Depending on the source, the percentage of Muslims in Thailand has been placed at around 4–8 per cent of a total population of approximately 65 million people. Islam is currently the largest minority religion in Thailand where (despite intermittent pressures by the Buddhist Sangha), Buddhism, a religion of great import in Thai society and the creed of the vast majority of Thais, has not been declared the official religion of the country. Muslims are concentrated in the southernmost provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, and Satun, where they make up anywhere between 65–85 per cent of the local population and are mostly ethnic Malay. The region itself has become known in popular parlance, somewhat problematically, as the “deep south”, “deepestmost south” or “far south” — terminology that further accentuates the perception of marginality to Thailand.¹ Other areas of major Muslim concentrations are in the North (Chiang Mai), the central plains (Bangkok and Ayutthaya), and the “upper” south (Songkhla, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phuket). This narrative of the marginalization of Malay-Muslims is further underscored in the way that until recently they were also known pejoratively as khaek or “dark-skinned visitors” in colloquial discourse.² There is also a Buddhist minority in the Muslim-dominated southern provinces amounting to approximately 30 per cent of the population, depending on which of the southern provinces one is referring to. Despite their minority status in the south, Buddhists are concentrated chiefly in urban areas and town centres (though there are Buddhist-majority rural villages scattered across the southern provinces), while the Malay-Muslims have a weightier presence in rural areas.
where economic activity continues to revolve around farming, agriculture, and fishing, and where traditional Malay practices and lifestyles still hold sway despite the onslaught of development and modernization.  

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM’S PLACE IN THAI HISTORY

The question of the arrival of Islam to Patani continues to be debated by Thai historians. According to some historical records, Muslim communities were present in Thailand as early as the thirteenth century — prior even to the conversion of Melaka — during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng (1279–1298) who ruled the Sukhothai kingdom. Islam, as several scholars have noted, arrived in Thailand via a number of routes, namely, the Indo-Malay Archipelago, Yemen, Persia, South Asia, China, Burma, and Cambodia. In local Malay-Muslim folklore, however, the transformation of Patani into an Islamic kingdom is traced to the conversion of the Patani king Phraya Tu Nakpa by Syaikh Sa’eed, an ulama from Pasai. The Patani king is said to have sought Syaikh Sa’eed’s help in curing a skin disease that was plaguing him. In brief, the folklore tells of how the Patani king made a promise to convert to Syaikh Sa’eed’s religion, Islam, if the latter were able to successfully rid him of the ailment. According to this narrative, after being cured Phraya Tu Nakpa failed to keep his promise and the disease returned. This cycle of healing and relapse happened three times, and it was only after the third occasion that the king honoured his commitment, and upon being permanently cured, converted to Islam and took the name Sultan Ismail Shah Zillulah Fi al-Alam.

In line with the rest of archipelagic Southeast Asia, the vast majority of Muslims in Thailand subscribe to the Shafi’i school of Islamic jurisprudence. The only major exception to this are Muslims in the north of the country, such as those populating Chiang Mai, who are mostly Hanafi in jurisprudential orientation. Beyond that, there remains a significant Sufi influence carried over from older traditions, and since Sufi Muslims also subscribe to one of the four accepted schools of Sunni jurisprudence, it is not uncommon to find that in Thailand Sufism overlaps at various points with the orthodox practices of the mainstream Shafi’i traditionalists.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Persian merchants brought Shi’a Islam to Thailand. The Ayutthaya era of Persian-influenced Islam may arguably be considered the “golden age” of Islam in Thai history, for Islam flourished at this time. During this period, the Muslim community in Ayutthaya was not only cosmopolitan but, as a result of its role in commerce, trade, and the bureaucracy, powerful and influential as well. With this influence
came the introduction of the office of the Chularajmontri or Sheikh ul-Islam, whose task was to advise the court of Ayutthaya on matters pertaining to Islam. The Chularajmontri is today seen as the official, if titular, head of Thailand’s Muslim community. He is appointed by royal decree and holds the office for a life term. In terms of institutional capacity, the Chularajmontri supervises Thailand’s twenty-nine provincial Islamic committees and the Islamic Centre of Thailand, established in 1945 as an outgrowth of the Patronage of Islam Act. The Chularajmontri is elected by the presidents of the twenty-nine provincial Islamic committees (which together make up the Provincial Council of Islamic Affairs) and thirty-six members of the National Council of Islamic Affairs housed at the Islamic Centre. He is endorsed by the king via royal decree.

Persian influence over the court in Ayutthaya was not confined to the introduction of the office of the Chularajmontri. Shi’a Muslims from Persia also served as ministers at the court of Ayutthaya, managing the Ayutthayan navy and its maritime trade. A small but increasingly active Shi’a community grew out of this legacy of Persian influence and can be found across several cities in Thailand today, with the largest concentrations found in Bangkok, Ayutthaya, and Nakhon Si Thammarat. At the same time as Persian influence flourished in the plains, Islam had also begun to command strong adherence across the Malay world, establishing another foothold in the process. The southern kingdom of Patani, while nominally a tributary of Ayutthaya, in fact enjoyed considerable autonomy and as a consequence gradually gravitated into the orbit of the Malay world. Along with sultanates in Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu, Patani underwent an Islamization process that took somewhat different form from that in the north.

