RELIGIOUS MOTIVATION IN POLITICAL STRUGGLES: THE CASE OF THAILAND'S PATANI CONFLICT
Marte Nilsen and Shintaro Hara

Abstract

The collective term “jihadist conflict” is widely used in academia, policy and the media to describe a range of different political and religious conflicts. While all these conflicts are fought by Muslim groups who in one way or another regard their struggle as a jihad, the goals, motivation, and interpretation of jihad differ significantly from one conflict to another. The branding of movements as jihadist is driven by analysts, governments and the media on the one hand, and by violent extremist groups with a transnational agenda on the other. While this branding is often embraced by those who pursue violent means, be they militant groups engaged in intrastate conflicts or disenfranchised individuals carrying out terrorist acts, the brand itself does not help us understand the fundamental conflict dynamics. Using the example of the Patani conflict in Southern Thailand, this article illuminates how a political conflict may be misinterpreted if the religious motivation of militants is generalized rather than analyzed in its own terms.

Key words: Religious motivation, political conflicts, Islam, jihad, branding, Patani

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The Jihadist Brand

The general discourse about conflicts involving Muslim militants is challenged by theoretical and methodological shortcomings. Jihadism as a theoretical concept is a highly problematic one that analysts, journalists and policy makers nonetheless tend not to problematize. Even the academic literature fails to provide clear definitions and is inconsistent in its application of the term.\(^2\) As a consequence, when a range of conflicts that are quite different in terms of purpose, motivation and tactics are branded as jihadist conflicts, without a clear definition of what the term implies, analysts risk the methodological fallacy of comparing apples and oranges.

In the wake of the attacks on Charlie Hebdo in Paris in 2015 and on the Orlando nightclub in 2016, Mark Juergensmeyer argued that the perpetrators behind the attacks branded their actions as jihad in order to give the actions an ideological spin, thus dignifying their other, more personal motives. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State (ISIS), on their part, engaged in a similar branding by taking credit for an attack that their organization did not directly control or support. By so doing they displayed symbolic strength and a seemingly wide geographic reach. Juergensmeyer’s argument is that some of the recent incidents of terrorism are only branded with an ideological label, and are not directly tied to an activist group.\(^3\) This kind of branding strategy helps market the organization, provides publicity, and may, in turn, attract more fighters and sympathizers.

This branding of jihadism has two main drivers: analysts, politicians, and journalists in search of a meaningful conceptual framework on the one side and extremist groups or so-called terror organizations in search of publicity on the other. In between we find a range of

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\(^2\) Hegghammer 2009, 245.
\(^3\) Juergensmeyer 2016.
Muslim militant groups and individuals ready to use violence, who take on a jihadist brand and adapt it to their local or personal religious and political contexts. Militant groups may adopt symbols, language and tactics, and express a sense of shared solidarity with other groups, even with extremist organizations. However, the jihadist brand is often superficial and has little significance for how they carry out their struggles. Most Muslim militant groups around the world fight primarily for local political goals where religion is one of many factors, and not for the creation of a global Islamic caliphate.4

Jihadism as a term entered the academic and political discourse in the late 1990s, when jihadist movements became routinely defined as Salafi groups who use violent means to defend Islam from non-Muslim oppressors.5 However, Salafism is a highly diverse tradition. Even the segments of Salafists who engage in violent means have distinctly different ideological and theological interpretations of Islam and their military targets are equally diverse. As Hegghammer has noted, the use of such theology-based typologies, such as jihadi, Salafi, or jihadi-salafi, reveals little about the political preferences of the actors described. It is highly problematic to assume that all actors known as Salafi or jihadi-salafi in their respective contexts can be analyzed as parts of a single transnational Salafi movement.6

To reiterate, so-called jihadist conflicts around the world are highly diverse, each with intricate local dimensions, and the individuals who associate themselves with the various rebel groups are motivated by a number of personal and societal factors. Lumping them together under a common conceptual brand implies that groups and individuals have common traits that will also be significant for conflict resolution. In this article we argue that this branding of jihadism conceals more than it reveals, and that the best starting point to achieve a peaceful solution is to understand each conflict as local and to address local disputes and

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4 Mueller 2004; D’Amato 2017, 1.
5 Neumann 2014, 9.
grievances. Militant struggles might be understood as quests for autonomy or independence, as political units framed by history, by socio-economic conditions, or by language and ethnicity, in addition to religion. Here we take both a non-reductionist and a non-essentialist approach to religious motivation in intrastate conflicts. Religion is a key motivating factor in many struggles, but it is rarely the only or even the most important one.

