Muslim Identity, Local Networks, and Transnational Islam in Thailand’s Southern Border Provinces

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Abstract

This paper discusses the nature of local permutations of transnational Muslim networks in Thailand’s southern Muslim-majority provinces and assesses their impact on creed, custom, and conflict in the region. More specifically, the paper interrogates the agenda and methods of idea and norm-propagation on the part of these agents and networks, and their evolving role, as well as the structures and conduits through which they operate and mobilize. In so doing, it finds a tremendously fluid and dynamic terrain in southern Thailand, where narratives, representations, and expressions of Islamic doctrine, legitimacy, and authority, are increasingly heavily contested within the Muslim community as a whole. In addition, the paper investigates the transnational dimensions of on-going violence in the southern provinces. Here, it argues that there is little by way of substantive evidence of any sustained penetration of the conflict in southern Thailand by external actors. No doubt, many have attempted to draw conclusions to the contrary, but their evidence and arguments, not to mention analytical methodology, are tenuous at best.

Introduction

The study of faith-based networks has generated a rich literature on the interaction between global and local identities and consciousness.¹

Much of the work in this field, however, has focused on transnational flows as they relate to migration, diaspora consciousness, and issues of cultural assimilation in relation to the movement of Muslims across borders, mostly into non-Muslim contexts. These thematic referents are important but by no means exhaustive, for significantly less attention has been given to the study of the interaction between global Islamic influences and prevailing indigenous Muslim culture and identity. The emergence of globally-connected local agents, affiliates, and networks, and their impact in shaping (and reshaping) Muslim creed, custom, and ultimately, identity, in Thailand’s Muslim-dominated southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, serves as an illuminating case in point.

In a major study on shifting perceptions and the role of Islam in Muslim minority communities, Olivier Roy has postulated that the current turmoil they face is a result of the physical and psychological ‘de-territorialization’ of Islam, where believers are confronted with an inevitable disengagement of religious creed and custom. The situation in Thailand’s southern provinces is, however, markedly different. There, the point of departure lies in the fact that, rather than a ‘de-territorialization’, its Muslim population is in fact witnessing a re-territorialization of Islam, as expressed in how the influence of transnational Islamic movements have inspired the renegotiation and reconfiguration of creed and custom, the result of which is not so much a compromise as it is a recasting of the primacy of Islam as an identity marker. This paper will demonstrate how transnational Islam, here taken to mean transnational institutions and the debates they generate and points of reference they introduce rather than demographic movements and migratory trends, has inspired the creation of popular, influential local affiliate networks which imbibe,
localize, and transmit foreign expressions of faith and piety, and in so doing complicate the terrain of ‘local’ and ‘folk’ Islam that has held sway in the region for centuries. In order to achieve this, the paper is framed in the following manner. First, it provides new empirical evidence and insights into major Islamic networks active in Thailand that have hitherto escaped scholarly interrogation. Second, it maps the ideational boundary-crossings facilitated by a diverse range of transnational Islamic movements and their local vehicles of mobilization that have been active perpetuating ideas and practicing forms of religious expression erstwhile foreign to Thailand’s Muslim-dominated southern provinces. Third, the paper offers insights into the relationship between these transnational religious forces and ‘local Islam’ in southern Thailand against the backdrop of Islamization, the globalization of ideas, and the concomitant diffusion of religious authority, in order to ascertain the extent to which external religious influences and what they represent have come to interact with, negotiate, and contest local boundaries.

The empirical cases mapped out and analysed consist of local affiliates of three influential transnational Muslim networks: Ikhwanul (i.e. movements that model themselves on the Ikhwanul Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) framework of social mobilization and activism), Jama’ah Tabligh, and broadly, what can be classified as a ‘Salafi-Reformist’ network. In line with the theme of transnational


4 The Ikhwanul Muslimin or Egyptian Brotherhood was founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, and is seen as one of the first modern institutions that engage in transnational Islamic activism with chapters in several Muslim countries.

5 Jama’ah Tabligh and Salafi-Reformist networks are further discussed in separate sections below.
Muslim activism, the paper will also consider the extent to which transnational actors and forces have influenced or shaped the ongoing violence in the southern provinces.

Concomitantly, the paper presents the following arguments. First, it contends that the past two decades have witnessed a proliferation of new sources of religious authority and legitimacy in Muslim Thailand, along with new interpretations of religious ideas and norms about how to be a ‘good Muslim’, particularly in the southern provinces. Moreover, these processes of Islamization, underpinned by local and transnational economies, are taking the form of new Islamic groupings and alignments that not only serve religious functions but are also transforming social and cultural mores and institutions. As a consequence of this phenomenon, the authority of the traditional religious monopoly in southern Thailand is being negotiated and contested, even as conceptions of religious thought and practice are being re-shaped by a confluence of modern and transnational forces. At the same time, we need to take cognizance of the fact that these new ideas are in many respects also being resisted and localized by commissars and adherents of ‘local’ Islam, thereby adding to the dynamism of the socio-religious terrain. Finally, given widespread interest in the ongoing conflict in the Muslim-majority southern border provinces, it is imperative for this paper to assert that there is as yet no evidence that these or any other major transnational Muslim networks are involved, either directly or otherwise, in the current violence and militancy.

**Islamization, transnationalism, and contexts of ‘being’ Muslim in southern Thailand**

The global religious space that Muslims in Thailand inhabit, not just through the abstract notion of the ummah (universal brotherhood of believers) but more importantly through the movement and networks of Muslims over many centuries, has always played a critical role in the shaping of Islamic identity, thought, and practice in the country. Nevertheless, with the exception of the work of Horstmann and Braam, the pertinence of external influences on expressions and articulations of Islamic faith and creed in Thailand has not been the subject of detailed scholarly scrutiny. While the impact of transnational

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influences is important to our appreciation of the religio-cultural terrain of Thailand, what is more urgent is an understanding of their indigenous expressions that have come about as a consequence of their activism and expansion. In other words, what this paper is interested in is local actors, agents, and networks that have been formed, and that draw on the ideologies, activities, and economies of these transnational movements. Prior to that, however, it is perhaps apropos at this juncture to consider the contours of creed and custom that have until recent times held sway and, for the most part, defined Muslim identity in southern Thailand, and upon which the much-vaunted reputation of the region as an Islamic intellectual hub in the Malay world prior to the twentieth century was established.

In many ways, Thailand stands at the interstices of Islam’s encounters with the Far East. Though the advent of Islam in the country can be traced back as early as the eighth century, it was during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the religion flourished as Persian traders brought shi’a Islam to Bangkok and the plains. In the mid-nineteenth century, ethnic Yunnanese (Haw) Chinese Muslims, fleeing persecution by the Qing Dynasty, settled in Northern Thailand’s Chiang Mai region via the mountains of the Golden Triangle and added to the kaleidoscope of Islam in the country. In the south, Islam began commanding strong adherence as the kingdom of Patani gravitated into the orbit of the Malay world (Dunia Melayu) and underwent an Islamization process together with the Malay sultanates of Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu. Owing to these distinct geographical roots of penetration, it is not surprising to find that notwithstanding some degree of overlap, the phenomenon of Islamization in southern Thailand has in many ways taken on different forms of expression compared with other regions of the country. Amidst this kaleidoscopic character of Islam in Thailand it has been in the southern border provinces where the emergence and development of the religion has been most profound.

The kingdom of Patani—which had a geographical footprint that essentially covered present-day Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and parts of Songkhla—was a much-heralded intellectual centre of Islam in

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Southeast Asia, a title that it shared (and in some ways was in competition) with Melaka and Aceh. In its heyday during the nineteenth century, the kingdom produced several notable Islamic scholars such as Wan Ahmad al-Fatani and Daud bin Abdullah al-Fatani whose contribution to Patani’s growing reputation as a centre of Islamic learning in the Nusantara (Malay archipelago) included not only production of a vast Islamic studies literature, but also the creation of a massive enterprise that translated, published, and disseminated major Islamic scholarship from Arabic to Jawi. Significantly, these luminaries also made their mark as recognized scholars in the Arabian Peninsula, where they taught in the popular ‘Ulama Jawi’ halqah (study circles) in Masjid Haram as prominent Malay shafi’i (one of the four schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence) scholars. It was by way of their labours that these scholars effectively contributed to the advent of a ‘golden age’ in transnational Islamic networking built on education and religious renewal between the Arab-Muslim and Malay-Muslim worlds.8 The rise to prominence of Patani’s great Islamic scholars in the scholastic circles of the Arabian Peninsula was further indicative of the fact that the process of Islamization was not exclusively unidirectional—that is to say, emanating from suppliers located at the temporal heart of the Islamic world to consumers in Southeast Asia—but that it moved in the other direction as well.

The prevalence of the shafi’i school of jurisprudence propounded by these local Islamic thinkers, combined with Patani’s susceptibility to strong sufi influences by virtue of being a geographical outpost on the fringes of the Malay-Islamic archipelago, underscored the gradual evolution of a syncretic form of Islamic practice that anthropologists have variously termed ‘local Islam’ or ‘folk Islam’. For the most part, this genre of a localized Islam has been characterized by a combination of sufi mysticism, ritualism, and shafi’i legal thought that, among other things, allowed for the relatively smooth accommodation of local adat (laws and customs) into religious practice. A particular feature of this brand of Islam was its abidance to a hierarchical social order. This was captured most profoundly in the nature of traditional religious education, where the ubiquitous pondok (literally, ‘hut’, referring to the traditional rural Islamic schools scattered across

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the Malay archipelago) in fact served as a religio-cultural centre located at the heart of the village community. Likewise, the tok guru (religious teacher) was often held in high esteem by the local community, serving the function not only of teacher but equally that of arbiter, healer, mediator, religious commissar, and elder (regardless of the actual age of the tok guru). Insofar as religious practice was concerned, it was ritualistic, mystic, and for the most part, undertaken as an expression of personal piety. Indeed, it was into this terrain that foreign globalized forms of Islam, expressed in new (and at times more structured) religious institutions, new ideas of religious jurisprudence and notions of social practices (but which were nevertheless deemed by their proponents as more ‘authentic’), and ultimately, new sources of religious authority and legitimacy, moved.

