like-minded groups in Southern Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. The Malay-Muslims living in southernmost provinces may sympathise with the insurgents not in religion, but in sharing the Malay culture that characterizes the southern region (HRW, 2010, pp. 20).

In case of BRN-Coordinate and Pulo, wives and sisters of separatists collected money from and to Malaysia. The jungle was used as a safe haven for militants as their relatives supplied medicine or food for them by coming down from the mountains to recruit other villagers to join the militant action (Helbardt et al., 2013, pp. 37). Apart from the political parties, the Malay villagers especially in Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis and Trengganu have always been strong supporters of the Patani struggle and have provided sanctuaries for the Malay Muslim separatists. At the same time, a significant number of Patani Muslims have migrated to the northern states of Malaysia, while others sought refuge in Saudi Arabia.

The tactics applied by some of the separatists in Southern Thailand have been similar to those employed by terrorists in Bangladesh. For example, the hit-and-run techniques and small-scale bomb attacks of the insurgents operating in the south are widely used since the restart of the insurgency in 2004. This technique has been claimed as the same tactic employed by the Bangladeshi-based Muslim terrorist group called Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami(HUJI) (Liow, 2004, pp. 532).

The Salafi-Wahhabi brand of Islamic ideology was applied by thousands of the Malay-Muslims in southernmost provinces who have graduated in religious studies in South Asia,

Southeast Asia and the Middle East (Yusuf, 2007, pp. 321). Furthermore, Zachary Abuza (2009, pp. 49) also points out that Hambali has been approached Thailand's prominent Salafi-Wahhabi cleric, Ismail LutfiJapagiya, to recruit insurgents for the terrorism campaigns.

For instance, Berjihad di Pattani was considered as the religious elements influencing by the Salafism-Wahhabism ideology. Berjihad di Pattani is a Jawi manuscript, which was found on the bodies of many of the dead separatists in Krisek mosque. The purpose of Berjihad is to mobilize the Malay-Muslim youth and men to support the concept of independence and Islamic state of Pattani in order to complete the purpose of the Malay-Muslim insurgents in Southern Thailand, which is a territorialisation of Islam in the local context (Liow, 2006, pp. 100-103).

The durability and longevity of the Southern Thailand insurgency resulted mainly from the insurgents' strong commitment to jihad, which had been inspired them to establish the Islamic state (Byman, 1998, pp. 149; Helbardt et al., 2013, pp. 19; Rahimmula, 2003, pp. 105-107; Smith, 2005, pp. 23-24; Helbardt, 2013, pp. 27-37; Chalk, 2008, pp. 7; Che Man, 1990, pp. 158-159; Abuza, 2003, pp. 21). The central reason of creating Islamic state and government is to assure the unity of Islamic community, so as to liberate the Islamic homeland from occupation and suppression by the colonialists (Moaddel&talattof, 2000, pp. 256-257). The aim of the state is not to enforce Islamic teachings on society, but rather to create the common conditions that will simplify the realization of the human mission. The purpose of maintaining the ummah or Islamic society, is to flourish the Islamic character and functionally increase the moral and spiritual to Muslims living in that community (Safi, 1991, pp.226-228). As a result of this renewal of pan-Islamism, attention has revived in the last few decades in the form of the Islamic State. The establishment of Islamic state massively presupposes the emergence of a society committed to Islamic elements and norms. As such, the Malay-Muslim militants had been proposed political autonomy to Thai state.

Nevertheless, scholars of ethnic conflict resolution often argue that territorial autonomy arrangements may offer a way out of intractable ethnic disputes by reconciling two seemingly paradoxical objectives: the desire of the state to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty and the aspiration of an ethnic minority for national self-determination (Ganguly, 2012).

But the right of ethnic nations to self-determination may also imply the right to political separation and independence from an oppressor state (Hannum, 2011). The possible solution has been proposed in the form of autonomy as a result of autonomy had never been

considered by the Thai government as an appropriate solution fitted in the context of Southern Thailand (McCargo, 2012, pp. 131).As constitution allows Malays in Southern Thailand to practice Islam and have the right to vote or participate in Thailand's political life.