These problems are illustrated by the Patani conflict. The territory of the three southernmost provinces of Thailand—Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat (in addition to four districts of Songkhla province), which roughly constitute the former Malay sultanate of Patani—was annexed by the kingdom of Siam (the former name of Thailand) in 1902. Ever since, opposition against Siamese/Thai rule can be traced within the ethnic Malay population. Insurgencies against what militant groups view as “the Siamese colonizers” have regularly troubled the region. The latest surge of violence escalated around 2004 and since then, bombs, arson attacks and killings have plagued the region on an almost daily basis. After a decade of conflict up to 2014, more than 6,000 people had been killed in some 14,000 violent attacks, injuring more than 10,000. While the main targets of the Patani militants are members of the Thai security forces and those Muslim locals who are seen as collaborators of the Thai state, Buddhist monks and the Thai Buddhist minority population have also been attacked. In response, some members of the Thai Buddhist community have organized militias to protect their villages, as well as to mobilize against the Muslim majority population.

Based on multiple field researches in the Patani region conducted over more than a

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7 Davisakd 2008, 85; Syukri 2005, 81. In this article the term “Patani” refers to the geographic region of the former Patani sultanate which roughly constitutes the three southernmost Thai provinces Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, as well as four districts of Songkhla province. The term “Pattani” refers specifically to the Thai province and its main city. While “Patani” is derived from Malay spelling, “Pattani” is derived from Thai spelling.
8 Che Man 1990; Surin 1982.
9 Srisompob 2014.
10 Deep South Watch.
11 McCargo 2012, 36-41.
decade, we argue ahead that an analysis of the links between political power, nationalism, ethnicity and religion may improve our understanding of the conflict. We illuminate how a political conflict, like the one in the Patani region, can be misinterpreted if the religious motivation of militants is generalized rather than analyzed on its own terms. Thailand and the Patani Insurgency

When a string of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) detonated around several of Thailand’s popular tourist destinations on 11 and 12 August 2016, killing four and injuring fifty-six people, it instantly caught the attention of the international media. Was this yet another example of jihadist attacks on Western tourists? The military government was quick to dismiss the assumption, as well as any links to the Malay Muslim insurgency in the country’s southernmost provinces. The latter dismissal was especially astonishing considering that the attacks did resemble the tactics of southern Malay Muslim militants. The reason for the government's hasty conclusions, even before investigations had brought in any substantial evidence, is no doubt its fear of the potential damage to the country’s tourism industry, which accounts for 8.6 per cent of direct contribution to GDP (19.3 per cent when indirect contributions are included).12

Regarding the government’s insistence that “Thailand does not have conflicts regarding ethnicity, territory or minority groups,”13 everyone remotely familiar with the political situation in Thailand knows that this is not true. The Patani conflict is certainly about territory, as the region is seen by the militants as occupied land. Furthermore, it is certainly about ethnicity, as the widespread discrimination experienced by the local Malay Muslim population has been a crucial factor in mobilizing more than ten thousand young men14 to a violent insurgency against the Thai state.

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12 World Travel & Tourism Council 2015, 1.
14 Wassana 2015, 1.
The material evidence for the so-called “Mother's Day attacks”\(^\text{15}\) also renders the Malay-Muslim link indisputable. The kind of coordinated IEDs used were typical for the Malay-Muslim militants in Thailand’s deep south, as were the arson attacks that took place in the same period and the same region. Analysts from the organization Deep South Watch pointed out that as many as fifty IEDs were detonated in the Patani region during the first ten days of August, before and immediately after Thailand voted in a national referendum, on 7 August, over a constitution dictated by the military junta. Anti-constitution slogans were found at eighteen of these locations.\(^\text{16}\) To investigate the thirteen bombs in the tourist areas of the upper south independently from the other fifty detonated in the Patani region over these days made little sense. Indeed, later investigations and arrests indicated clear links to Patani militants.\(^\text{17}\) However, it was not only the Thai government that gave different weighting to the two attack patterns. The fifty IEDs detonated in the conflict zone received little media attention in Thailand, compared to the Mother’s Day attacks, and almost none in international media.