The advent of transnational faith movements was closely intertwined with processes of Islamization across the Nusantara (the Indo-Malay archipelago). Islamization processes at work in Southeast Asia have been diverse and variegated, despite the tendency of their agents to skirt culturally relativist positions by stressing universalist principles of the faith. In consequence, processes of Islamization have often given rise to competing formations of Muslim identity through new conceptions of personal piety, cultural, and socio-economic change, as well as political and armed conflict. What is instructive for current purposes, however, is the fact that whatever form it takes, Islamization has more often than not been possessed by a transnational dimension. This becomes readily evident when one trawls the narrative of Islam’s ‘arrival’ in Southeast Asia, which, as highlighted above, conventional historians have identified to be a function of expanding trade between the Middle East, South, and Southeast Asia long before the advent of the internet revolution. Indeed, it was often the case that foreign Muslim traders and merchants, sufi orders, and Muslim intellectuals introduced new understandings and expressions of faith that altered patterns of social and cultural interaction.

Needless to say, this historical tradition of receptivity to foreign influences has accelerated in modern times with advances in communication. The first signs of this were evident as early as the

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9 Several scholars have dealt with the major traditions of local Islam in the south, including, A. Bangnara, Fatani Dahulu dan Sekarang [Patani Then and Now], Selangor: Penal Penyelidikan, 1977; Andrew Cornish, Whose Place is This? Malay Rubber Producers and Thai Government Officials in Yala, Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997; Ahmad Fatani, Ulama Besar dari Fatani [Patani’s Revered Ulama], Kelantan: Pustaka Aman, 2001.
1930s, when a fledgling ‘modernist’ wave of Islamic reform established a minor beachhead in Thailand through the activism of Muslim scholars such as Ahmad Wahab (of Indonesian origin) in Bangkok and Haji Sulong Abdul Kadir in Patani. These two scholars had returned from sojourns in the Arab Peninsula with aspirations to align Muslim faith and practice in Thailand with ideas about Islamic reform and revival that were at the time actively discussed and debated within Muslim intellectual circles worldwide. The well-documented global Islamic awakening of the 1960s and 1970s had a further impact on conceptions of religious identity amongst Thai Muslims across the country, and saw a proliferation of networks of Muslim civic activism that possessed transnational roots. Three networks, in particular, warrant closer attention for the extent of their influence and degree of penetration into Thai society, the challenge they posed to local narratives and expressions of piety, and for the deeper questions of faith and creed that they asked of Muslims in Thailand: the Ikhwanul-inspired social activism and mobilization of the Young Muslims Association of Thailand, the pietist and apolitical Tabligh movement emanating from South Asia, and a loosely networked Salafi-Reformist project that has gradually surfaced in Thailand’s southern provinces on the back of religious students returning from Saudi Arabia, and whose focus was to bring into line religious beliefs and practices with ‘core foundations of Islam, by avoiding and purging out innovation, accretion, and the intrusion of ‘local custom’.

Young Muslims Association of Thailand

One of the most active and well-connected Islamic organizations in Thailand, the Young Muslims Association of Thailand (YMAT), was established on 13 October, 1964, by a small group of Muslim

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11 The concept of ‘reform’ in Islamic studies has often been caricatured, and remains the subject of much debate and disagreement. The manner in which it is used here is in reference to Islamic movements whose objectives follow the train of thought described above. For a deeper, critical discussion on concepts of reformism and traditionalism in Islam, see Filipo Osella and Caroline Osella, ‘Introduction: Islamic Reformism in South Asia’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2–3 (2008), pp. 247–257.
businessmen and university students in Bangkok. Its founder was an army officer, Colonel Udom Tappawatana, and its first president was Damrong Samutcojorn. Following Damrong, YMAT has had 20 presidents. The current (2010) president is Nikmanasay Sama-ali, a Director from a Thai public school in Pattani and resident of Yala province, one of the three Malay-Muslim majority provinces in the south. Since 1997, the president of the organization has been of ethnic Malay-origin from the provinces.

YMAT’s roots are modest—it began as a small Muslim community club modelled after the YMCA (Young Man’s Christian Association) that met regularly to discuss a range of social issues confronting Thailand’s Muslim community. Beyond these meetings, the activities of the early YMAT also included participation in mosque-based programmes. These low-key and community-based activities soon gave way to more visible forms of activism and community engagement. Influenced by the global Islamic resurgence, in the mid-1970s, YMAT began to imbibe much of the Ikhwanul-style social activism taking place in Muslim societies across the world which was modelled after the Ikhwanul Muslimin, the Egyptian mass-based social and political movement. In many ways, this ‘awakening’ was further facilitated by the climate of democratization which had engulfed Thailand in the wake of the pro-democracy student movements of the mid-1970s. The objective of this heightened activism was to ‘strengthen the faith and religious identity’ of Muslims across Thailand. At this time, YMAT’s popularity within Thailand also expanded exponentially as it drew into its membership ranks many Thai Muslim students returning from tertiary education institutions across the Islamic world. Needless to say, these students formed yet another critical conduit for the influx of reformist and Ikhwanul-based ideas through organized lectures and talks, community outreach programmes, and ‘summer camps’. According to its senior leadership, YMAT’s renaissance reached its apex in the 1980s, when it ‘reached out to Muslim civic and social leaders and Muslim politicians. We (the YMAT leadership) urged them to embrace Islam in their social activities and succeeded in many respects. We encouraged the Muslim voters to vote for Muslim candidates who are actually practicing their faith’.14

12 Interview with Abdul Roziz Kanie, Phuket, 25 May, 2008.
14 Ibid.
Despite its formation a decade earlier, it was in the mid-1970s, when the aqidah (faith) of YMAT was firmly anchored on the global phenomenon of Islamic resurgence, that the organization developed a strong ideological blueprint. Inspired by the ideals of the Ikhwanul Muslimin as well as an increasingly active Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, or Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), under the effervescent leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, YMAT premised its social activism on the belief that the revelation of Islam was bestowed to Muslims by Allah to guide them in every aspect of their lives. To that effect, the message underlying YMAT activism was that the revelation of Islam was not a matter to be confined to the realms of personal faith; it informed a Muslim’s conduct in the social, political, and economic spheres as well, since Islam provided the template that was required for Muslims to navigate and surmount the problems confronting humankind. Reflecting this fundamental principle of the organization, the YMAT website lists as its motto the adage: ‘Islam is the way of life’.

Apart from the works of prominent Ikhwanul thinkers such as Hassan al-Banna and Rashid Rid’a, the radical ideas of Sayyid Qutb, Mu’ammar al-Qaddafi, and Maulana Mawdudi also exerted strong intellectual influence on the leadership of YMAT, although Anwar Ibrahim came into increasing prominence as the relationship with ABIM strengthened. While YMAT’s social activism was generally accepted, their attempt to transmit some of the ideas underpinning their work occasionally met with some degree of suspicion. One of the most controversial examples was YMAT’s attempt to translate the work of Qutb (specifically, Milestones) into the Thai language, a move that raised the ire of government authorities. The following recollection of a member of the YMAT Advisory Council about the controversy surrounding the translation of Qutb’s work illustrates the gulf in perception between YMAT and the Thai government:

They [the Thai government] only wanted to see the militant side of Qutb and his language of revolution. But we saw a moral message in his work. The Thai

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15 Interview with Nikmanasay Sama-ali, Yala, 24 May, 2008.
authorities didn’t understand that Qutb’s work was a response to the problem in the Arab society. We, on the other hand, were not interested in carrying out a revolution. We are a minority, religiously speaking, in this country. The Arab Muslims were the majority in the Middle East and his message was in response to their predicament. We don’t view ourselves as some immigrants coming here to profit from the land. In other words, we don’t challenge the notion of the Thai nation-state. We are just trying to carry out work to ensure the continuity and strengthening of our community in Thailand.\textsuperscript{17}

More broadly, YMAT leaders claim not to promote any particular school of jurisprudential thought, although in private they have opined that many of their members can be considered ‘Salafi’ in creedal orientation. Nevertheless, according to the leadership, ‘tolerance is important and we [YMAT] don’t put up with people who come in and try to split the association. YMAT’s members are people who have been around and see many aspects of Islam and Muslim communities’.\textsuperscript{18}

Unlike the two other networks discussed in this paper, YMAT’s impact on the ideological and theological landscape of Muslim Thailand has been far less profound. YMAT is ‘reformist’ in the sense that its general position on jurisprudential issues is not defined by strict abidance to shafi’i legal traditions. From broader perspectives however, YMAT has not introduced doctrinal or exegetical ideas that fundamentally challenged traditional understandings of Islam among the local Muslim communities of southern Thailand—certainly not to the extent witnessed in the case of other groups. Indeed, its reformist credentials for the most part pertain to its social and civic activism more so than theological innovation and transformation. This being the case, YMAT has won acceptance across the spectrum of Muslim society in Thailand for its social services and, more recently, its advocacy for justice and the rights of Malay-Muslims in the southern provinces.

\textit{YMAT activism and contemporary politics}

Notwithstanding the political activism of YMAT during the turbulence of the 1970s (both globally in the wake of the Islamic resurgence as well as locally in Thailand as a consequence of the student revolution of October, 1973, and its aftermath), as a reform movement

\textsuperscript{17} Interview with Saravud Sriwan-nayos, Bangkok, 27 May, 2008.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
it failed to transform into a major mainstream political force. According to Scupin, this was likely a result of the movement’s inability to garner sympathy and support from traditionalists who harboured apprehension towards a perceived radical bent to YMAT activism. Nevertheless, YMAT continued with its political activism throughout the 1980s and 1990s, albeit on a smaller scale, primarily by ‘encouraging Muslim voters to vote for Muslim candidates who are actually practicing their faith’.