Conversely, this right is not only vehemently denied under the Thai constitution, but the constitution may even reject the right of territorial autonomy since it considers Thailand to be the exclusive homeland of the Thai nation, a majority of whose population follows Buddhism as their religious faith.Under the Thai constitution, the state regards Malay-Muslims not as a distinct ethno-national group, but rather as Thais who happen to be Muslims (Satha-Anand, 2012, pp. 148).Accordingly, ChaiwatSatha-Anand (2009, pp. 2012) argues that non-territorial autonomy could be an option for conflict resolution in Southern Thailand; however, neither the Thai government nor the insurgents share a common understanding of what non-territorial power sharing arrangements may mean.

Up to a certain point, any movement towards secession will therefore legitimise the use of excessive force by the Thai military in Southern Thailand. This will inevitably result in massive civilian fatality and widespread destruction of the region and its fragile ecosystem and environment. Secession therefore is improbable to gain support from the international community as a possible solution to the Southern Thailand conflict (Taras&Ganguly, 2010, pp. 52).

## **Discussion**

Thai government and military officials frequently understand that the Malay-Muslim insurgents directly involved in a political process that seeks to found an independence or Islamic state (Dar-us-salaam) due to several factors. Firstly, in Southeast Asia, the unity of state, social stability and ethnic diversity have been challenged regarding with the fact that all nations have had to cope with their period of independence.

Thailand has never been colonized, however, it has had vastly difficulty in dealing with ethnic insurgency of its southern region. Thailand became constitutional monarchy on 24 June 1932 and is ruled by an elected government. None of the Thai constitutions declared Buddhism as being the official religion, but in terms of the relation between Buddhism and democracy, Thai Buddhist democracy has stressed on Buddhist concepts of unity and affection (Kobkua, 2003, pp. 9-15).

The constitution is evidently written that Thailand is a unitary state and cannot be divided. As a result, the concept of autonomy, secession, self-determination and independence could

not be succeeded. Indeed, Thai government acknowledges that the concept of independence is similar to the notion of Islamic state.

I therefore argue that under the current Thai constitution, there is no space to even consider a territorially demarcated 'ethnic homeland' for the Malay-Muslims that could be given a measure of autonomy and self-rule, as has been claimed by several scholars and vocalised by various groups in the region as well. The right of ethnic nations to self-determination may also imply the right to political separation and independence from an oppressor state. This right is not only vehemently denied under the Thai constitution, but the constitution may even deny the right of territorial autonomy since it ponders Thailand to be the exclusive homeland of the Thai nation, a majority of whose population follows Buddhism as their religious faith.

I also make the point that those alternative options to autonomy such as secession and military solution, are undesirable and also unlikely to work in Southern Thailand. Although secession in Southern Thailand may help rectify a historical 'wrong' and satisfy a majority of the Malay-Muslims by allowing them to exercise their right of national self-determination, it is unlikely to be accepted by the Thai-Buddhist majority (Abuza, 2007).

Any movement towards secession will therefore legitimise the use of excessive force by the Thai military in Southern Thailand. This will inevitably result in massive civilian fatality and widespread destruction of the region and its fragile ecosystem and environment. Secession therefore is unlikely to gain support from the international community as a possible solution to the Southern Thailand conflict (Taras and Ganguly, 2010, pp. 52).

I confidently see a military solution imposed by the Thai state is also unrealistic and undesirable. It will have little support from the Thai population and may not be even backed completely by the Thai military. It will lead to massive civilian casualties and human rights violations in Southern Thailand, which would severely damage Thailand's reputation and international standing with negative consequences.

I further propose that respecting the freedoms of opinion, belief and association of individual is the best way in which the collective freedoms of ethnic or religious groups can be protected. Addressing cultural diversity of Malay Muslims in the Southern Thailand increases public recognition of the value of minority group, but it requires different forms.