Since the Mother’s Day attacks and some other isolated incidents in tourist areas did point indeed towards Malay Muslim militants,\(^\text{18}\) does this mean that the Patani rebellion had taken a step towards international terrorism by targeting Thailand’s tourist industry, something that could indicate a possible involvement of the Indonesian Jemaah Islamiah (JI) or ISIS affiliated groups? In the initial stages of this conflict, which coincided with the escalating “War on Terror” after the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and the Pentagon in the USA, a number of analysts pointed towards Thailand as a potential hot spot.

\(^\text{15}\) 12 August marks Queen Sirikit’s birthday and is celebrated as Mother’s Day in Thailand, a significant Thai national holiday.
\(^\text{16}\) Engvall 2016.
\(^\text{17}\) Deep South Watch 2016, 3; Sasiwan 2016.
\(^\text{18}\) Davis 2016; Wheeler 2016.
for international terrorism. While direct involvement proved hard to verify, the indications were many. JI militants were known to interact with militants from the Patani region, and in 2003, Hambali, the JI leader and the link between JI and Al Qaeda, was captured in central Thailand in a joint operation between the CIA and the Thai police.

While the majority of scholars with expertise on the conflict in Southern Thailand rejected this analysis as simplistic, uncritical reference to jihadi Patani militants continued to distract the academic discourse on the conflict. However, in spite of a number of warnings, Patani never became that “second front” of a global jihad that many security analysts predicted. Svensson has argued that one of the reasons why the Patani conflict has not escalated is that this conflict, like many similar conflicts with a religious dimension in Southeast Asia, is mainly motivated by other, local factors.

According to Svensson, religion in Patani only plays a peripheral role in the conflict, as opposed to conflicts in the Middle East, where he argues that religion plays a central role in 87 percent of the conflicts. While we agree with Svensson’s argument in the case of Patani, we are not convinced that the central role of religion in conflicts in the Middle East is sufficient to explain the level of violence there. We find it unhelpful to epitomize conflicts according to degrees of centrality of religion. Instead we prefer Hegghammer’s typology of five main rationales for actions that underlie most forms of Muslim or Islamist activism. These are: “state-oriented” rationales; “nation-oriented” rationales; “ummah-oriented” rationales; “morality-oriented” rationales; and “sectarian-oriented” rationales.

The Patani conflict, as well as most conflicts with a religious dimension in Southeast Asia, is driven mainly by a “nation-oriented” rationale, while a mix of the above rationales

24 Hegghammer 2009, 258.
may be found in the numerous conflicts in the Middle East. In many cases there is more than one relevant rationale in the same conflict, and one rationale can over time replace another. Toft has argued that religion is likely to become central to a civil war when political elites compete in evoking religious doctrines and beliefs in an effort to maintain or attract domestic and international support and that this kind of religious outbidding is typical in societies with pre-existing religious cleavages.\textsuperscript{25} The advantage to Hegghammer’s typology isn’t just that it provides a basis for more nuanced thinking about the causes of Muslim militancy, but also that it enables us to study Muslim militancy in a more comparative perspective. Highlighting the political core of Muslim activism enables us to spot similarities with non-Muslim forms of political violence,\textsuperscript{26} thus avoiding an essentialist conceptualization of the rationales of Muslim groups.

**Who are the Jihadists?**

Jihadism as a term is often implied but rarely defined. In some analyses it is used to describe broadly any conflict involving Muslim militants expressing some kind of religious motivation. In others it is used more narrowly to describe Salafi Islamist groups targeting civilian and primarily Western interests in terrorist attacks.\textsuperscript{27} Jihad in itself is an important aspect of Islam, referring to every Muslim’s duty to strive in the way of God, and to realize God’s will.\textsuperscript{28} It is usually associated with a person’s inner spiritual struggle; it is only in the meaning of *jihad qital* (armed jihad) that the term is understood as a violent defense of Islam. However, armed jihad covers much more than “terrorist” attacks on “Western interests.” Most Muslim militant groups fighting local political struggles will define their fight as a jihad, without regarding it as a transnational fight for Islam. Religion increasingly has come to form

\textsuperscript{25} Toft 2006, 19.
\textsuperscript{26} Hegghammer 2009, 261-262.
\textsuperscript{27} Neumann 2014, 9.
\textsuperscript{28} Esposito 1998, 93.
the cornerstone of ethnic identity. Consequently, local conflicts in many parts of the world are perceived as both ethnic and religious. As Scott Appleby noted: “it is virtually impossible to disaggregate the precise roles of religion and ethnicity.”