Social outreach and education have long been primary avenues of YMAT’s engagement with Thailand’s Muslim minority communities. To that end, it is not surprising to find that Muslim students were a major recruitment target for YMAT because they were seen to have ‘more leadership potential than any other target group’. According to their leaders, YMAT was the first Muslim organization to introduce Qira’ ati (pre-school) Islamic education in southern Thailand geared towards supplementing the compulsory national education system for pre-schoolers. Since 1990, YMAT has been running monthly workshops to train Qira’ ati teachers in cooperation with local tambon (district) administrative centres, provincial administrative centres, and the various provincial Islamic committees in the region. At present, there are up to 10,000 people enrolled in this workshop programme, run as usroh (study groups) for tafsir al-Qur’an (Qur’anic studies) and centred in Bangkok, Pattani, Yala, Songkla, and Krabi.

YMAT’s community outreach activities are very much underwritten by a local economy premised for the most part on zakat (tithe) collections across the country for their Ummah Fund which is used to support bursaries for poor Muslim students (approximately 40 to 50 a year), welfare for the rural poor, and for infrastructure building projects in villages. YMAT has also been the beneficiary of support from various government ministries for publicity campaigns on specific projects. These include the Ministry of Public Health,

20 Interview with Saravud Sriwan-nayos, Bangkok, 27 May, 2008.
21 Interview with Nikmanasay Sama-ali, Yala, 24 May, 2008. Other target groups include youths (in general), scholars and intellectuals, politicians and political activists, business people, Mosque committee members and local leaders.
22 Ibid.
23 It is believed that about 200,000 to 300,000 Baht is collected annually for the Ummah Fund that is administered by YMAT officials.
which has supported YMAT’s HIV awareness programme (which also received support from UNISEF), and the Ministry of Justice and (previously) the National Reconciliation Commission, which has sponsored programmes on human and community rights. In many ways, sponsorship and fundraising is a further extension of YMAT’s ideological and political proclivity. Concomitantly, the organization has had to be cognizant of political and religious implications that might follow from its collaboration with certain stakeholders seen as ‘controversial’ in Muslim eyes. As but one example, YMAT president Nikmanasay clarified that the organization had turned down offers of support from the US-based Asia Foundation because they had to ‘take into consideration the feelings of the people, especially the Muslim community’. On another occasion, YMAT had to reject funding from the Thai Health Promotion Foundation for their health programmes. This was made on the grounds that the Foundation derived a large portion of its budget from the two per cent excise tax on tobacco and alcohol imposed by the government, and hence these monies were deemed by the organization to be ‘wang dari benda haram’ or ‘unclean funds’.

External links

Beyond local education and social outreach, YMAT is also plugged into several international networks of Islamic social activist organizations, although these are comparatively low-key when considered beside their activism on the local front. Human rights activism has been a major transnational pursuit, where YMAT has contributed funds and participated in human rights campaigning in Kosovo, Palestine, and Iraq. More recently, YMAT participated in the initiative of Global Peace Vision Malaysia to establish medical clinics in Afghanistan. In Thailand, YMAT has worked with agencies such as the National Reconciliation Commission, the National Committee of Human Rights of Thailand, Law Association of Thailand, UNISEF, and the

24 Interview with Nikmanasay Sama-ali, Yala, 24 May, 2008.
25 Ibid.
26 According to a YMAT Advisory Council member, this is because the organization ‘does not have the resources to do international outreach...and there is no money for international networking’. Interview with Saravud Sriwan-nayos, Bangkok, 27 May, 2008.
27 Ibid.
International Red Cross, on various issues relating to the conflict in southern Thailand. As evident from the above discussion, YMAT has also been highly selective of its partners in various initiatives on ideological grounds.

The ties between YMAT and ABIM were alluded to earlier. Subscription to ABIM-style political agitation in the 1970s, however, did not appeal to all members of the YMAT and this became a matter of great debate among its founding leadership. Tensions that arose within the organization as a consequence of its alignment with ABIM undermined the organization’s ability to articulate a coherent voice representing the interests of Muslim students in Thailand. Beyond that, the zealous reformist ideals demonstrated by YMAT also led to occasional altercations with traditional Muslim community leaders over matters like improvements to the structure and curriculum of the pondok.28

The Jama’ah Tabligh

An increasingly assertive socio-religious force among Thailand’s Muslim community that is rooted in broader reformist tradition is that of the Jama’ah Tabligh, an Islamic grassroots dakwah (missionary) movement that is primarily focused on the purification of the Islamic community. The Jama’ah Tabligh originated from the South Asian continent as part of an Islamic reform movement in the mid-nineteenth century that focused on religiosity, observance, and personal devotion. Put simply, the focus of Tabligh-activism is the replication of the Prophetic lifestyle as dictated in the hadith.29

While Tabligh activities surfaced as early as the 1960s, it was in the late 1970s that the Jama’ah Tabligh movement gained a foothold in southern Thailand as a result of activism on the part of Indian-Muslim traders who had travelled to the region to introduce their teachings to students and to the public in general:

Jama’ah Dakwah Tabligh started entering Thailand around 1979. Masjid Jami, built in Sungei Golok, Narathiwat in 1983, was the first Tabligh centre established in the three territories of Southern Thailand. Later, we bought a place at the city area/seaport of Muang Yala, which is the Yala centre now,

29 Narrations of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad.
as big as 21 Rais [33,600.00 m²], and we built a musalla [place of prayer] temporarily to carry out the Jama’ah activities. In 1993, we built a mosque on an area as big as 4 Rais [6,400.00 m²—which is still not ready yet], and we used up about 110 million Baht of our budget, which came from alms from religious believers and donations from the rich of the country; we never accepted money from any organizations outside of the country.30

While the activities of Jama’ah Tabligh are highly mobile, decentralized, and transnational in nature, in the case of southern Thailand, followers often congregate at the Markaz Dakwah Yala in the outskirts of Yala town and to a lesser extent Bangkok, where shura (consultation) councils consisting of groups of elders meet to vet candidates for khuruj (when Muslims join the Tabligh movement and travel to preach over periods ranging from three days to four months). Tabligh members come from a varied background, which includes professionals such as engineers, doctors, teachers, lawyers, and university students, as well as farmers and businessmen.31

Growth

The Jama’ah Tabligh, which has its origins in South Asia, is one of the most visible Islamic movements in Thailand today. The growing popularity of this movement over the years has been accelerated by the presence of several notable religious teachers among its ranks who lent much-needed credibility to a hitherto unfamiliar Islamic movement which locals observed with a mix of interest and caution. Among the more prominent of these leaders were Ustaz Mahmud bin Hayee Ismail, who trained in Islamic studies first at Pondok Paderu in Yala and then in dakwah in universities in Jordan and Pakistan. Mahmud established the first religious school in southern Thailand that is known to be associated with the Jama’ah Tabligh, Madrasah Tahfiz Alkuran (which is also the generic term for Quranic schools), in Yala province approximately 50 years ago. According to educators at Madrasah Tahfiz Alkuran, the school was established for the purpose of ‘returning Muslims to the Qur’an so as to attain true spiritual peace in their lives similar to that which the followers of the holy Prophet

30 Interview with Ustaz Mahmud, general manager of Markaz Yala, Yala, 21 May, 2008.
31 See Braam, ‘Travelling with the Tablighi Jamaat in South Thailand’, p. 42. Braam suggests that up to 20,000 people conduct their dakwah every year in southern Thailand.
Aside from local *dakwah* activities, Mahmud has also given southern Thailand’s Jama’ah Tabligh movement international branding with his Tabligh work in Asia, Europe, and Africa. Another prominent religious teacher associated with the Jama’ah Tabligh is Ustaz Zakaria Al-Fathoni. Based in Yala, Ustaz Zakaria is a popular Tabligh-speaker widely travelled in the Southeast Asian region, and is the head of Jama’ah Mastura, the female arm of the Jama’ah Tabligh.

**Local Networks**

In southern Thailand, Tabligh activism revolves around a network consisting of the Yala centre, mosques (*mahallah*) and study groups (*halaqah*). This local network facilitates the *khuruj*, which will see the Tabligh adherents travel across the region and overseas, covering as many nodes on the Tabligh network as possible. According to sources, this network has about 800 mosques in the southern provinces and about 127 *halaqah*, which themselves network among their congregations of anywhere between 6–10 mosques. In addition to this, there are in the three provinces a total of 20 Muassasah Mahallah—mosques through which *khuruj* pilgrimages are formally arranged and managed. These are listed in Table 1 below.