Though Buddhism is not the official religion of Thailand, it is the majority religion, and while the king is officially the patron of all religions in Thailand, his stature and position is very much emblematic in the eyes of Thai society of the stature and recognition that Buddhism commands in the country. The primacy accorded to Buddhism is further expressed in the crafting of modern Thai national identity along the lines of “Chat, Sassana, Pramahakasat” or “Nation, Religion, and Monarchy”, which clearly speaks to the central role that Buddhism was expected to play in the eyes of Thailand’s modernizers in the early twentieth century.

The question of religious identity is also freighted with ethno-linguistic connotations. This is particularly pertinent in the context of southern Thailand, where such considerations have had ramifications for the place of Malay-Muslim culture and identity in the modern Thai nation. Since the modernization of Thailand was set in motion during the reign of King Rama V (King Chulalongkorn), the nomenclature employed to categorize Thailand’s
The Muslim population has been a subject of much debate. The official term for Muslims in Thailand, “Thai Islam”, was a product of the Patronage of Islam Act enunciated in 1945 by the post-war democratic government. This term, however, caused some consternation in the ethnic Malay communities of the southern provinces. For them, it was seen as a perpetuation of the narrative of hegemony and subjugation that informed local understandings of history, and “Thai Islam” was interpreted as yet another means through which Bangkok contrived to dilute, if not altogether eradicate, Malay culture and identity in the south. As far as the southern provinces are concerned, locals have traditionally preferred to emphasize not only their religious but also their ethnic identity. So sensitive and controversial is the issue of nomenclature and the discourse on identity for southern Thailand that debates over how to identify the Muslims of the south continue to this day.

The latest permutation surfaced as recently as 2005, when this question became one of the key challenges faced by the National Reconciliation Commission. Members of the commission were compelled in the course of their deliberations to ponder the difficult questions of “who” exactly were the victims of conflict and whether the problems of the south were really rooted in historical consciousness. At another level, this stress on “Malayness” speaks to the exclusiveness of Malay-Muslims’ conceptions of self, for such terminology obviously aims to distinguish its referents from Thailand’s non-Malay Muslims. It should be noted here that it is not the objective of this book to unpack the problems associated with terminology and nomenclature. Such an endeavour would demand a volume of its own and as such lies well beyond the scope of the current project. While recognizing the complex nature of the problem, this book will nevertheless employ the terminology of “Malay-Muslim” when referring to the Muslims of southern Thailand, simply because this is the label that is used most often by both scholars and locals, and it remains the least problematic term as far as the object of inquiry — the Muslim community of the southern provinces — is concerned.

While Malay-Muslims are our primary concern, we need to keep in mind that a significant component of the Muslim population in Thailand is for all intents and purposes Thai in terms of culture and social practice, including in the use of the Thai language. In other words, they share little by way of cultural and linguistic affinity with the ethnic Malays, aside from religion. In the south, they populate the upper provinces of Trang, Phang-nga, Songhkla and Satun, and, as suggested earlier, are commonly referred to among Thais as “Thai Islam”. Compared to the Malay-Muslims of the three southern provinces, these Thai Muslims are considerably better integrated into contemporary Thai society. Their children speak Thai, as they do themselves,
and attend Thai national schools. They participate in economic and social activities alongside Buddhists. While Muslim by creed, oftentimes their adherence to Islam is far less rigid than what is found among the Malay-Muslims in the three southern provinces, notwithstanding the prevalence of pre-Islamic cultural practices among the latter. For instance, Thai Muslims sometimes eat foods generally deemed to be prohibited in Islam, and they do not necessarily observe obligations of prayer and fasting very strictly. Moreover, the women are hardly ever found in the full hijab, whereas such dress has in recent times become increasingly popular in the Malay-Muslim communities of the three southern provinces, no doubt as a sign of the proliferation of Salafi influence in the region. Overall, some scholars have observed that Muslim communities in the upper southern provinces have generally developed a more relaxed mutuality with Buddhists, and the coexistence of people of both religions in many villages is notable.

The heterogeneous character of Muslim society in Thailand becomes even more evident when one profiles Islam in the rest of the country. Bangkok, for instance, is home to approximately 500,000 Muslims from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, while Chiang Mai to the north has a population of around 30,000 to 35,000 Muslims, half of whom are ethnically Yunnanese while the rest consists of Persian, Bengali, Pathan, Indian, Cham, Malay, and Indonesian ethnicities. Because of this heterogeneity, decades of attempts at integration on the part of various Thai governments have given rise to a discourse that recognizes at once the ethnic plurality of Thailand’s Muslims as well as the unity of their allegiances to the state and its conceptualization of national identity. As alluded to earlier, the essence of this is captured in the terminology of “Thai Islam” or “Thai Muslim” that has come to dominate the state’s discourse on its Muslim religious minority. Again however, while this nomenclature is generally accepted by Muslims outside of the three southern provinces, it is widely rejected in Malay-Muslim circles because of the salience of their Malay ethnic identity, into which their allegiances to Islam are subsumed, in their conceptions of self.