While the East and Southeast Asian region has seen a dramatic fall in armed conflicts since 1979, many remaining conflicts have religious components. The conflicts in Bangsamoro and Patani are two examples of such political conflicts where religion, more specifically Islam, has come to play a role. Long running disputes over territory, governance, and culture have taken on religious rhetoric in which the concept of jihad is prominent, albeit without the transnational jihadist agenda. Security analysts have warned about the interaction between local Muslim fighters and transnational jihadist groups, such as JI in the case of Southeast Asia, and predicted that it might only be a matter of time before these local struggles are co-opted by transnational Islamic militant groups.

There certainly is documentation of communication between leaders of militant groups in Southeast Asia, as well as evidence of common training arenas and exchanges of strategies. Still, it must be determined whether the groups are fighting for the same cause, or if they are under any form of political or ideological influence from transnational groups. As we will demonstrate, Muslim rebel groups in the region may share a sense of solidarity and brotherhood, however, there is little, if any, evidence of a pan-Islamic cause.

Another theoretical problem of the discourse on Muslim militancy is the unwavering focus on terrorism. There is a tendency to view so-called terrorism as qualitatively different from other violent acts. Regardless of the civilian loss, a political struggle restricted to a certain conflict area generally is considered less serious than, for example, a terrorist attack in an area frequented by tourists, with the latter being regarded as a greater threat with a

29 Gunning and Jackson 2011, 374; Cavanaugh 2004, 24.
distinctly different motivation. Like the term jihad, the term terrorism is often ill-defined, and it is rarely clear what violent acts qualify as terrorism. In recent times it is popularly assumed that terrorism is inextricably linked to Islamist violence, although the vast majority of terror attacks in Western Europe over the past forty-five years were executed by non-Islamist actors.\(^2\)

To move forward, the academic discourse about jihadism should strive to identify and understand the conflict drivers. It would be foolish to assume that perpetrators of terrorist acts do not have political agendas. The agenda may derive from religiously shaped arguments, but these arguments are not detached from political realities. For instance, if Boko Haram in Nigeria or Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines claims affiliation with Al-Qaeda or its Indonesian branch JI respectively, the operations would still relate primarily to local political contexts. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) that attacked Myanmar security forces in October 2016 and August 2017 is led by individuals within the Rohingya diaspora in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia who rely on the compassion among Muslim communities around the world for the plight of the Rohingya for legitimacy. In this sense, ARSA, known also as Harakah al-Yaqin (the faith movement), is international. However, the group primarily directs its attacks against the Myanmar state.\(^3\)

Politics is central even for ISIS, which today is regarded as the embodiment of a violent Islamist group with a transnational agenda. Despite the organization’s deeply fundamentalist ideology and its ability to attract support from foreign fighters from the global \textit{ummah}, ISIS, too, is a product of political realities. It was the US-led invasion, occupation and destabilization of Iraq that laid the foundation for the growth of ISIS, and it was later amplified by the Syrian civil war. In many cases Syria’s foreign fighters are new converts, and others are disenfranchised, formerly secular Muslims searching for a purpose in life. The perpetrators of terrorist attacks in countries like France and Belgium seem

\(^2\) Datagraver 2016.
\(^3\) International Crisis Group 2016.
to be motivated by internal political problems linked to old colonial legacies, failed integration, unemployment and social injustice in their home countries. As Barker argues, all terrorism is local.34 What distinguishes terrorist attacks from other political struggles is not easily determined, and a scrutiny of the relevant “push and pull” factors would provide better analytical tools to understand the motivation of people who pursue violent ends.35

What’s Religion Got to Do with It?

If there are problems with the conceptual focus on religion in the analyses of jihadist conflicts, does this mean that religion is an insignificant factor? Not at all. Reducing the religious drive of a Muslim armed group to a principal question of territory and political authority would be as flawed as employing an essentialist interpretation of jihad. However, analysts tend to misinterpret conflicts where groups claim jihad as something radically different from other conflicts, based on the widely held assumption that religion and politics do not mix. Western academia is heavily shaped by secular understandings of war,36 and because religion is viewed as an illegitimate cause of war, a call for jihad seems exotic.

