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Over-reading the Islamist factor in Thailand's southern troubles

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THE spectre of global Jihad and the infiltration of international terrorist groups in southern Thailand have become more ominous after a car bomb exploded in the border town of Sungei Golok on 17 February 2005, killing six and injured more than 40 people.

Following the American campaign in Afghanistan and the subsequent warnings that Southeast Asia had become the “second front” in the war on terror in early 2002, terrorism experts and security analysts have assiduously attempted to trace the regional reach of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the Southeast Asian branch of Al Qaeda. To that end, the Sungei Golok attack has been seen in some quarters as suggesting an international terrorist involvement in the southern Thai conflict.

These are assumptions that are borne out of a legitimate security concern. The conflict in southern Thailand, driven by Pattani separatism and Malay-Muslim nationalism, has long been a matter of concern for Thai policy makers. Today, this situation threatens to be further complicated by the possible influx of radical Islamist Jihadi ideology. This concern should not be dismissed out of hand. However, it is precisely because of the seriousness and magnitude of such claims, along with the severity of their policy ramifications, that they have to be carefully scrutinised. While we have to be alert to the possible “Islamisation” of the conflict in southern Thailand, we should also be careful not to see the hand of radical Islam behind each and every attack that is occurring in Thailand's troubled southern provinces.

No doubt, the war on terror and Washington's foreign policies towards the Muslim world can lead to an ideological affiliation between ethno-nationalist Muslim resistance groups, such as those operating in southern Thailand, and transnational terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda and JI. However, this has so far not translated into active collaboration between the two. Indeed, on available evidence, it is not likely that foreign elements are presently actively involved in southern Thai violence. For instance, the perpetrators of violence in southern Thailand have yet to employ suicide-bombing tactics, which have been the preferred *modus operandi* for international Jihadist groups. There also does not appear to be any hurry on the part of the militants to claim “ownership” of violence. This stands in stark contrast to the “publicity drive” that tends to follow acts of global Jihadi terrorism today for which militants from the Middle East to Indonesia are quick to claim responsibility. Finally, despite the global Jihadi objective of targeting Western interests and the “Great Satan”, not a single Westerner has been harmed, or a Western interest targeted, in over 900 attacks in southern Thailand since 4 January 2004.

No doubt, JI operations chief Hambali was caught by Thai and American security forces in Ayutthaya on 11 August 2003 and was known to have operated out of Thailand previously. Yet intelligence sources have also reported that he “was careful to avoid the majority Muslim Thai south and Muslim communities generally”, and that at the time of his arrest “it was

doubtful that . . . Hambali had either the support personnel or the explosives to mount any major attack in Thailand”.

Some analysts and terrorism experts have also suggested that after the 28 April 2004 attacks in Pattani, Songkla, and Yala which left more than 100 militants dead, there were four unclaimed bodies of foreigners who were said to be either Malaysian, Indonesian, Bangladeshi, and/or Cambodian. However, no personal or travel documents have been found on these bodies that would indicate their nationality. In fact, it is equally likely that some, if not all, of these unclaimed bodies were those of orphans who were mobilised and paid to perpetrate acts of violence. This is certainly the opinion of Thai military intelligence sources as well as leaders of the Muslim community in the south.

The possible influx of radical Islamist ideology, which is also a legitimate concern of the policy-makers, has made it necessary for the authorities to closely monitor the teaching and preaching of such ideology in schools and mosques throughout the south. However, one should also be careful not to exaggerate the extent to which such ideology has taken root, or developed a following. This is particularly so in the case of Thailand, where the Muslim community is defined by great diversity, and where different persuasions exist and respond differently to radical Jihadi ideology. A case in point was the uncovering of the militant document *Berjihad di Pattani* (The Fight for the Liberation of Pattani) by Thai security forces after the wave of attacks on 28 April.

According to sources, the manual suggested that the Shafii school of thought of the insurgents is increasingly coming under the influence of the Salafi Jihadi doctrine. One should note however, that there were numerous references in the document to notions of invincibility and the use of mysticism during religious conflict. Such practices are usually associated with Sufism and are not widely accepted by the Shafii school within Sunni Islam, including by many so-called “Salafi” movements. Of course, this alone might not prevent collaboration between the different groups, particularly if they share similar goals such as, say, destabilising the southern provinces in order to discredit the Bangkok government. Yet it is precisely this possibility for local collaboration that puts a question mark over the notion that the southern conflict was being exacerbated by the import of radical ideology.

To be sure, the most recent Sungei Golok attack marked an escalation of violence as it was obviously aimed at a larger group of civilian victims. While the imprint of Islamic radicalism and foreign Jihadi involvement in southern Thailand remains faint, the possibility, however remote at this stage, that the southern conflict might be further “radicalised” and “internationalised” by the involvement of external players cannot be dismissed altogether. Already, numerous known international Jihadi websites have begun to show images of the 25 October 2004 incident at Tak Bai, where more than 70 Muslim protestors died of suffocation during Ramadhan while being transported to an army camp.

Yet in the quest to establish who the radicals are and to understand what exactly they believe in and why, we need to recognise that Islam in Thailand is not homogeneous either in belief or praxis; it is a multi-faceted phenomenon that is pulling the Muslim population, particularly the Malay-Muslims in the south, in different directions. What we certainly must not do however is to caricature Islam in southern Thailand as if all aspects of Muslim identity and assertiveness are the cause of “radicalism” that will invariably lead to “Jihadism” -- and hence need to be curtailed.

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