From this sketch of the ethno-religious terrain, it is clear that one of the major fault lines in Southeast Asia’s cultural landscape lies at the border between Thailand’s upper southern provinces and its “deep south”. It is at this junction that “Thai” ends and “Malay” begins, and where the question of ethnicity gains greater currency in the discourse on communal identities. As noted above, Muslims of the “deep south” are predominantly Malay, and it is to this ethnic identity that loyalty and primacy are pledged. Malay-Muslims maintain a strong identity distinct from that of other Thai Muslims, to say nothing of their Buddhist countrymen. Their claim to distinctiveness is based
in large part on the construction and maintenance of an historical narrative of uniqueness. It begins with the argument that they are ethnically different (“Melayu”) and, as Anak Patani (children of Patani), are Muslims of a particular stock and purity. This narrative is not only widely held to and celebrated among the Malay-Muslims of the south, it is also transferred from generation to generation via oral history as well as the local school curriculum (of which more will be discussed later) and thereby etched into the communal consciousness. Nowhere is this uniqueness and exclusivity more patently expressed than in the realm of language. Malay-Muslims speak a local dialect of Malay commonly but problematically referred to in Thai as “Jawi” or “Yawi”. Local Malay-Muslims refer to it as “Bahasa Tempatan” or “the local language”, and it is linguistically similar to the Malay dialect spoken in the neighbouring northern Malaysian state of Kelantan. These significant linguistic disjunctures also carry religious overtones. Here, Omar Farouk observes:

it is only in recent times that the Thai language has been elevated as the language of Islam in Thailand. Consequently, there is a growing corpus of Islamic religious literature in Thai. There have already been a few versions of translations of the Qur’an. Collections of hadiths too have been translated into Thai. The expanding role of the Thai language within Thailand’s Muslim public sphere, however, has not dislodged the entrenched position of Malay as the traditional language of Islam, especially among the Malay Muslims of Thailand.

To be sure, the centrality of language is not merely confined to the polemics of academic debate. From his research into the declassified documents of the Central Intelligence Office, Thanet Aphornsuvan has unearthed the Thai government’s early fixation with language in their framing of the “problem” of the south. In Thanet’s words:

The classified report stated that apparently the ‘Thai Islam’ in the four southern provinces (including Satun) did not understand the system of government because many of them had learned little Thai from ancient times to the present. There was no interest in studying Thai language. The government bureaucracy did not seriously promote and encourage them to study Thai language, thus ‘Thai Islam’ only studied Islamic religion and Malay language with devotion. We could see that ‘Thai Islam’ in the four southern provinces hardly used the local dialect but preferred to use Malay. Therefore they had no opportunity to know and understand the development in the government system of administration.
The salience of language in conceptualizations of self and other on the part of the Malay-Muslim community was also stressed in the observation of religious leaders that “if the government accepts our language, we can accept the Thai nation”. More recently, the controversial nature of questions of language recognition and legitimacy have been further captured in the debates surrounding the National Reconciliation Commission’s proposal for Malay to be adopted as a “working language” in the south.

Notwithstanding the cultural divide epitomized by language, there have of course been some points of convergence between Malay and Thai Muslims. For instance, as is the case throughout the Muslim world, in Thailand the institution of the mosque lies at the heart of both Malay-Muslim and Thai-Muslim society. Clearly though, it has been the divergences that by and large seized both the Thai governments and the local communities.

If language is a clear expression of the exclusivity of the Malay-Muslim identity, then one could conceivably argue that separatism has become its chief consequence. To be sure, nowhere is this exclusivity of Malay-Muslim identity more profoundly demonstrated than in the long-drawn separatist struggle for liberation from a Bangkok which is portrayed in Malay-Muslim ethno-nationalist discourse as an alien colonizer. Predictably, the geographical parameters of this century-old separatist struggle have largely been defined by the ethno-religious boundaries of the “deep south” Malay-Muslim provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani. While this is not to imply that a separatist spirit holds sway among the vast majority of Malay-Muslims in the south, the nexus between separatism and cultural identity nevertheless has proven sufficiently salient to warrant consideration here, particularly given the role that Islamic schools are believed to have played (and continue to play) in sustaining it.

ISLAM, IDENTITY, AND ETHNO-NATIONALISM

Historically, the kingdom of Patani consisted of the area that today roughly coheres geographically to the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat in southern Thailand. Between roughly the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, the Kingdom of Patani was also known as Patani Darussalam, and was acknowledged across the Malay world not only as a Malay kingdom, but as an Islamic polity (Dar Al-Islam). At the same time, Patani was also a flourishing centre of commerce and trade, where traders from Southeast Asia met and transacted with counterparts from elsewhere on the Asian continent and Europe. More specifically, Patani Darussalam was during this time emerging as a major centre for Islamic learning in Southeast Asia.
to the extent that scholars would later describe it as the cradle of Islam in Southeast Asia. The pondok schools of southern Thailand played a particularly important role in establishing and sustaining this reputation. By the early twentieth century, just as a re-awakening of religious consciousness was underway across the Muslim world, the Patani region had the largest number of pondok schools in the Malay Peninsula, drawing students from all over the Southeast Asian region.  