It is time to recognize religion as an important motivating factor in political conflicts. Atran et.al. have shown how “devoted actors,” unconditionally committed to a sacred cause and to “sacred values,” express willingness to make costly sacrifices, including that of their own lives.37 Considering how religious and ethnic identities are increasingly interconnected all over the Muslim world helps us to better understand the powerful alloy of religion, ethnicity and political causes reflected in rebel groups, and not least in the recruitment of militants.38 A political, ethnically defined fight may also be perceived as a struggle to defend the rights of the Muslims—a jihad qital (armed jihad). The solidarity with other Muslim

34 Barker 2003, 112.
36 Lunde 2009, 235.
37 Atran et.al. 2014, 51.
38 Helbardt 2015, 98.
groups facing injustice and hardship is subsequently strong. Most fighters are driven by some sort of “sacred values” but not necessarily by millenarist convictions, such as aiming for a global caliphate or other goals associated with violent transnational Islamists.

Most Muslim societies have gone through a substantial transformation over the past fifty years. Relatively homogenous local religious cultures have been challenged by modernist interpretations and practices of people returning home from religious studies in Pakistan, Egypt or the Middle East. Salafi or deobandi\(^\text{39}\) inspired ways of living have in many places suppressed ethnic identities, and caused friction and intra-religious conflict with the more traditional beliefs and Sufi inspired practices. Transnational, violent, Islamist movements often claim adherence to the Salafi tradition. This is true for groups like the Indonesian JI, Al Qaeda and ISIS. The militants leading the political struggle in Southern Thailand, however, are largely traditionalists and have little in common with the modernist religious teaching of Salafi preachers.

While some madrasas are known to recruit militants, the vast majority of religious schools are preoccupied with accomplishing their institutional goal of religious education. Fundamentalism is first and foremost a religious reaction against secularism, and it is on the rise within all religious traditions. However, only in special circumstances does fundamentalism lead to violence. Brekke argues that first-hand experience with extreme violence is a prerequisite for fundamentalist groups to turn to terrorism.\(^\text{40}\) An illustration is the Chechen conflict. The jihadist Islamist movement that fought the Second Chechen War (1999-2009) only appeared after the brutalities of the First Chechen War (1994-1995).\(^\text{41}\)

Perhaps is it this violent culture, rather than fundamentalist convictions, that leads to terrorism and the extreme violence perpetrated by some of the so-called jihadist groups. If this is the

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39 Muslim reform movement within the Sunni tradition, known for proselytizing among Muslims.  
40 Brekke 2007, 134.  
case, it is the brutality of war, not religion, that should be the subject of interest in the analyses of Muslim militant conflicts’ development from political to jihadist struggles.

**Branding the Patani Jihad**

Over the past two decades, there has been some interaction between Patani militants and various Muslim militant groups from other Southeast Asian countries. However, there is to this date no evidence of direct involvement of outside Muslim groups in the conflict in southern Thailand, or indications that this conflict has developed from its local scope to a regional or transnational one. In a recent interview we conducted with an ustaz (religious leader) with links to militants, any influence by groups like ISIS or Al Qaeda was promptly rejected.⁴² Similarly, a member of MARA Patani, the peace dialogue group of seven Malay Muslim militant organizations, dismissed the notion that the Patani militant movement had any links with Salafi groups whatsoever.⁴³

What we did see, however, was an occasional branding of transnational jihadism among some locals—a branding that seems somewhat shallow and ephemeral. In 2001 there was a widespread and sudden appearance of Osama Bin Laden T-shirts and posters, even before the resurgence of the Patani conflict. This seemed to confirm suspicions that local people were under the influence of transnational terrorist organizations. However, the Bin Laden phase, a fascination especially for juveniles, disappeared rather quickly. It is our clear impression, after observing local Malay Muslim communities from within for more than a decade, that neither villagers nor local militants have any shared ideology with violent, transnational, Islamist groups. We have found instead that the conflict rests on three inter-linked pillars. These are religion (*agama*), nation (*bangsa*) and homeland (*thana air*), which can be expressed respectively through the acronym of *alif, ba, ta*, the first three letters in the

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⁴² Interview with BRN affiliated ustaz, December 2016, Malaysia.
⁴³ Interview with a MARA Patani leader, November 2016, Malaysia.
The branding of jihad only happened as certain symbols suddenly appeared in the international media. At the time, local people had little information of what they represented apart from a notion of Muslims fighting against the “American imperialists.” However, as more information emerged about the symbols and what they represented, the symbols disappeared. In interviews, local religious leaders have pointed out that these brandings primarily are expressed by youths who are not associated with the rebel movement, and that their use is normally short lived. When asked about why some local youths were attracted by the ISIS flag, most informants explained that the sentence on the flag itself is good. The flag depicts the shahada— the testimony of faith that “there is no God but Allah,” and below this sentence appears the name of Allah and the Prophet Muhammed. A MARA Patani leader pointed out that the symbolism in the ISIS flag is no different from the symbolism in the Saudi Arabian flag, but speculated that ISIS’s design might be more attractive to the younger generation.