As far as Islamic education is concerned, there are around 60 schools in Thailand that have either been directly established by Jama’ah Tabligh or are closely affiliated with it. Known by their generic name of ‘Madrasah Tahfiz Alkuran’ after the original school in Yaha, Yala, most of these schools are located around Bangkok (Minburi), Nakhon Si Thammarat, Tak (Mae-sod), Yala (Klorek and Bachok), and Narathiwat (Sungei Golok, Dusun Nyor, and Chanet). The original Madrasah Tahfiz Alkuran is a three-building institution, currently headed by Al-Hafiz Abdullah Yamaloh. Unlike mainstream Islamic schools, however, Tabligh schools are private institutions and

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32 Interview at Madrasah Tahfiz Alkuran, Yala, 11 December, 2006.
33 Married women are permitted to partake in Tabligh activities, but have to live with either relatives or female friends during the course of their *khuruj*.
34 According to Imtiaz Yusuf, there had been other attempts by the Jama’ah Tabligh to build schools in Bangkok, but these were rebuffed by the Muslim community. Conversation with Imtiaz Yusuf, Bangkok, 14 January, 2006. The figure of 60 was suggested by Tabligh members during an interview at Madrasah Tahfiz Alkuran, Yala, 11 December, 2006.
Table 1
Centres which arrange and manage khuruj pilgrimages

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre (Muassasah Mahallah)</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pakara</td>
<td>Nurul-Islam Mosque, Ban Pakara, Muang, Pattani</td>
<td>Established in 1983, administered by Ustaz Haji Yusof Khan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jok-kiye</td>
<td>Jok-kiye Mosque, Saiburi, Pattani</td>
<td>Established in 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nadtanjong</td>
<td>Nadtanjong Mosque, Yaring, Pattani</td>
<td>Established in 1998</td>
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<tr>
<td>Napradu</td>
<td>Markaz Napradu, Khokphoe, Pattani</td>
<td>Established in 1980</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pujud</td>
<td>Pujud Mosque, Muang, Pattani</td>
<td>Established in 1988, administered by Imam Bukoree Tokku-baha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basa-e</td>
<td>Nadbasa-e Mosque, Yarang, Pattani</td>
<td>Established in 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bana Yala</td>
<td>Nibong Baru Mosque, Muang, Yala</td>
<td>Established in 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batuputih</td>
<td>Pondok Pade-paseputeh, Muang, Yala</td>
<td>Established in 1988, administered by Tuan Guru Waedina Haji Waeda-oh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aseng</td>
<td>Aseng Mosque, Yaha, Yala</td>
<td>Established in 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pohonjamu</td>
<td>Pohonjamu Mosque, Bannangsata, Yala</td>
<td>Established in 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betong</td>
<td>Betong Mosque, Betong, Yala</td>
<td>Established in 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kota Baru</td>
<td>Kota Baru Mosque, Raman, Yala</td>
<td>Established in 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenong</td>
<td>Jenong Mosque, Raman, Yala</td>
<td>Established in 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sungei</td>
<td>Darussalam Pasemas Mosque, Sungei Golok, Narathiwat</td>
<td>Established in 1983, administered by Ustaz Usman Rayalee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeringo</td>
<td>Jeringo Mosque, Yingo, Narathiwat</td>
<td>Established in 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jabak</td>
<td>Jabak Mosque, Ruesok, Narathiwat</td>
<td>Established in 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalekawe</td>
<td>Seri Sakorn, Narathiwat</td>
<td>Established in 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eceh</td>
<td>Dusongnyo, Rangeh, Narathiwat</td>
<td>Established in 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalok</td>
<td>Lalok Mosque, Ruesok, Narathiwat</td>
<td>Established in 2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

are not registered with the government. Many are recipients of support from foreign, primarily South African, Tabligh organizations and members. The students who graduate from these local Tabligh schools are known to proceed on to Pakistan to further their Islamic education.
in schools linked to the Jama’ah Tabligh.\textsuperscript{35} Not surprisingly, the Jama’ah Tabligh in Thailand continue to enjoy strong ties with like-minded movements in Pakistan, Bangladesh and, increasingly, South Africa. Between the Markaz Dakwah Yala, whose religious classes are supervised by Ustaz Abdurrahman Phatlung, and Madrasah Tahfiz Alkuran, which remains the largest Tabligh-linked religious school in southern Thailand, Jama’ah Tabligh schools have approximately 5000 students in total.\textsuperscript{36} Most of these students either have or will proceed to further their education in Tabligh institutions in South Africa, Yemen, Sudan, Jordan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India.\textsuperscript{37}

The 1.5-acre Markaz Dakwah Yala is possibly the largest Tabligh centre in the East Asian region and has been endowed with a special sanctity in the eyes of local Muslims. A lecturer at the Yala Islamic University enthused: ‘I love to pray at the Markaz because it is almost like praying in Mecca’.\textsuperscript{38} Needless to say, the popularity of the Markaz is not confined to locals: co-religionists from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines are also drawn to the Yala centre, and regularly spend time in its mahallah to undertake their own dakwah.

\textit{Relations with the State}

While Jama’ah Tabligh groups oftentimes come under intense scrutiny elsewhere, in Thailand the movement has mostly been spared harassment by the Thai government. On the contrary, the government has endorsed and supported its activities. This is evident from actions such as Bangkok’s support for the staging of an inaugural Tabligh convention in 1982 at an army camp in Kai Sirintong, Pattani.

From the Thai government’s perspective, supporting the Jama’ah Tabligh had yielded welcome dividends—anecdotal evidence suggests

\begin{itemize}
\item[35] Interview with Pakorn Priyakorn, Secretary-General, Islamic Centre of Thailand, Bangkok, 25 January, 2005; email interview with a local Malay-Muslim scholar, 2 February, 2006.
\item[36] Given the nature of the Jama’ah Tabligh, which effectively has a ‘rotating door’ approach to membership, we need to appreciate that it is impossible to obtain definite figures regarding the organization. Any Muslim can volunteer to do dakwah with the Jama’ah Tabligh without necessarily committing to the organization itself in any formal capacity.
\item[37] Interview at Markaz Tahfiz Alkuran, Yala, 11 December, 2006.
\item[38] Interview at Yala Islamic College, Yala, 18 January, 2005.
\end{itemize}
that large numbers of Malay-Muslim separatists and insurgents may have abandoned their struggle and surrendered their arms after taking up membership of the Jama’ah.\textsuperscript{39} Possibly, another reason for the relatively benign view of the Thai establishment is the Jama’ah Tabligh movement’s avowed apolitical stance: the notion of political ‘quietism’ is stressed through Tabligh mosques and educational institutions. For instance, a central tenet of Tabligh lifestyle which is preached at the Markaz Dakwah Yala is that followers should avoid politics, debates, rankings, and philanthropy.\textsuperscript{40}

The influence of the Jama’ah Tabligh in Thailand peaked during the years 1986–1996, when it was led by the charismatic Emir Yusoff Khan Pakara, a native of Tak province. Upon his passing, the movement has become somewhat decentralized, with several centres of Jama’ah Tabligh activity strewn throughout the south and in Bangkok, mostly operating independently.

\textit{Local activism and responses}

The Jama’ah Tabligh is an Islamic movement that functions foremost as an avenue for the expression of personal piety. This being the case, Tabligh members are known for their ascetic lifestyle and aversion to politics, which is considered a ‘worldly matter’. The objective of the Jama’ah Tabligh is essentially to replicate the Prophet’s \textit{hijrah} (migration from Mecca to Medina), through which the organization becomes a revolving door movement where Tabligh activities recruit ‘on-the-move’ and often entails members leaving their homes and villages for periods ranging from three days to four months on the \textit{khuruj} in order to undertake \textit{dakwah}.

As a \textit{dakwah} movement, the Jama’ah Tabligh differs from others of a similar nature in that they concentrate their efforts in rural communities, notwithstanding the movement’s increasing popularity among the middle class.\textsuperscript{41} Since the mid-1980s, Jama’ah Tabligh adherents, including foreigners, have travelled regularly to Muslim

\textsuperscript{39} This view was expressed by several Malay-Muslim community leaders during field interviews conducted in Pattani in July, 2005.

\textsuperscript{40} Interview with Ustaz Mahmud, general manager of Markaz Yala, Yala, 21 May, 2008.

\textsuperscript{41} The \textit{dakwah} movement in Malaysia, for instance, is focused on student organizations and university campuses. See A. B. Shamsul, ‘Inventing Certainties: The Dakwah Persona in Malaysia’ in Wendy James, \textit{The Pursuit of Certainty: Religious and
villages in the southern provinces, preaching their own version of
purist Islam against traditional practices along the way as part of their
dakwah. Tabligh members liken this manner of expression of piety
to the Prophet’s own missionary efforts as a travelling teacher and
preacher, which they deliberately sought to emulate in their endeavour
to spread Islam’s message throughout the region. These Jama’ah
Tabligh members are known to visit most, if not all, the villages in
the southern provinces at least once a week, and cover every house
in the village. The Tabligh movement in southern Thailand is led
by locals who are usually educated in Pakistan, and they anchor
groups of Tabligh travelling preachers who undertake door-to-door
preaching. They also organize study circles at local mosques. True to
the transnational nature of the movement, not to mention the legacy
and reputation of Ustaz Mahmud, the activism of Thailand’s Jama’ah
Tabligh movement also extends beyond Thai borders. For example,
several prominent Thai Tabligh members are religious teachers and
imam (including Imam Salat Tarawih or leaders of the Ramadhan
prayers) in Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam.

According to its members, the Jama’ah Tabligh of southern Thailand
is very much self-funded, relying on a local political economy that
primarily takes the form of waqf (religious endowment) dividends
flowing from the rental of land and property located in the vicinity
of Markaz Dakwah Yala. Further to that, the Tabligh movement
has also raised funds from zakat contributions of its followers and,
ocasionally, foreign pilgrims who had ventured to Yala to perform
their khuruj.

Among the local community there is considerable disagreement
about the Jama’ah Tabligh as a new interpretation of the faith and
expression of religiosity: some feel that they are the epitome of piety
while others assail them for being misguided, and for misguiding,
Muslims. Reasons cited for opposition to the Tabligh movement vary,
ranging from practical to epistemological, theological, and doctrinal.

Cultural Formulations, London: Routledge, 1995. Having said that, there are tertiary
education students who are members of the Jama’ah Tabligh in southern Thailand.

42 The author was informed by Alexander Horstmann that the Thai chapter of the
Jama’ah Tabligh might have as many as 200,000 members.