Although Patani Darussalam was basically a tributary state of the Siamese kingdom after the Siamese invasion during the reign of Rama I (1737–1802), actual links were for the most part relatively weak. Consequently, Patani enjoyed a significant degree of independence which on several occasions was manifested in a refusal to pay tribute to Siam, and at times even in rebellion against Siamese rule. Gradually, however, as the modernization and bureaucratization of the central state took shape, the kingdom of Siam gained leverage over its outer peripheries, including Patani, and through the combined use of military force and administrative centralization, not to mention the occasional diplomatic machination, eventually managed to consolidate its grip over the southern region. As part of King Chulalongkorn’s policies to transform his principality into a modern territorial nation-state with a Westernized bureaucracy, a modern educational system was created towards the end of the nineteenth century. The transformation of the education system was to serve two purposes. First, it was envisaged to provide a steady stream of educated officials and administrators for a Siamese bureaucratic service upon which the modern state was to be built. Second, the content of the existing education system was to be restructured so as to facilitate the integration of ethnic minorities into a coherent Siamese national identity. These efforts to transform education, however, did not always appeal to Siam’s outer provinces. In fact, in the southern provinces of the former Patani Darussalam, these policies were for the most part not welcome at all. The initiatives were actively resisted on the account that they threatened local cultural and religious identity, expressed in the autonomous education system centred on the pondok, and ignited a spirit of resistance that in many respects carries on to this day. The dislocation threatened by these changes in education for the Malay-Muslim population was succinctly described by Raymond Scupin in the following manner:

they (the changes) created fundamental dilemmas for the Malay Muslims of this southern region. The Thai compulsory education system was based upon the Thai language, a language foreign to most of the Malay Muslims of the South, and upon Buddhist values, which were intimately
associated with a traditional monastic curriculum developed by the Buddhist Sangha. Therefore, in the eyes of many Muslims in these southern provinces to become involved as a citizen participating in the Thai polity necessitated a rejection of one's language and religion.\textsuperscript{15}

Following the completion of administrative consolidation of Siamese rule over the territories of the traditional Patani kingdom in 1909 (after the signing of the Anglo-Siamese Treaty), a resistance movement emerged led by displaced feudal Malay elites. Despite the recognizable role of this traditional feudal leadership in the early stages of the Malay-Muslim rebellion against Siam, religious leaders have always made a major contribution to the articulation of challenge against the hegemony of the central state.\textsuperscript{16} The Siamese government's attempts to exert control over traditional institutions such as the \textit{pondok} and \textit{shari'a} courts — the educational and judicial backbone of Malay society — ensured that disenchanted religious teachers and jurists provided a fertile source of intellectual and religio-cultural leadership for movements opposing the incorporation of the southern provinces into the Siamese central state.\textsuperscript{17} Religious leaders were further emboldened by the Islamic reformist movement of the early twentieth century that swept through the Malay world. As we will see later, this reformist tide witnessed the influx of ideas that transformed Muslim mindsets, pitting them against central authorities who in any case never fully comprehended the implications of Islamic reformism on Thai-Muslim consciousness.\textsuperscript{18}

In order to grasp this fundamental antithesis in the historical consciousness of the Malay-Muslim community, one has to appreciate not only the resilience of Malay identity, but also the forceful nature of Bangkok's drive to craft a distinct Thai nationality and impose it on ethnic minorities. The turn of the twentieth century saw the Thai state seek to promulgate modernizing policies that required the dilution of ethnic identities and loyalties, even as they promoted the primacy of Buddhism. This phenomenon was most tellingly demonstrated during the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1881–1925). Upon succeeding Chulalongkorn, he initiated new policies aimed at constructing a Thai national identity resting on three institutions, namely, Nation (\textit{Chaat}), Religion (\textit{Saatsanaa}), and Monarchy (\textit{Phra Mahaa Kasat}), as its cornerstones.\textsuperscript{19} Explaining the impetus behind this construction of identity, Raymond Scupin surmised: “this Thai political and cultural code constituted an iconic representation of the structure of Thai society that was formulated to mediate actual ethnic ambiguities and contradictions within the country”.\textsuperscript{20} The articulation of a new ideology of nationalism was followed by the promulgation of compulsory Thai education for the purposes of indoctrinating...
Islam and Malay-Muslim Identity in Thailand

the values it encapsulated. In the Malay-Muslim provinces of the south, this attempt to form and consolidate a national identity clashed head on with prevailing educational practices which emphasized Islam and cultural identity. Instead, the articulation of this nationalist project marked “the beginning of a long and tortuous struggle to widen the sphere and deepen the level of autonomy for the Malay-Muslims of Patani based on specific ethnic differences”\(^\text{21}\). These tensions would later be aggravated by aggressive assimilationist policies during the administrations of Phibun Songkram (1938–44; 1948–57) and Sarit Thanarat (1958–63). In these periods, civil law was imposed and Islamic law abolished. The office of the Dato Yutthitam (qadi or Islamic judge), that had governed family and inheritance issues in the Muslim community while still being subject to the final arbitration of a sitting Thai judge, was dismantled. Friday was abolished as a public holiday, and there were orchestrated attempts to convert Muslims to Buddhism\(^\text{22}\). In the case of Sarit, assimilationist policies were imposed for the purpose of cementing a new “development” ideology (patanakarn) that attempted to bring about integration and assimilation through social-economic development programmes\(^\text{23}\). The net effect of this historical legacy of marginalization was to bring about what Peter Gowing termed the “psychological death” of the community\(^\text{24}\). Needless to say, this new ideology, and the policies it spawned, did little more than to provoke strong Malay nationalist reactions.