To this date there has been no confirmation of anyone from the Patani region joining JI in Indonesia, or ISIS in Syria. There was some media speculation about the possible link between ISIS and one member of the leading militant group, Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), upon his arrest in Malaysia. However, little evidence of this link was presented in the news report. Moreover, in 2015 Russian intelligence reported that ISIS militants had infiltrated Thailand, but the aim of this infiltration allegedly was to target Russian interests in the country. The Syrian War has attracted foreign fighters to ISIS from around the world, not exclusively from Muslim communities. Thailand has, however, not yet experienced this.

44 Interview with ex-BRN member, October 2016, Narathiwat, Thailand. Hara 2016b.
45 Interview with two local traditionalist religious leaders, February 2017, Pattani Thailand.
46 Interview with MARA Patani leader, November 2016, Malaysia.
47 Teeranai 2017.
48 Newsweek 12 April 2015.
In mosques around the Patani region there are frequent expressions of support for the struggles of mujahideens (holy fighters) in various countries like Palestine or Afghanistan, or of sympathy for the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, but ISIS is never mentioned. To be more precise, ISIS’s struggle is simply not regarded as a jihad. According to the aforementioned ustaz, in order for a struggle to be recognized as a jihad, there are certain strict conditions that must be fulfilled. In his opinion, the struggle of ISIS doesn’t fulfill these conditions.49

While the targeting of Thailand’s tourist industry could be interpreted as a strategic shift for some Patani militants, the objective of their struggle has not changed. According to central members of the movement, the purpose of using violence is to weaken the enemy and cause confusion, to the extent that they will be ready to negotiate. The tourist industry is the Achilles’ heel of the Thai state, and the Patani conflict remains unmistakably nationalistic. In fact, the religious motivation of the movement has been subordinated by the overriding political aim. Out of eleven Patani militants interviewed, none reported joining their respective organizations as a result of religious influence, or exposure to specific religious ideologies. They reported their main motivation as one that predated their decision to join the movement: their enduring resentment against what they see as the Siamese colonization, originating from their own experiences and observations.50 Even in the booklet Berjihad di Patani (The Holy Struggle for Patani) that circulated among militants and in religious institutions in the early 2000s, the nationalistic undertone of its author permeates the text—something that the numerous Qur’anic references and surah citations are not able to disguise.51 Patani militants have political goals rooted in the local dynamics and context.

49 Interview with BRN affiliated ustaz from BRN, December 2016, Malaysia.
50 Interview with two ex-BRN members, December 2016, Malaysia.
51 Liow 2009, 131. The Berjihad di Patani is by no means a reference book for the militant movement. MARA Patani leaders have expressed disagreement with some of its content (Interview with MARA Patani leader, November 2016, Malaysia).
However, while Patani militants are driven by a political and nationalistic agenda, it is clear that religion and Islam also play a part in the conflict. The motivation for joining the rebel movement combines ethnic politics and religion.

**Politics and Religion**

The Patani militant movement consists of a decentralized network of fighters, where the rank and file soldiers only know their local commanders, and are largely unaware of the organization’s political leadership. These fighters are mostly motivated by an aspiration of independence for the Patani Malay population from the Thai state, and by a sense of jihad—the sense that their struggle is a religious obligation, and that if they die for this cause they will become martyrs.\(^{52}\) As Helbardt (2015) has shown, the idea of a true Islamist society is an important motivating factor for many fighters.\(^{53}\) However, the distinction between ethnicity and religion is nonexistent in the Patani region. In the local context of separation between Thai Buddhists, Chinese, and Malay Muslims as each other’s “significant others,” Malayness and Islam have merged historically. To be Malay is to be a Muslim. The Malay language may be referred to as “Islam language,” and Malay food may be presented as “Muslim food.”\(^{54}\) Even the term jihad has its own local interpretation where religious and ethnic aspects blend together. In an interview, a leading figure of the Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani (GIMP) defined their struggle as a jihad, but distinguished it from other interpretations of the term with the explanation that the organization claims their own rights, rather than the rights of others. Further, he explained that the struggle will end as soon as the Siamese colonizers grant the rights that they took away from Patani.\(^{55}\) In other words, it is interpreted as a jihad of Patani people (as an obligation), by Patani people (as *mujahideens*), and for Patani people