43 See Alexander Horstmann, ‘The Tablighi Jama’at, Transnational Islam, and the
Transformation of Self between Southern Thailand and South Asia’, Comparative

44 Interview at Markaz Dakwah Yala, Yala, 11 December, 2006.

45 Joseph Chinyong Liow, Islam, Education, and Reform in Southern Thailand: Tradition
At its most mundane, the white robes called *thawb* and turbans (*taqiya*) characteristic of the dressing of Jama’ah Tabligh members, which are worn to imitate the dress of the Prophet as well as to ‘ward off the devil’, have until recently been relatively foreign to traditional circles in the southern provinces. More substantive differences percolate beneath the surface, particularly between the Jama’ah Tabligh and some Salafi-Reformists. In the main, the latter have raised doubts as to the doctrinal authenticity and purity of the Jama’ah Tabligh and criticized their apparent use of sufi techniques to instruct new recruits on meditation and self-control.46

The opposition of Salafi-Reformists can perhaps be explained at least in part by the fact that the Jama’ah Tabligh is frowned upon in Saudi Arabia, a major source of Salafi-Wahhabi thinking. Also, some religious scholars have argued that an approach to *dakwah* which amounts to what they consider to be the abandonment of family, as they claim followers of the Tabligh are effectively doing when they depart on the *khuruj*, and, in the case of religious teachers who take leave from their schools, neglect of educational responsibilities, cannot be said to be a correct emulation of the example of the Prophet and the Salaf. Indeed, an ustaz (religious teacher) interviewed remarked tersely that some Tabligh members were setting a bad example for, ‘while they [Tabligh members] ventured to other villages to preach, their wives back home do not pray nor wear the headscarf, and the children are left without a disciplinarian’.47 He further noted that participation in Tabligh activities also meant that women often had to take over the responsibility of supporting the household in their husband’s absence, and that this had a negative effect on child discipline at home.48 Another detractor—this time a traditionalist religious teacher—accused the ‘*dakwah* people’ (which is how Tabligh members are sometimes referred to colloquially, sometimes even pejoratively) of being closed-minded: ‘When I asked them about what their wife and children are going to eat, they [Tabligh] said God’s work is above everything else. All they say is Allah this, Allah that. *Dakwah* is about form and not much substance’.49

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47 Interview at Azizstan School, Yala, 11 January, 2005.

48 Ibid.

49 Interview at Tabia Witthaya, Yala, 2 August, 2006.
Intellectually, Salafi-Reformist scholars go to the extent of dismissing the Tabligh movement altogether, disparaging their members as Muslims who are misdirected. Jama’ah Tabligh members have been criticized for their purportedly weak knowledge of Islam. For instance, Tabligh instructors are often taken to task for their alleged use of ‘lesser’ hadith such as those contained in the Fazail A’maal (Virtuous Deeds—an Islamic text). As previously mentioned, the Jama’ah Tabligh has also been approached with a fairly considerable degree of caution by certain segments of the orthodox Malay-Muslim shafi’i sunni community because of the pressure they exert on these communities to turn away from their age-old cultural traditions. Hence, while some Salafi-Reformists view the Jama’ah Tabligh to be ‘too sufi’ in orientation, traditionalists are of the contrary opinion that they are ‘not sufi enough’.

The point to stress here though, is that in the eyes of traditionalists and orthodox Muslims the Jama’ah Tabligh threatens to undermine traditional Thai Islam and polarize Muslim society. Anthropologists have documented how these contentions between the Jama’ah Tabligh and traditional/orthodox Muslims have been expressed. For example, in the challenge that members of the Tabligh pose to traditional authority in the local mosques, when its younger, charismatic leaders overtly contest the stature and authority of more senior teachers and imam in the pondok, Islamic private schools, and local mosques. The profile of the Jama’ah Tabligh leadership in Thailand also differs somewhat from the orthodox Malay-Muslim community in terms of their education: the former are usually educated in Pakistan while the latter, in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Indonesia, though it is unclear if this contributes further to the gulf between the movement and its more orthodox and traditionalist counterparts.

Salafi-based Reformism in Thailand

Unlike the case with YMAT or the Jama’ah Tabligh, the brand of Salafi Reformism that has slowly been gaining currency in southern Thailand today does not take a formal, institutional shape. Rather, this network manifests itself as an informal structure built around Salafi-Reformist

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50 One should bear in mind here that this criticism of the ‘lesser hadith’ is a common, often polemical, device through which Muslims contest and counter alternative traditions within Islam.

madrasahs (reformist Islamic schools) and Islamic centres that are either run by or associated with prominent salafi-ulama (religious scholar) and alim (a person knowledgeable in religion), and whose religious beliefs and practices can be distilled as the following:\textsuperscript{52}

- \textit{Usuluddin} (principles of the faith) must be premised on the work of Ibn Tamiyyah;
- In \textit{fiqh} (Islamic jurisprudence) observance, one cannot adhere to a particular \textit{mazhab} (Islamic school of law) but can combine teachings of one \textit{mazhab} and another (a process called \textit{talfiq}, which means to take rulings from different schools of law);
- Authentic sources of Islamic knowledge are al-Quran and \textit{sunna} (the way of life prescribed by the prophet Muhammad), and not \textit{ijma} (scholarly consensus) or \textit{qiyas} (analogical reasoning);
- Praying via \textit{tawassul} (an intermediary between man and God) is prohibited;
- Worshipping at \textit{tugu-tugu peringatan} (memorial tombs) is \textit{syirik} (idolatry) in Islam;
- Prohibition of \textit{qasidah} and \textit{berzanji} (genres of religious poetry) that praise Rasulullah s.a.w. \textit{tahlil} (posthumous religious rites for the dead, though its literal meaning can be the act of attesting to God’s oneness);
- Prohibition on the Islamic \textit{ummah} (universal brotherhood of believers) from observing holidays such as \textit{Maulid Nabi} (birthday of the Prophet), \textit{asyura} (the tenth of the month of Muharram in the Islamic calendar), and others;
- Prohibition on the learning and instruction of \textit{sifat} 20 (the 20 attributes of God—a popular element in traditional religious instruction);
- Prohibition of \textit{zikir} (chants in remembrance of God);
- Prohibition of \textit{Tariqah} rituals (sufi understandings of pledging allegiance to their leaders which can be traced back to the Prophet);
- Prohibition of \textit{berwirid} (a form of prayer).

What is immediately striking about these prohibitions is that they actually contradict many long standing practices and expressions of faith and piety that have been widely practiced in southern Thailand, and more broadly across the Malay Archipelago.

\textsuperscript{52} These features of Salafi-based Reformism are summed up from the numerous interviews conducted with both reformist and traditionalist religious teachers during the course of fieldwork carried out for this project.
Historically, in the context of southern Thailand the proponents of reformist thinking have come to be known as the Kaum Muda (Khana Mai in Thai, or New Generation). Among its early leaders were Haji Sulong Abdul Kadir, Jahi Abdullah Benaekebong and Ustaz Abdullah Chinarong (he is also known locally as Abdullah India owing to his religious training in Deoband, India). Since his return from Saudi Arabia, where he obtained a doctorate in comparative Islamic jurisprudence from the Islamic University of Al-Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud in Riyadh, Ismail Lutfi Japakiya (Ismail Lutfi al-Fatani) has emerged as the most prominent personality and leader of this reformist movement in contemporary southern Thailand. Lutfi’s Salafi-Reformist credentials are all the more intriguing, given his upbringing in traditional, orthodox southern Thai Islam. Furthermore, his father, Abdurrahman Japakiya, was a respected tok guru of the traditionalist orthodox shafi’i-sufi mould who had among other things also taught in the famed Ulama Jawi halaqah (study circles) in the Arab Peninsula. Despite his demonstrable appreciation of more sophisticated approaches to Islamic doctrine and exegesis, traditionalist scholars have insisted on labelling Lutfi and the brand of Islam he espouses ‘Wahhabi’ in derogatory fashion.

Describing the impact of Salafi-Reformist Islam on the traditional landscape in southern Thailand, particularly on the Muslim intelligentsia, Abdul Aziz Yanya, president of the traditionalist Pondok Association of Southern Thailand (Persatuan Pengajian Pondok Lima Wilayah Thailand Selatan) opined:

The Wahhabi understanding which brushes aside generations of amalan sunnah [traditional religious rituals] of the Islamic ummah in this country can be said to be spreading among the educated and young intellectuals. They reject the rituals of reading the al-Qur’an for the dead, recitation of yasin, qunut, tahil, berdoa, berzikir [all are different types of formal prayers], ziarah kubur [visiting of graves], and other rituals of the Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah which have been allowed and encouraged.

In defence of traditional faith practices, Yanya suggests that even though these young reformists condemn traditional rituals as ‘bida dan khurafat’ (innovations and superstitions), in truth they are only

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53 Prior to obtaining his doctorate, Ismail Lutfi obtained a B.A. in Usuluddin from Madinah University and an M.A. in Comparative Fiqh at the Ibn Saud University.

54 Interview with Abdul Aziz Yanya, Pattani, 17 May, 2008.
attracted to the ‘new thinking’ because they want to perform their rituals ‘fast and quick’.

This opposition notwithstanding, what is of further pertinence to current purposes is the fact that the extensive amount of time that Lutfi spent in Saudi Arabia essentially allowed him to establish ties with various governments, religious leaders, and Islamic organizations in the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula, ties which formed the pillars for an extensive network both in that region as well as back in southern Thailand. Aside from a number of madrasah (approximately 20), stewardship of Salafi-Reformist dogma is centred on three key networks—Majlis Ilmi (Pattani), Majlis Tafakkuh (Yala), and Jamiyah Dakwah Patani (Pattani). These networks revolve around district offices (in the three provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat) managed by a naqeeb (captain), and are engaged in weekly usroh (study group) meetings. At times, the propagation of Salafi-Reformist teachings also take place during evening forums, lectures, and courses after salat maghrib (evening prayers). An important anchor for this Salafi-Reformist network in southern Thailand is the Yala Islamic University.

External support and transnational influences

The transnational reach that Lutfi possesses across the Muslim world, particularly to the heartland of the Middle East, is clearly evident in the sources and degree of support he has managed to procure for the Yala Islamic University. This has included support from the Saudi-based Islamic Development Bank, the Saudi Ministry of Religious Affairs, the King of Qatar, the King of Kuwait, as well as private donors from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. Similarly, the profile of Yala Islamic University has increased since its inauguration in 1998, and with this its enrolment of Muslim students.

55 Ibid. This criticism is not unlike that being made in conservative and traditionalist Christian circles against the ‘health and wealth gospel’ of their charismatic and Pentecostal counterparts.