Sandwiched between these authoritarian regimes, however, was a brief democratic reprieve which, though short-lived, did witness an attempted recalibration of policy towards the Malay-Muslim provinces of the south. In a move to temper the strains in the relationship, the government of Khuang Aphaiwong crafted the Patronage of Islam Act in 1945. Among the policies enunciated was the reinstatement of the office of the Chularajmontri discussed earlier, the right to observe Friday as a holiday, and the restoration of Islamic family and inheritance laws\(^\text{25}\). Under the Act, Dato Yutthitam was also reinstated as a government appointee, though many in the Muslim community criticized this on the grounds that a non-Muslim government should not have the authority to appoint a Muslim judge. The Patronage of Islam Act further legislated for the creation of a National Council for Islamic Affairs (NCIA) that was to be headed by the Chularajmontri. The NCIA functioned as an advisory body to the interior and education ministries on matters pertaining to the Muslim community and oversaw the activities of the various Provincial Councils for Islamic Affairs (PCIA).

The salience of Malay-Muslim ethno-cultural consciousness ensured that separatism in southern Thailand was naturally an exclusive affair, thereby reinforcing the uniqueness of the three southern provinces. Indeed, Malay-
Islam, Education and Reform

Muslim resistance was premised exclusively on Malay identity and interpretations of history. Yet this exclusivist subtext to southern Thai separatism is sometimes missed in narratives of the struggle, particularly those purveyed in the conflict and terrorism studies fields, which tend to portray it as a phenomenon that covers the entire region of southern Thailand.26 Despite forming 67 per cent or so of the population, a substantial portion of Satun’s ethnic Malays, for reasons too complex to be elaborated here, no longer use the Malay language. In other words, Malay-Muslims in Satun are by and large assimilated Thai speakers, and this has had a tremendous effect on the place of Satun in Malay-Muslim conceptualizations of self and other. The relatively successful assimilation of Malay-Muslims in Satun provides a fairly persuasive explanation of why the province is largely peripheral in the socio-cultural imagination of the “deep” south. Against this backdrop, it is also no coincidence that Satun has always stood apart from the separatist activity that has plagued southern Thailand.27 For instance, statistics compiled at Chulalongkorn University on the violence since January 2004 indicate that Satun has mostly been spared in the most violent year to date in the history of southern resistance. This reinforces the argument that the dynamics behind the conflict in southern Thailand remain primarily driven by ethnic identity and are confined to the Malay-speaking provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala.28 The question of Satun throws into greater relief the dichotomous identities at work in defining the essence of resistance and rebellion in the south.29 At the heart of this, as Ruth McVey tells us, lies the tension “between Patani and those Muslims who do not share Patani’s past”.30

Popular attitudes towards the Chularajmontri further indicate the exclusionary nature of southern Thailand’s Malay-Muslim community. Since the reintroduction of this office in 1945, no Malay-Muslim has ever occupied this office. This fact is not lost on locals in the Malay-Muslim provinces. Indeed, because of this, the Chularajmontri is not seen by local communities as an acceptable representative of their aspirations. Likewise, comments and statements made by non-Malay (and non Malay-speaking) Muslim political, community, and religious leaders are not deemed by Malay-Muslims to be legitimate articulations of their grievances.31

THE STATE AND ISLAMIC EDUCATION

Historically, education in Thailand primarily revolved around both religious and royal institutions. Buddhist monks provided basic education to boys in classes set within the compounds of monasteries, while children of the royal household and from the nobility were educated in formal institutions to serve
Islam and Malay-Muslim Identity in Thailand

at court and govern in the provinces. The mass of society was made up of farmers who had little access to formal education. Village history, lore, and local philosophy were transmitted orally. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the Thai education system was modernized and made more accessible to the general public for the purpose of staffing the growing bureaucracy with administrators and civil servants. This began with the 1898 Education Proclamation, which was strongly influenced by the British system and in which academic and vocational paths of education were made accessible to the general population.32

Islamic education in Thailand has traditionally revolved around the institution of the pondok. Pondok schools have a long tradition in Malay history. The pondok assumes an integral role in the Malay society of the southern provinces of Thailand and performs the key task of providing religious instruction. Moreover, pondok are closely associated with Malay-Muslim identity and often act as the centre of gravity for everyday Malay social life. Beyond that, pondok are also important repositories for and progenitors of Malay language, history, and culture. As mentioned earlier, by the nineteenth century the southern kingdom of Patani had become a prominent regional centre for Islamic learning. Muslim students from both archipelagic and mainland Southeast Asia (primarily Cambodia) would sojourn in any of the several hundred pondok schools here before moving on to the Middle East and North Africa for further Islamic education.33 Patani was renowned for its religious teachers and scholars. Patani Muslims were prominent educators in major Islamic institutions throughout the Arab-Muslim world. Such was their prominence that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries scholars such as Ahmad Patani, Zayn al-Abidin Patani, and Da’ud ibn Abd-Allah Patani congregated in the Masjid Al-Haram in Mecca and taught in the Malay halaqah (study circle), where they were popularly known as “ulama Jawi”.34 Back home, tok guru (pondok religious teachers) were instrumental in translating religious commentaries and sermons from Arabic to Jawi (the modified classical Malay script that includes, among others, Arabic and Khmer influences). Snouck Hugronje, the Dutch bureaucrat and scholar of Islam in the Dutch East Indies, noted the influence of the Patani ulama in Mecca:

During his visit to Mecca in the 1880s, Snouck Hugronje had occasion to have extensive contacts with the Malay community there, and to observe who were the most influential writers living in the community at the time. One of his interesting observations was that the writings of scholars originating from the Patani area were significant, as measured
by the regularity of their publication by Meccan presses. Thus those Patani thinkers who made a mark in Mecca must have left a legacy throughout the Malay world via returning students.35

The prominence that Patani enjoyed as a regional centre *par excellence* of Islamic education may have eroded over the decades, yet its historical legacy continues to inform the identity of the Malay-Muslim population in the southern provinces and remains a factor that must frame any assessment of contemporary Islamic education in southern Thailand.

**REGULATING KNOWLEDGE AND DISSEMINATION**

Malay-Muslim education institutions have traditionally had tenuous relations with the central government in Siam, and the pondok has been, and continues to be, viewed with a great deal of suspicion and mistrust. Concomitantly, a major policy challenge for Bangkok, not only from the perspective of education and regional development in the south but also for security and conflict management, has been the question of how to integrate Islamic education into mainstream Thai society in a non-threatening manner. In order to understand the tense relationship that exists today between the Thai state and Islamic education institutions, particularly those located in the south, an appreciation of historical developments is required.

The genesis of the strained centre-periphery relations between Bangkok and the southern provinces may be traced to the modernization policies initiated in the early twentieth century. At the heart of this was the state’s attempt to monopolize the means and articulate the ends of education. For instance, the National Education Plan of 1936 declared that “the government has the authority to control the institutes, to administer examinations to the teachers and award them diplomas, to administer examinations to students at the completion of Primary General Education, Junior Secondary Education, and Senior Secondary Education”.36 The outcome of this process was to be the creation of persons “considered to have the knowledge which a Siamese citizen should have … he is a citizen who is able to earn his living by having an occupation; he knows the rights and duties of the citizen, he will prove himself to be useful for his country by means of his occupation”.37 It was in this respect that the government was especially concerned about the pondok in the Malay-Muslim southern provinces. Given that these traditional institutions, being essentially religious schools, did not offer academic courses, they were not construed to contribute positively to national development. Moreover, because the *tok guru* of the pondok never taught in Thai and the
students never used the Thai language, this institution was considered to have a fractious influence on the broader objectives of fostering national identity and cohesion.

The early 1920s witnessed the onset of more than eighty years of government-sanctioned attempts to integrate, if not assimilate, the Muslim education system of southern Thailand into the national mainstream. It was a process that had a tremendously corrosive impact on center-periphery relations. Early policies enforced integration through the introduction of government schools into the southern provinces and by enactments such as the 1921 Compulsory Education Act that legislated four years of compulsory primary education for all children. These national schools, however, were greeted with suspicion in the Malay-Muslim community. Many parents were not swayed by the provision by legislation of two hours of Islamic studies per week in these institutions — a policy that remains in place to this day. In fact, many Malay-Muslim parents saw the government schools as Buddhist institutions — part of a government agenda to stymie the practice of Islam, undermine the Islamic faith, and convert southern Muslims to Buddhism.38 Furthermore, the policy of placing Muslim children in Thai schools where Buddhism and secular subjects were taught was also viewed with consternation by the religious elite in the south, as it threatened to undermine their leadership position within the community and imperil long-standing cultural identities. Predictably, Malay-Muslim parents shunned the national schools, which eventually were attended only by a small minority of children of Malay civil servants and aristocrats. The fact that government authorities attempted to strictly enforce the Act only meant greater resentment on the part of the Malay-Muslim community towards the central authorities.

In response to the failure of the government-school integration project, Bangkok contemplated the blanket closing-down of the pondok. Eventually, Thai political leaders, no doubt cognizant of the possible ramifications of such a policy, settled for a more cautiously calibrated approach of easing Thai language instruction into the pondok through the dispatch of Thai teachers and educational materials to the south. However, the blanket closure of the pondok has never really been taken off the table.