Firstly, the values of cultural diversity have to be recognised in Public policy and National agenda. The declarations can be powerful if they enter into the institutional symbolism of the state such as flags, public holidays, anthems and the form of special one-off government

announcements. Public recognition of the Malay Muslims culture may involve adjustment to the law. The local governance mechanisms should also be sensitive to religious and cultural norms in order to provide space for the background differences among people (Jitpiromsri&McCargo, 2008, pp. 414). One common form of cultural recognition is exclusion from legal obligation; members of the society or community may be exempt from a law that applies to everyone in that society or community.

While the other form of religious recognition is exemption from religious actors as religious leaders have religious legitimacy to guidance their followers; the capability of religious opinion leaders is to foster public policy which is influenced by historical relations of religion and state as well as by current situation such as globalization, demographic change, level of religiosity in the society and relations among religious communities. A stronger form of minority recognition in Southern Thailand can be viewed as compensation for certain kinds of disadvantage such as Southern Thai people from Malay Muslim backgrounds are entitled to special university scholarships studying Islamic studies in Middle East countries due to the fact that the Malay Muslims have historically received fewer such opportunities than other Thai citizens.

Additionally, in order to win the hearts and minds of the local people in Southern Thailand, the Thai government must take steps to lessen social disparity, increase local political participation and decrease the fear and distrust of the security forces in the minds of the people. Good governance, law enforcement and development programs implemented by the Thai government are appropriate means to lessen socio-economic disparities, raise political participation and decrease fear and distrust of security forces among the local population in Southern Thailand. This may eventually undercut local support and sympathy for the insurgency and help bring peace to a troubled region.

The arrangements created by the government need to be built on legitimacy and the awareness of the troubled history of the region from both sides. According to the Qur'an, a concept of ummah or community is somewhat strong among Muslims (Satha-Anand, 1990, pp. 15); hence, the government should create community-organizing programs in order to build strong relationships between state officials and the Malay-Muslim community and to generate reconciliation among Thai-Buddhist and the Malay-Muslim communities (Sarosi&Sombatpoonsiri, 2012, pp. 403).

The government should reform the education system and fast-track development programs in the Deep South in an effort to secularise the educational curriculum and eradicate poverty



and create employment opportunities for the youth. Increasing employment opportunities for the Malay-Muslims within the Thai bureaucracy should be a particular priority. A special scheme to provide subsidy (in the form of small loans and cash grants and land) to farmers and rubber plantation workers could help improve the economic climate of the region.

Secondly, the idea of nationalism also extended to ethnic minorities in Thailand who wishes to become Thai and it can be perceived as a threat to dramatically decrease the Malay-Muslim identity. This leads to the extremely rise of pan-Islamism so as to create the Islamic state worldwide, is significantly pondered by the Thai state as one of the crucial factors, causing the restart of Southern Thailand insurgency in 2004.

The nationalism has been applied by the Thai government in relation to welcomed ethnic minorities in Thailand who wishes to become Thai, is viewed as a threat to their Malay-Muslim identity. This has challenged the Malay-Muslims to mobilize groups of them in order to voice their political suppression. As such, creating Islamic state is flawlessly option to preserve the Malay-Muslim identity. Islamic state has no division between private and public, the state and society, which are understood as the main foundation of nation-state from Western perspective.

The proposal on Islamic state by the separatists in Southern Thailand is not workable in the context of Thailand. As a result of the ideas of human rights and citizenship are more related to Islamic principles than with claims of Islamic state to enforce Shari'a, is based on European concepts of state and law and not on Shari'a or the Islamic tradition. It is important to note that the ruling elites contribute such claims to legitimize their control of the state in the name of Islam in order to preserve their interest and this does not mean that such claims are correct (An-na'im, 2008, pp. 1). My call for the state and not society to be secular is intended to enhance and promote genuine religious observance and to foster and regulate the role of Islam in the public life of the Malay-Muslims in Southern Thailand.