56 According to local religious and community leaders, aside from Bamrung Islam Wittaya school (at which Ismail Lutfi is the Principal), the main Salafi-Reformist schools in southern Thailand are Islahiyah Nadtokmong (Muang, Yala), Islam Phattanasat Wittaya Bangpu (Yaring, Pattani), Suksan Sasana Wittaya (Muang Narathiwat), Islam Dua (Tung Yang-Daeng, Pattani), and Islam Prachasongkroh Bede (Tung Yang-Daeng, Pattani).

57 It should be noted though, that after 11 September, 2001, the Thai government legislated that all foreign donations have to be channelled through Thai embassies and consulates, and not given directly to the intended recipient.
from the region—primarily Cambodia and China.\textsuperscript{58} Lutfi’s close links with Saudi Arabia have provided fodder for his critics: not only has he been derided a ‘Wahhabi’ by his detractors, attempts have also been made to discredit his broader reformist agenda as ‘Arabization’ of the Malay-Muslims in southern Thailand. The Middle Eastern Ulama, however, have been more forgiving, and have interpreted his stature and standing favourably as a testament to his credibility and credentials as an Islamic scholar.\textsuperscript{59}

Where the transnational sources and reach of this network have been most profound is in the nature and sources of its financial benefactors. The Salafi-Reformist movement has been the beneficiary of considerable financial support from external sources, around which the network has established a political economy to sponsor its activities and expansion. As mentioned above, Ismail Lutfi obtained support and funding from Middle Eastern governments, especially those of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Qatar for education, social awareness, and religious instructional programmes. In addition, non-governmental organizations such as Muassasah from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi-based Rabitah Islam (Islamic Associations), and Qatar’s Jamiyyah al-Hilal lid-Dirasat wat-Tanmiyah (Hilal Association for Education and Development) are also active in the southern provinces providing funds for the building of mosques and schools in the areas where the population is open and welcoming of Salafi-Reformist ideology.\textsuperscript{60} The following section on the Jamiyyah Ihya Al-Turath Al-Islami (Thailand) shows the type, scope, and extent of work that foreign-funded Islamic organizations in southern Thailand are undertaking.

\textit{Jamiyyah Ihya Al-Turath Al-Islami (Thailand)}\textsuperscript{61}

The revival of \textit{Jamiyyah Ihya Al-Turath Al-Islami} (Islamic Heritage Society South East Asia Committee) (Thailand), was officially

\textsuperscript{58} A Muslim student from America, and one from Sweden, had also previously graduated from the university.

\textsuperscript{59} It should be noted here that since being appointed \textit{Amir al Haj} in 2007, Lutfi has through his connections managed to increase Thailand’s quota for the annual pilgrimage from 2,000 to 16,000.

\textsuperscript{60} Needless to say, the provision of substantial amounts of funding means that in most instances, these foreign foundations are permitted to either nominate or even to appoint the imam of ustaz for the mosque/school.

\textsuperscript{61} The following information was gleaned from an extensive interview in the foundation’s office in Muang, Narathiwat, on 20 May, 2008.
registered with the Registrar Department of Narathiwat Province in 2003. Established under the patronage and funding of the Kuwaiti government, the office is located in Banhutae-tuwa, Tambon Khoh-Khian, Muang, Narathiwat. This foundation is involved in social development projects such as the building of schools, mosques, and orphanages, as well as welfare support for the poor and victims of natural disasters. Examples of funding for some early projects and those it is currently involved with are listed in Table 2.

Furthermore, the foundation has also been involved in other projects, including the building of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Yala Islamic University (to the sum of 18 million Baht), 18 Islamic education centres, 183 mosques, a hospital, six homes for the poor, six school buildings, 18 Pusat Tahfiz al-Quran (Quranic memorization centres), and three markets. It has also purchased 108 Rais of land for waqf endowment, sponsored 788 orphans, constructed or financed the construction of 70 wells, built 245 bathrooms/toilets, sponsored six employees for the Hajj (pilgrimage), printed 16,000 copies of al-Quran, and provided financial assistance and salaries to 129 preachers in the region.

Similar to the case of the YMAT discussed above, fiscal and accounting norms and practices of these networked Salafi-Reformist foundations are tied to religious ideology in the sense that the availability of support is sometimes contingent on the demonstration of receptivity to the doctrines, creeds, and practices of the movement. For instance, schools funded by Saudi and Kuwaiti foundations oftentimes have also to be recipients of curriculum material, and teachers are often selected and appointed at the discretion of the management of these foundations. Likewise, welfare support and personal loans may come with obligations that entail, if not subscription, then at least exposure, to Salafi-Reformist doctrine. This is the case with local charities run by Lutfi, where individuals applying for financial assistance have to commit to attending his khutbah (sermons) in Muang, Pattani every Friday for several months.62

Relations with the State

Pressured by its western allies, the Thai government proceeded soon after the 11 September, 2001, attacks in the US to place a

62 This was made known to me by a local Malay recipient of support during an interview in Pattani, 15 January, 2005.
### Table 2

*Projects carried out by Jamiiyah Ihya Al-Turath Al-Islami (the Islamic Heritage Society South East Asia Committee) (Thailand)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name of Recipient</th>
<th>Sum (Kuwaiti Dinar)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early Projects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sekolah School Phattana Sasana Wittaya, Banhutae Tua, Muthee 4 Tambon Khok-Khian, Muang Narathiwat</td>
<td>210,671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sekolah Tarbiah Islamiah, Muthee 3 Tambon Bosam Amphoe Thabpood, Phang-nga</td>
<td>65,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sekolah Phattana Sasana Wittaya, Muthee 4 Tambon Phumriang, Amphoe Chaiya, Surat-Thanee</td>
<td>43,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sekolah Phattana Sasana Wittaya, Muthee 2 Tambon Nathon, Amphoe Thungwa, Satul</td>
<td>54,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sekolah Phattana Sasana Wittaya, Muthee 10 Tambon Aou-Noi, Amphoe Muang, Prajuabkhirikhan</td>
<td>27,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sekolah Phattana Sasana Wittaya, Muthee 4 Tambon Tha-chak, Amphoe Muang, Nakhornsri Thammarat</td>
<td>42,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sekolah Phattana Sasana Wittaya, 60 Muthee 1 Tambon Muang-Klang, Amphoe Kaper, Ranong</td>
<td>16,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sekolah Phattana Sasana Wittaya, Tambon Mae-Soad, Amphoe Mae-Soad, Tak</td>
<td>36,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Pusat Islam Ommu Muhammad (Pusat Didikan Anak Yatim) [Orphans’ Education Centre], Ban Koeduepar, Tambon Yi-ngo, Amphoe Yi-ngo, Narathiwat</td>
<td>45,325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Sekolah Phattana Sasana Wittaya, Muthee 2 Tambon Lam-Pelai, Amphoe Thepha, Songkla</td>
<td>36,173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total 10 schools and Islamic centres</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>577,599</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recent Projects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pusat Islam Banbangsarong, Muthee 4 Tambon Tha-Thongmai, Amphoe Kanjanadith, Surat-Thanee</td>
<td>4,680,000 Baht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pusat Islam Ban-Aiyamu, Muthee 2 Tambon Kiya, Amphoe Sukirin, Narathiwat</td>
<td>2,405,000 Baht</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pusat Islam Banlamai, Muthee 5 Tambon Bongo, Amphoe Rangeh, Narathiwat</td>
<td>7,215,000 Baht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pusat Islam Banpaloh, Muthee 3 Tambon Bangoi, Amphoe Raman, Yala</td>
<td>5,639,000 Baht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Pusat Islam Ban Thung-Riyang, Tambon Maekree, Amphoe Tamod, Phattalung</td>
<td>2,665,000 Baht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Pusat Islam Banklongyang, Muthee 3 Tambon Klongyang, Amphoe Kohlanta, Krabi</td>
<td>215,460 Qatari Riyal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Pusat Islam Bannongpla, Muthee 8 Tambon Thaseh, Amphoe Thaseh, Chumphorn</td>
<td>3,900,000 Baht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total 7 Islamic centres</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>26,504,000 Baht + 215,460 Qatari Riyal</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
moratorium on Saudi financial contributions to Islamic organizations in the country, as well as the number of Thai Muslim students sent to Saudi Arabia for tertiary religious education. Nevertheless, despite some early apprehension towards his connections to Saudi and Wahhabi interests, as well as a series of allegations made by purported terrorism experts that he was the representative of Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist network (JI) in southern Thailand, Lutfi himself has become a close associate of Thai government authorities and has been a vital ally in Thailand’s own campaign against violence and terrorism in the southern provinces. In the words of a senior security official, Ismail Lutfi ‘is very important to us in the south’. Significantly, Lutfi was the first, and thus far only, Islamic scholar to have published a detailed rebuttal of *Berjihad di Patani* (The Struggle for the Liberation of Patani) a document evidently recovered by Thai security personnel on 28 April, 2004, that articulated the religious justification for a series of coordinated attacks that took place on that day. He followed this up with a major treatise against the dogmatic use of violence in the name of Islam, clearly as an oblique reference to the ongoing conflict in the south. In his public sermons too, he has openly condemned the appropriation of Islam by militants to justify their violent acts. That being said, he has been equally harsh and unequivocal of Muslims who do not abide by the teachings of Islam.

Lutfi’s proximity to Thai government authorities is not confined to his role as a bridge to the Muslim community. He has on several recent occasions also taken on a number of major government positions. These have included membership in the National Reconciliation Commission, an appointment to the Thai Senate after the 19 September, 2006, coup, and an advisory role to the Shaykh ul-Islam (or Chularajmontri in Thai, who is the titular head of the Muslim community in Thailand). Similarly, the Yala Islamic University (previously Yala Islamic College) received a very public endorsement by Thai royalty when the crown prince visited the college in 2005.