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53 Helbardt 2015, 115.
54 Nilsen 2012, 127. This phenomenon occurs only when the Thai language is in use, not the local Malay dialect.
55 Interview with GIMP leader, December 2016, Malaysia.
(with independence as the ultimate goal). For Patani fighters, religion and ethnicity together form their “sacred values.”

There are many reasons for this intertwined ethnic and religious identity which transpires at various levels in Patani Malay communities. The suppression of Malay ethnic identities in Thailand’s assimilation policies is one. While Malay culture and language have been regarded with suspicion, the Muslim religious identity has been accepted by the Thai state and the Thai population to the extent that it does not threaten the political cohesion of the Thai kingdom. Malay culture and language have thus been cultivated within religious frames in order to be acceptable. The Thai state has at the same time tried to co-opt the Patani region with the use of Buddhist and nationalist symbols, and by building Buddhist temples and stupas and supporting Buddhist monasteries in the region. This has caused friction between the two religions, and has contributed to an intensified Malay Muslim self-awareness as a colonized people, and to further alienation and opposition against Thai rule. The religious motivation of Patani locals and Patani militants is, in other words, an important part of their political drive.

This religious motivation has, however, been misinterpreted by many analysts. The increase in Muslim self-awareness and religious identity has been viewed as a consequence of Salafi inspiration from students returning from religious education in the Middle East, Egypt and Pakistan. Subsequently, this has been interpreted as a sign of radicalization with a potential for violent Islamist ideology. This reasoning was particularly evident in the early writings of security scholar Abuza, who advanced a general argument about militant Islam in Southeast Asia, with Indonesia as the main focal point, rather than an analysis of the situation on the ground in the Patani region. One of Abuza’s main concerns was the

56 Liow 2016, 110-114.
57 Nilsen 2012, 156.
58 Nilsen 2013, 40-44.
59 Abuza 2003.
institutions of religious education financed and religiously inspired by Salafists from the Middle East, Egypt, and Pakistan. He claimed that due to Salafi influence, the Patani militant movement “is as much a battle within the Muslim community as it is an overt sectarian conflict, with the insurgents trying to impose very hard-line Salafism on the population.”

Abuza was right in his observation that there is a strong influence of reformist Islam in the Patani region, “the new school”—khana mai in Thai or kaum muda in Malay. Among them are the Salafis, who challenge Patani’s traditional Islamic practices known as “the old school”—khana gao in Thai or kaum tua in Malay. However, he was wrong to assume that these reformists are the driving forces of the conflict. There is a strong connection between prominent members of various Patani militant organizations and educational centers in the Middle East known as Salafi strongholds. The Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) was founded in Mecca in 1968. The newly deceased BRN profile, Sapae-ing Baso, also studied in Mecca. Azzudin Abdul Rahman and Abu Hafes of the Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani (BIPP) both studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. There is even a strong historical link to Syria, where a number of PULO members were educated. At that time, however, it was Socialist and not Islamist thoughts that dominated the education system. A few of the members also received military training there, but the training was led by secular Palestinians who at the time had a base in Syria. However, while there is a long tradition of Patani militants studying at Middle Eastern Universities, Salafi teaching is explicitly rejected by these organizations. Instead, “the old school” or traditionalists form the backbone of the rebellion, and there is considerable continuity from previous insurgent groups to the present

61 Abuza 2009, 4.
62 Joll 2012, 78; McCargo 2008.
63 Abuza 2009, 4.
64 Interview with PULO-MKP leader, November 2016, Malaysia.
65 Interview with MARA Patani leader, November 2016, Malaysia.
Another problem with Abuza’s perception of the Salafi movement as central to the rebellion is that the main Salafi scholar, and one of the most popular preachers in the Patani region, Ismail Lutfi Japakiya, rejects that the ongoing rebellion can be described as a jihad. Abuza linked Lutfi to Indonesian Salafists with connections to JI (including former JI leader Hambali), but failed to demonstrate how his reformist Islamist movement had anything to do with the Patani militants.