Thirdly, the deep resentment that the Malays felt towards the Thai state gave rise to strong feelings of nationalist movements, which were often spearheaded by religious leaders and scholars. The appearance of the first religious leader who turned to the leader of the movement, Haji Sulong, is significantly encouraged the Malay-Muslim in southernmost provinces to advance the revival of Malay nationalist movement to urge for political autonomy (Liow, 2006, pp. 28). The second religious leader in the Deep South has been targeted is Ismail LutfiJapagiya; however, there is no evidence insisting that he has been involved in the insurgency in Southern Thailand.

The link between global jihadi ideology and the Malay-Muslim separatists in the Deep South has been fittingly in order to further explain the central reason behind the restart of the insurgency in 2004. Unlike the past movements, which were fired by sentiments of nationalism, socio-economic deprivation and historical wrongs (Srisompob&Panyasak, 2006, pp. 104), the 2004 insurgency was fired by radical Islamic ideology and strong sentiments for 'jihad' especially among the Malay youth.

The global jihadi ideology itself does not need to be acknowledged as Salafi-Wahhabi ideology because it was constructed by the local elites so as to mobilize the Malay-Muslim separatists to commit an act of terrorism in the name of Islam. As I hardly find rich definition of Salafism-Wahhabism has thus far been articulated. Salafism-Wahhabism is seen as more radical than other Islamists. In contrast, it is very complicated to operationalize the notion of extremism enough to be called a Salafi-Wahhabi. (Meijer, 2009).

For instance, the Jawi manuscript titled *Berjihad di Pattani*, which was found on the bodies of numerous of dead separatists in Krisek mosque, after Thai military officers were authorized to harsh counter-insurgency to the militants at Krisek mosque in Pattani province on April 27<sup>th</sup> 2004 (Liow, 2006). *Berjihad di Pattani* systematically calls for a holy war of liberation for the Kingdom of Patani from Thai state. The remarkable concept of *Berjihad* focuses on the purpose to which Islamic idioms are directed; mobilizing the Malay-Muslim population to join the separatist groups. *Berjihad* is implied the sector of global jihadi struggle that brainwash a number of militants in Southern Thailand.

Hence, I assuredly maintain my argument that *Berjihad di Pattani* is the only reliable source that can be best explain the upsurge on the link between the global jihadi perspective and the streams of the Malay-Muslim's nationalist movement of Southern Thailand in order to create the Islamic state or Dar-us-Salaam in Southern Thailand (Albritton, 2005, pp. 168; Joll, 2010, pp. 268; Sugunnasil, 2006; 125; Chua, 2004, pp. 2; Connors, 2006, pp. 151).

### **Research Approaches, Methods and Techniques**

A contextual research will be used in this study.

Pamela Baxter and Susan Jack (2008, pp. 1) have defined qualitative case study as: "an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. This ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood."

## **Data analysis**

The data analysis of the specific type of qualitative research strategy as case study involves a detailed description of the setting or individual. In order to gain a better understanding on the unrest in Southern Thailand, research setting, political system, statistics of the unrest and the Malay-Muslims minority will be looked up and interpreted at the stage of data analysis (Creswell, 2013, pp. 191).

## **Research setting, political system, statistics of the unrest and the Malay-Muslims minority**

The religious base of Thai political culture allows free space for various religious groups to practice in Thailand (Yusuf, 2008, pp. x). Thailand has embarked upon a political system in which the army and bureaucratic forces determine the role and the mode of participation of the non-bureaucratic forces (Chai-Anan, 2002, pp. 136).

However, Thailand has allowed the Malay-Muslims minority to choose their own communal development. The Malay-Muslims speak the Malay language in the provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat of the Deep South, but in Songkla, the integrated Malay-Muslims speak the Thai language (Yusuf, 2007, pp. 323). The Malay-Muslims' everyday life is dominated by local culture and customs, which intermingle with the values and practices of Islam.

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