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63 Interview with a senior Thai security official, Singapore, 11 December, 2007.
64 From the perspective of religious scholarship, Lutfi’s rebuttal should hardly be surprising given his Salafi-Reformist credentials and the very traditionalist, sufi nature of the *Berjihad di Patani* document.
65 Ismail Lutfi Japakiya, *Islam Agama Penjana Kedamaian Sejagat* [Islam as the Pathway to Harmony], Alor Star: Pustaka Darussalam, 2005. For a detailed study of this and other aspects of Ismail Lutfi’s contribution to Islamic knowledge in southern Thailand, see Liow, *Islam, Education, and Reform in Southern Thailand*. 
The presence and expanding influence of Salafi-Reformists in Thailand (primarily but not exclusively in the south) has been a matter of some concern for traditionalist religious leaders. Not surprisingly, this concern stems from the doctrinal positions and teachings of these Salafi-Reformists in their open rejection of certain traditional beliefs and practices long associated with local Malay culture as well as religion.

Seeking to purge mysticism from Islam, Salafi-Reformists are highly critical of practices associated with the vibrant sufi traditions in Malay folk Islam, such as the use of prayer beads and holy water, as well as celebrations commonly associated with Malay culture, such as the dikir barat (traditional musical performance) and wayang kulit (shadow puppet theatre). These activities are uncompromisingly dismissed as bid’a (innovation) and thence, ‘unIslamic’. Likewise, reformist scholars and teachers oppose superstition, such as the commonplace belief in traditional rural circles that certain well-known tok guru of popular pondok are berkat (blessed). In response, traditionalists have berated their reformist detractors who condemn local beliefs and practices. While reformists justify their attack on tradition as ‘improving the community’s understanding of and adherence to Islam’, traditionalists have retorted that the former are merely acting ‘self-righteous[ly]’.66 Others see this influence as incompatible with local adat that remains an important institution in Malay culture.67

According to some religious leaders, it seems that the debates between the Kaum Tua (Khana Lau or Old Generation) and the Kaum Muda peaked during the period between 1992 and 1997. Among the most vocal tok guru of the Kaum Tua who have been speaking out against the Salafi-Reformists are Heng Lubok Sawa (or Tuan Guru Ibrahim, from Narathiwat), Loh Saroh (or Tuan Guru Abdullah, from Pattani), and perhaps the most famous of Pattani’s contemporary generation of traditionalist scholars, Tuan Guru Ismail Sepanjang of the famed Pondok Darul Muhajreen in Pattani. Describing how conflicts between Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda surfaced during this period, a religious teacher observed:

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The conflict usually arises when those in masyarakat bawahan [grassroots] accept these new teachings through an interlocutor who himself does not have in-depth knowledge, is biadat [lacking in courtesy], and who claims that Kaum Tua are not adhering to the correct Islamic teachings. Likewise, those who reject the Salafi-Wahhabi movement do so in a harsh manner as well. Usually, the conflicts arise due to trivial comparative religious issues such as the prohibition of weaving a three-sided ketupat [rice dumpling] because it is associated with Hinduism and the worship of Hindu idols, the recitation of qunut [special prayers] during subuh [dawn prayers], celebrating maulidin-nabi [the Prophet’s birthday], and others. The Salafi-Wahhabi movement always rejects such observances which have become customary to the local population without considering the positive or negative aspects of these issues, and whether it is really against religious teachings or not. But we [Kaum Tua] see that if such observances do not contradict the religion, then it should be protected, but the Salafi-Wahhabi movement view it categorically as bid’a which is prohibited in religion.68

A key underlying concern that provoked this reaction is the fact that the increasing popularity of the Salafi-Reformists is perceived in some quarters as a threat to traditional authority of more orthodox religious leaders. Nevertheless, because of the stature of Ismail Lutfi and other ulama associated with the Salafi-Reformist movement, such as Ismail Ali, Abdulghani Kahama, Yusuf Sidek, and Ismail Dusong-nyo,69 and the broad respect they command amongst the local population (at least for their eloquence in Arabic), some traditionalist scholars have preferred to distinguish between their religious ‘ideology’, which to these scholars is still acceptable, and their ‘approach’:

I am not against the ideology of the Wahhabi movement under the leadership of Dr. Ismail Lutfi and his companions as they teach and preach the Islamic ummah to stay within the boundaries of the religion; I am less agreeable with their approach that mengumpaskan [deliberates on] khilafiah [comparative religious issues], which can result in conflict between Muslims and the public. And their thinking is not related to the organisation that is managed by the dakwah group, which is lead by me.70

68 Interview with Babo Broheng Payedueramae, Narathiwat, 21 May, 2008.
69 Ismail Ali is an assistant professor at the Prince of Songkhla University—Pattani Campus, Abdulghani Kahama is secretary of the Islamic Private School Association and Principal of Prachasongkroh Bede Islamic School, Yusuf Sidek is a lecturer at the Prince of Songkhla University—Pattani Campus, while Ismail Dusong-nyo has relocated to Bangkok.
70 Interview with Nidir Waba, Pattani, 20 May, 2008. Nidir Waba is the Chairman of the Islamic Private School Association and a respected ulama in southern Thai Muslim circles.
As the most prominent of the Salafi-Reformist scholars, it should be no surprise that Ismail Lutfi has come to personify the challenge that the reform movement poses to traditionalists, and hence has come under intense (and at times, personal) scrutiny and criticism. Nevertheless, typifying the patterns of contestations, Lutfi also has his ardent supporters. The following opinion was conveyed in animated fashion by a former student of Lutfi’s:

I, as a student of Dr. Ismail [Lutfi], want to state that he never taught his students to create divisions, but taught them to hold firmly to al-Qur’an and Sunnah Nabi [the way of life prescribed by the Prophet]. Everyone loves him and he is our abi [father or teacher] even when some parties despise, hate, and create lies about him. I am sure Allah will protect and guard him and his message will take us to the right path. Those who blame him should repent and use their free time to seek knowledge so as to understand the teachings of Dr. Ismail correctly.71

Beyond southern Thailand

The expansion of Salafi-Reformist influence is not confined to southern Thailand. Particularly in the early years at the turn of the twentieth century, Islamic reformist movements in Bangkok and the immediate vicinity of the plains have sought to increase their following among Thailand’s non-Malay Muslim community. Not surprisingly, there has always been some overlap between the two geographical regions—for instance, Direk Kulsiriwad, often seen as a pioneer of Islamic reformism in Bangkok, was known to have been a close associate of Ismail Ahmed, a Pattalung native (north of Songkhla) who was also an early proponent of reformist Islamic thought. Despite these links, there have in fact been very little official ties and association between Salafi-Reformists among the Malay-Muslim community with those in the upper regions.

In the development of the religion in Bangkok, the influence of Islamic thought from the southern provinces has been notably limited. Rather, it has mostly been a South Asian brand of religious reform that has taken on especial salience by virtue of the contribution of the South Asian Muslim diasporas as conduits for the influx of Islamic reformist and modernist ideas. It was also South Asian Muslims who created the Jamiatul Islam, (Islamic association) which was modelled along the

lines of the modernist Jamaat-I Islami, formed by Abdul ala Maududi in Pakistan, and which proved to be a major vehicle through which reformist thought was propagated by Direk Kulsiriwad in Bangkok. Reformists also worked through radio talk shows, religious schools, and monthly publications such as Al-Jihad (The Struggle) and Al-Hidaya (Guidance), with the latter remaining in circulation.

**Transnational Islam and conflict**

The outbreak of a seemingly new cycle of violence in January, 2004, in the Malay-Muslim provinces of southern Thailand has, predictably, sparked intense interest in the nature, trends, and trajectories of militancy on the part of Malay-Muslim insurgents who have revived the struggle for a separate Patani state. This is an agenda which, though long standing, appears to be increasingly drawing from religious metaphors today.72 While this is not the place to rehash debates over the origins, motivations, and actors involved in the southern Thai conflict, some attention should be given to the transnational dimension, or lack thereof, of this conflict. Though the present author has already staked a position on the matter of transnational influences in the southern Thai conflict elsewhere,73 a sustained and considered deconstruction of the assumptions behind the perennial concern for external (read: global jihadi) involvement in this conflict remains vital, given the attention it has garnered in the international press.

Security and terrorism experts constantly warn that southern Thailand could attract intervention from foreign radical jihadi groups, if the Thai government continues with its current iron-fisted counter-insurgency policy. According to this view, the perpetuation of sectarian violence between Muslims and Buddhists, purportedly an objective of at least some of those involved in the ongoing violence, will feed the logic propounded in certain quarters of the nebulous global jihad. Of particular interest from this perspective is the debate on whether JI, the regional terrorist group which has been linked to al-Qaeda and known to operate in Indonesia and the southern Philippines, has


already established, or is likely to establish, a presence in southern Thailand. This is a legitimate concern, particularly given credible evidence that prominent JI members, such as Dulmatin and Umar Patek, had expressed an interest in extending support and assistance to insurgents in southern Thailand.74

Global Jihadi terrorism and the chimera of southern Thailand

The debate over Thailand’s connection to foreign Islamic terrorist groups emerged after it was revealed that the Bali bombers had planned their October, 2002, attacks in Bangkok. A senior JI member, currently in US custody, Afghan-trained Ridwan Issamuddin (or ‘Hambali’ as he is more popularly known), was also alleged to have planned to attack a number of high profile soft targets in Bangkok. These included the Bangkok International Airport and a US-owned hotel along the crowded Sukhumvit and Khao San roads which are popular with foreign backpackers. Yet despite countless suggestions that JI and al-Qaeda members may have entered Thailand, there remains no evidence that international jihadist groups have succeeded in penetrating the insurgency in the southern provinces. This is not to say, however, that members of the JI did not attempt to exploit local grievances in southern Thailand in their own interests.75 In fact, according to some ‘locals’ involved in the insurgency there were, evidently, expressions of interest on the part of foreigners in the conflict:

There were men who claimed to be JI members from Aceh. But they were too much like businessmen trying hard to make a deal. They wanted to sell us arms. They weren’t much interested in our cause. These men could be people disguising themselves as JI. But we don’t want to deal with them because if we become like JI, the situation in Patani will become even more complicated...like Iraq where Muslims kill Muslims. As of now there are already too many split among our people as to how to carry out this struggle. We don’t want to see more Muslims killing Muslims. Also, we don’t want to become international terrorists, as this is not our aim. That’s why we keep the fight within our border [Patani].76

74 This point was made by Sidney Jones during a seminar at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore on 29 October, 2008.
75 See Noor Huda Ismail, ‘Southern Thailand’s Conflict: A Rare Perspective’, *Jakarta Post*, 30 March, 2008.
76 Interview with a pemimpin (leader) involved in the current conflict, Yala, 13 August, 2007. It bears noting that there is no evidence that JI had operated in Aceh either.
The most prominent terrorism case in the country was the arrest in 2002 of four Thai Malay-Muslims who were accused of being JI members. Their defence lawyer, Somchai Neelaphajit, was later abducted by police officers and is now presumed dead (his body has yet to be recovered). In June, 2005, however, the case was dismissed when a Thai court ruled that there was insufficient evidence to convict the four suspects—medical doctor Waemahadi Wae-dao, school owner Maisuru Haji Abdulloh, Maisuru’s son Muyahid, and labourer Samarn Wae-kaji—of conspiring to bomb foreign embassies in Bangkok and tourist destinations in Pattaya and Phuket.