Madrasas, or pondok schools, as they are called in Malay, have also been associated with the rebel movement, and the Thai state keeps the schools under tight surveillance. The pondoks are religious boarding schools of tremendous importance to the local Patani culture, due to a lack of trust in Thai secular education, and to the proud tradition of the Patani pondoks and their central role in fulfilling the spiritual and cultural needs of the local population. The fact that many pondok schools are financed from abroad and include teaching by religious reformists has raised suspicion within Thailand. However, the pondok schools are also divided into reformist and traditional schools, where the reformist schools mainly operate as private Islamic schools in which half of the curriculum is taken from the standard Thai curriculum (wicha saman), and the remaining part is dedicated to Islamic studies. These schools receive funding from the Thai state—a funding scheme that has been described as a Trojan horse designed to erode the robust traditional pondok system from within. The traditional pondok, for the most part, do not operate with a standard curriculum or receive state funding, but provide a purely Islamic education according to the old traditions.

66 Helbardt 2015, 28.
67 Japakyia 2005, 76; Liow 2009, 125.
68 Abuza 2009, 49-52, 121, 123.
69 Hara 2016.
70 Feigenblatt et.al. 2010, 304.
71 Liow 2009. It should be noted, however, that the government’s subsidy arrangement has led a number of more traditional pondok schools to adopt the Thai standard curriculum as well.
Both private Islamic schools and the traditional pondok are relevant in the search to understand the Patani rebel movement, and how youngsters are recruited as fighters.\textsuperscript{72} Some pondok schools certainly play a role in the radicalization of recruits. There are, however, vast differences between the private Islamic school pondok and the traditional pondok, and the support local people show their traditional pondok schools should not be interpreted as support for violence. The traditional pondok represent a forum for social, cultural and spiritual education, and are the prime arena for keeping up the local Malay language and its written form jawi (written Malay based on the Arabic rather than the Latin rumi alphabet, as in Malaysia).\textsuperscript{73} In other words, even religious education is closely related to ethno-linguistic identity.

To understand the religious motivation of rebels in the Patani conflict, and even the term jihad, we need to carefully examine how politics, nationalism and ethnic identity are interlinked with religion in the region. The term jihad in and of itself gives little meaning unless we consider its specific local connotations. Islam has an indisputable position in the Patani Malay perception of polity. For the BRN, the main militant organization, the short-term objective is independence. The longterm objective is the establishment of an Islamic Patani state recognized by God. The ideal is Baldatun Toibatun Warabbun Ghafuur (A Good Land, and a Forgiving Lord), as it is described in al-Quran, QS 34:15.\textsuperscript{74} The envisioned state is not the theocratic caliphate, as accentuated by ISIS in Syria and Iraq, but rather a state that governs in accordance with the laws of God, in line with the old Patani sultanate.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{72} Liow 2009, 129-132.
\textsuperscript{73} Hara 2016; Liow 2016, 114.
\textsuperscript{74} This Quranic verse became well known as an ideological line of the Patani militant movement after the head of the BRN delegation to the 2013 peace dialogue, Hasan Taib, used it to conclude his first YouTube video clip, published 26 April 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XzxHyvRu1U
\textsuperscript{75} Joll 2010, 268.
Conclusion

None of the militants we have interviewed in the Patani region or across the Malaysian border has claimed to be motivated primarily by religion. They fight for independence, but they do see independence as a “holy purpose.” Their religious motivation is intertwined with the political and historical backdrop of the region, and therein lies the key to conflict resolution. To use Hegghammer’s typology, they express a clear “nation-oriented” rationale behind their struggle. 76 They seek sovereignty for the Patani region, which is perceived as occupied and controlled by the Buddhist Thai state. In this case, peace can be reached with political concessions, such as increased local self-determination and a radical decentralization of power. In this political process, it is important that Islam and the local Malay language be accepted as equal to Buddhism and the Thai language.

The Patani conflict is, in this sense, not particularly complicated. In other conflicts where religion is at play, the rationales driving the conflict may be more complex, and two or more of the rationales in Hegghammer’s typology could play out in the same conflict. This is perhaps what complicates many of the current conflicts in the Middle East.

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76 Hegghammer 2009, 258.


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