Since September, 2001, there has been no dearth of attempts to link violence in the south to a global jihadi terrorism driven by al-Qaeda and expressed in Southeast Asia in the JI and its ambitions of creating an abstract pan-Islamic state. Anecdotal ‘evidence’, such as the fact that several militants killed during military operations in southern Thailand were wearing T-shirts emblazoned with JI or Osama bin Laden logos, have been liberally cited. Others claim to possess ‘very reliable sources’ suggesting that Thai Malay-Muslims have for years been collaborating with Bangladesh-based Muslim militant movements and that ‘Thais were being trained in militant tactics by these groups. Yet others ventured early in the conflict that ‘independent estimates already put JI membership in southern Thailand as high as 10,000. The suggestions of Bangladeshi involvement in the southern Thai violence draw a highly questionable causal relationship based primarily on the observation that the tactics used by some of the militants in southern Thailand resonated with those employed by militants in South Asia. The hit-and-run tactics of militants operating in southern Thailand in fact follow a popular pattern in insurgencies,

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77 Information leading to their arrest came from a Singaporean JI member, Arifin bin Ali, aka John Wong, who was apprehended in Bangkok on May, 2003, and quickly handed over to the Singaporean government. Press statement from Singapore’s Ministry of Home Affairs, 10 June, 2003.


as do the relatively low (though admittedly increasing) yield bomb attacks, and on their own do not indicate any specific operational cooperation with foreign militant groups. Certainly, allegations of a Bangladeshi connection have never been corroborated by any statement or interrogation depositions of captured militants or alleged JI members in Thailand.81

Despite spending more than six years searching for evidence, neither Thai security and intelligence or the terrorism, analyst community have thus far been able to confirm JI activity in the south. What is clear, nonetheless, is that the climate of violence in southern Thailand differs considerably from other JI operational theatres. There is a distinct disinterest in Western targets, which has been and remains a trademark of global jihadi terrorist activity. Further to that, there have not been any suicide attacks, another trademark of JI and other jihadi terrorist organizations, in southern Thailand. The militant rhetoric revolving around violence has also differed markedly. While al-Qaeda affiliates in Iraq and elsewhere (including JI) proudly claim responsibility for acts of violence and make public calls to jihad, the perpetrators of violence in southern Thailand remain conspicuous in their silence. Insofar as they are concerned, currently there appears to be no urgent need to register ownership of violence, make political claims and demands, or even to associate these acts to the clarion call of jihad being issued by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, thereby belying attempts to neatly map out ‘tentacles of (global) terrorism’ that encompass Thailand’s restive southern provinces. In fact, given the tendency of al-Qaeda to trumpet their presence across the globe, it would not be too far-fetched to assume that if indeed al-Qaeda or any of its affiliates had gained a foothold in southern Thailand, they would have broadcast this achievement through all available media by now.82

According to some reports, international jihadis themselves did not view southern Thailand as fertile soil for their cause.83 In the present author’s interview with Ismail Lutfi, the Saudi-trained Salafi

cleric who has been accused by some of being JI’s southern Thailand representative, Lutfi revealed that while he did meet with ‘orang keras’ (militants) in Bra-o district (Pattani) when three of them attended one of his khutbah and asked to discuss religious matters with him, fundamental differences soon surfaced in the course of their discussion over the matter of religious violence, whereupon Lutfi apparently argued animatedly and subsequently dismissed them from his office.84

While there is little evidence suggesting that external agents have established a foothold in the southern Thai conflict, there is similarly little indication that local militants engaged in the violence are looking to tap into the nebulous global jihad to augment their capabilities. This view has been reinforced by the old guard separatists who have returned to the fray, and who have indicated that while they have a ‘moral obligation’ to liberate Patani, it would be misleading to assume that they are prepared to do so by way of links with the international jihadist movement or with radical groups such as JI. Several reasons have been cited for this. First, these leaders are conscious of the need to avoid making any move that might elicit negative international reactions and delegitimize their struggle. To that end, any connections with terrorist groups are seen as a guarantee of this. Second, collusion with extremist jihadi groups such as JI will almost certainly elicit negative attention from Malaysian authorities. Kuala Lumpur has developed a strong track record of clamping down on groups with radical agendas, particularly those that threaten to undermine the state. This is an important consideration because southern Thai separatists have traditionally enjoyed, and continue to have, relatively easy access into Malaysia.

Conclusion

Through the perspective of Islam and questions of Muslim identity in southern Thailand, this paper has been conceptually interested in how

84 According to Lutfi, the ‘orang keras’ began the conversation by asking about Islam. They then moved on to ask about the oppression of the Malay-Muslims in southern Thailand. It was at this junction that Lutfi claimed he became suspicious of their intentions. Following this, the three men raised the issue of violence as a legitimate response to the oppression that was taking place in the southern provinces. Lutfi claimed he got involved in an argument with the men over the question of the use of violence to resolve the problems in the south, and he subsequently dismissed them. Interview with Ismail Lutfi, Pattani, 14 January, 2006.
transnational influences are received, internalized, and replicated in
the form of local networks of faith and activism that have expanded the
space of religious interpretation, debate, and expression in southern
Thailand. Scholars of transnational faith-based movements have noted
how these networks have inherited and benefited from globalization
and the information revolution as actors, agents, and recipients. In
Thailand, the influence that transnational Islamic networks have
enjoyed has led to the creation of a rich constellation of Muslim
cultures, identities, and local networks throughout the country. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Muslim-majority southern
provinces. While often portrayed as possessing a monolithic Malay-
Muslim identity in contradistinction to the Thai-Buddhist majority
across the country, what often escapes scholarly attention is the fact
that the terrain of Muslim thought and practice in the south resembles
more a kaleidoscope of variegated religio-cultural identities.

Through the optics of three major local networks, this paper has
unpacked the nature, source, and consequence of this kaleidoscope of
faith and creed by evaluating the vehicles, modalities, and narratives
of transmission of Islamic knowledge to southern Thailand, and
by charting out complementary and competing networks of Islamic
groups and movements. In the YMAT case, it has imbibed the
Ikhwanul tradition of reform, modernism, and social activism. For
the Jama’ah Tabligh, its distinguishing feature is the sufí-oriented
emphasis on personal piety, more so than social and community
activism, although these elements are present to a certain extent,
for instance, in how the community sometimes supports and funds
individuals going for *khuruj*. In the case of the Salafi-Reformist
movement, a network has been built around faith-based organizations
and schools that depend to a large extent on considerable financial,
logistical, and ideological support from the Middle East. Despite
the fact that the southern provinces of Thailand have long enjoyed
a reputation of being a centre of Islamic knowledge and learning
in Southeast Asia, where a vibrant Malay-Muslim cultural tradition
continues to thrive, the globalization of religious identity and
knowledge epitomized by these three networks has meant that Islam
in the area is becoming increasingly influenced by transnational
forces that are negotiating, if not transforming, these very boundaries
of creed and custom. In some cases, most notably with the Salafi-
Reformist movement and their international sponsors, these networks
and their local replicas have been sustained by a political economy
whose working methods and objectives appear most illustrative of a
transnational dynamic that is multidimensional and intertwined with the propagation of agendas.

The impact that these new actors have had on the Islamic landscape of Thailand’s southern provinces has been nothing short of profound. The activism of these Ikhwanul, Tablighi, and Salafi-Reformist networks have resulted in the pluralization of ideas, weakening of religious monopolies, and fragmentation of traditional authority, giving rise to contestations within the Muslim community because of the epistemological and populist challenge posed to local understandings and practices of religion that have until now held sway, particularly in Thailand’s Islamic ‘heartland’ of the Malay-Muslim southern provinces. At the heart of this contestation are conflicting opinions on the nature and authenticity of knowledge and authority, Islam’s relationship with local culture and tradition, and ultimately, the source and markers of Muslim identity(s).

At the same time, these contestations have also, on occasion, given rise to a localization of transnationalist influences, where imported ideas are negotiated and adapted to local social and cultural terrains. This is evident in varying degrees in all the three cases studied here. In point of fact, the resilience of local norms, culture, and history is perhaps best expressed in the script of the ongoing separatist insurgency in southern Thailand, which remains anchored on a pattern of resistance dating back at least a century, and has evidently managed to insulate itself from the ideology of the global jihad that has so fixated terrorism and security analysts the world over.

In the final analysis, even as these networks expand and embed themselves in Thailand’s southern Muslim-majority provinces, the question remains how, and if, the global and local identities can in fact reconcile themselves in the context of southern Thailand in a way that will, if not augment, then at least preserve the central place of Islam in local identity.