Although it was never colonized, Thailand experienced unsettled periods of military dictatorship after constitutional monarchy was established in 1932. Over the years, the various military administrations put forward a range of disingenuous policies that were aimed at bringing Islamic schools under the control of the central government. The National Education System and National Education Plan, formulated in 1932 and 1936 respectively, places strong emphasis on the spread of national culture, history and language.
A series of textbooks for use in government schools throughout the kingdom was prepared by the Ministry of Education. No other languages, religions, or historical narratives were accommodated in the curriculum. Not surprisingly, from the Malay-Muslim vantage, these initiatives were once again viewed as attempts to impose Thai values in a way that threatened Malay culture, religion, and heritage. The end of the Pacific War, during which Thailand had found itself aligned with the Japanese, offered a fresh opportunity for reconciliation. The democratic administration of Pridi Panomyong (1946–47) was viewed as sympathetic to the independent and assertive identity of Thailand’s Malay-Muslim minorities. A subsequent spirit of compromise found expression in the not-insignificant concessions that were made to the Malay-Muslim community under the broad rubric of the Patronage of Islam Act already discussed. The return of Field Marshall Phibun Songkram and military administration, however, saw a return to policies of forced assimilation. Phibun, who served two terms as premier, had already under his earlier administration overseen the introduction of a new education system in 1932 that sought to streamline the cultures, identities, and languages of Thailand’s disparate ethnic groups into pillars for a Thai national identity. In the south, this nationalist transformation of education entailed the replacement of Malay textbooks and study aids with Thai vernacular material. Broader policies concerning the expression of Malay-Muslim cultural identity were also promulgated. These included policies and legislation that circumscribed the wearing of the Muslim headscarf in public and that rescinded sharia law. It has been alleged that during Phibun’s administration turbans worn by hajis were snatched by the police and trampled on, and women wearing Muslim clothing and headscarves were “kicked and jabbed by Siamese police”. Even more drastic was his administration’s attempt to force all schools to adopt Buddhist ethics, a move that inevitably antagonized the Muslim minority, fuelling further resentment against Bangkok.

In 1958, the Ministry of Education mooted the issue of pondok registration. Again, the raison d’être of this initiative was two-fold: the integration of pondok graduates into the mainstream economy and society on the one hand, and on the other, the monitoring and management of the “threat” arising from suspicions that pondok education perpetuated Malay-Muslim narratives of resistance and separatism. The latter imperative has since been elaborated upon by Thanet, whose investigations of archival material led him to conclude that:

According to the classified memoir of Pattani’s governor, the practice in the 1950s was a strict control of the pondok under the local administrative officials and the police. They closely watched and observed all activities
and movements of the pondok especially tok guru were under special observations of the district officers and the police chief; (we) must find ways to use them as tools to bring peace to the national state and find ways to prevent any incitement and mobilization (of the people).42

Added to this was the larger subterranean problem of how the pondok and its students were viewed in mainstream Thai society. Prior to these initiatives to restructure Islamic education, pondok were viewed not as educational but religious institutions.43 The profile of the typical pondok graduate — well-versed in religious knowledge but lacking an understanding of Thai national history, not conversant in the Thai language, and lacking technical skills was a matter of consequential concern for the central government.

By 1960, the policy of registration was refined with the following objectives: namely, the much-needed improvement of pondok infrastructure and facilities, improvement of the curriculum and pedagogy of Islamic education, and the creation of a proper system of assessment and evaluation that would be in line with national standards. Registration required pondoks to provide information about their schools and, in particular, their curriculum and to abide by instructions from the Ministry of Education regarding the restructuring of the latter. In return, these schools would be provided access to government funds for infrastructural development.

Attempts to integrate, assimilate, and transform Islamic education reached a watershed in 1961 with the Pondok Educational Improvement Programme (PEIP), which codified the suggestions made by the Ministry of Education regarding the restructuring of Islamic education. The PEIP aimed to persuade traditional pondoks to register in exchange for financial support and to introduce academic and vocational subjects with the Thai language as the medium of instruction. Within a year of its introduction, 197 pondok registered, either swayed by the instrumentalist imperative or by an interpretation of the policy as a fait accompli. In 1965, it was decided that pondok that registered and received government aid would be re-classified as private religious schools. By the final year of registration in 1971, more than 400 pondok had registered, even though it had not been made compulsory.44 Several reasons accounted for the initial popularity of the registration programme and the support it garnered from the community. First, unlike some previous policies, the PEIP was not an overt attempt to circumscribe the teaching of Islam in the Malay-Muslim provinces, at least not at first glance. To be sure, the spread of Islamic knowledge would be allowed to continue, but with the evident caveat of greater scrutiny by the state. Second, registration was voluntary and not compulsory. Again, this differed markedly from the more coercive policies of
previous administrations that did not proffer choices for the Malay-Muslim community. Third, registration came with much-needed subsidies in terms of financial support, teachers (for academic and vocational subjects), teaching aids, and other necessary equipment and facilities.

Predictably, the PEIP was not without its drawbacks. To be sure, there were several controversial facets to the programme. Though the PEIP was couched in terms of government support for the modernization and advancement of Muslim education, it nonetheless represented a powerful penetration of the state into a formerly closed system of education. In 1949, the Thai government had as part of its larger “Thai-nization” assimilation program promulgated the Private School Act, which required all private schools to register with the education ministry and to bring their curricula into conformity with government guidelines. But because pondok schools were classified as religious institutions and not as private schools at the time, they fell outside the remit of the Act. In light of this, the 1961 PEIP can be viewed as a political machination to achieve, at least in theory, what the Private School Act had failed to achieve in 1949 — state penetration into and control over the pondok. The consequence of this was not lost on some at least in the community. No doubt the PEIP facilitated the gradual modernization of Muslim education, but it also meant that education could now function as a medium of integration as patronage gave way to overt control — a fact that further eroded relations with the state. In response, as more than 400 pondoks registered, another 100 or so closed down and went underground in protest against the policy. Likewise, just as the government’s policy on the pondok was at heart driven by political considerations, so it elicited a highly political response from the Malay-Muslim community. Indeed, as Uthai Dulyakasem has noted, the status of the traditional pondok was another issue of contention that was mobilized by Malay-Muslim separatists operating in the southern provinces. In view of this, the following citation extracted from separatist propaganda material is worth reproducing here:

Pondok schools are the only institutions of the Malay people which teach Malay language to serve the community’s needs. Pondok schools are not a disguised organization for political purposes. Nor are they educationally and economically wasteful. The conversion of the pondok schools to the private schools is to introduce an undesirable culture to the people. The use of Siamese language as a medium of instruction, the teaching of Siamese history, the teaching of Buddhist principles in the schools mean the obstruction of learning Islam and Malay language. These subjects are
not only irrelevant to our needs but they will also destroy the intent and aim of the pondok schools, and hence Islam will disappear from Siam.\textsuperscript{46}

Pivotal to the resistance was the perception that the central government's emphasis on a national Thai curriculum was in fact an implicit enforcement of Buddhist ideology and philosophy, couched in the language of national unity and pluralism.

It is clear that the spectrum of government policies had a significant, consolidated impact on Islamic education in southern Thailand. The piecemeal dismantling since 1961 of the pondok structure of religious education had disrupted "the process by which the Malay-Muslim community used to produce its intellectuals", by compelling them to adopt aspects of secularism and Thai culture (including Buddhism), thereby diminishing Patani's status as a centre for Islamic education.\textsuperscript{47} In other words, the policy facilitated government penetration of the pondok. The net effect of this was the erosion of the tradition of excellence in the standards of Islamic education, as pondok schools became instruments and institutions for the expression of broader resistance to perceived Thai colonialism in the Malay-Muslim southern provinces. In the process, large numbers of religious leaders and students were politicized to the extent that Islamic education has for the past four decades been the front line of the contest for identity between Bangkok and the southern provinces. Another inadvertent effect of these policies was the outflow of Muslim students abroad, a phenomenon that will be mapped out in greater detail in following chapters.

The drive to regulate Islamic education continued in earnest into the 1980s under the Private School Act of 1982, which, among other things, sought to improve the management and administration of Islamic private schools. With particular reference to Islamic education (the Act was meant to regulate private schools in general and not just Islamic schools), the government had proposed under the Act to develop Islamic private schools by elevating standards of curriculum, improving administration, and improving facilities (including teaching materials).

Insofar as issues of curriculum are concerned, Islamic education has been subject to constant re-calibration through the years under the auspices of various government directives. Having said that, these efforts to improve the curriculum have mostly entailed adjustments to the number of hours per week devoted to academic and religious studies subjects respectively. They have done little by way of improving the content of religious knowledge, which in any case is something that the Ministry of Education does not appear equipped to do.\textsuperscript{48}
EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PLAN OF THE PROVINCES ALONG THE SOUTHERN BORDER

Released in 2006, the Education Development Plan of the Provinces along the Southern Border is the latest and most comprehensive articulation of the Thai government’s policies and objectives towards education, in particular religious education, in the three southern provinces. In this respect (and also because there is currently no English version of the document), it is worth close scrutiny here.

Written in Thai, Jawi, and Malay, the policy paper essentially sets out the vision of the Thai government with regard to improving the structure of education in the southern provinces. The beginning of the document essentially acknowledges a number of challenges that confront Islamic education in the south. This includes the observations that current standards and processes of administration have not been effective; that drop-out rates among Malay-Muslim students from the formal education system remain high; that there is lack of an accommodative spirit as well as of a systematic curriculum; and that the current curriculum is unable to impart the “right values” in its students. Because of this, students in the Islamic school system have not obtained an education that brings with it opportunities for advancement and employment. On the other hand, the current state of government schools does not sufficiently recognize the culture, lifestyle, and needs of the local (Malay-Muslim) community. The challenge, then, is identified as that which required the crafting of “cohesive educational policies” that allow for the “merger of Islamic laws with general knowledge and knowledge towards employment that would provide a stepping stone for students and the community” to advance in society. In terms of objectives, the report highlights issues such as the provision of right conditions for effective education, the creation of opportunities for students of all backgrounds, and, ultimately, a proper balance of “secular and religious” education. Noticeably, the report also stresses the importance of language training, not only in Thai and Malay but also in English and Mandarin. It emphasizes in particular the primacy of the Malay language and, without further elaboration, “the correct knowledge of local history”.

From here, the report looks specifically at various aspects of education that require attention. These include teacher training and education curriculum development, development of educational facilities in government institutions, development and improvement of private education, career development and public education, and development of higher education. The report lists the following specific areas of focus:
Teacher Training and Education Curriculum Development:
- To combine compulsory and basic education in every educational institution according to the specific needs of Buddhist and Muslim students;
- To adapt education and teaching curricula in order to facilitate instruction in the fields of religious studies, Thai language, local history, and foreign languages, in particular English, Mandarin, official Malay, as well as the Malay dialect (Jawi);
- To accelerate the pace of the usage of combined education mentioned above so as to assess its utility in both religious and secular studies in the education system;
- To encourage primary schools to adopt a dual-language system (Thai and Malay) in the implementation of the curriculum and the development of teaching aids that are appropriate to the local context;
- To recognize the educational certificates and diplomas of students who have studied overseas and who have not received recognition for these qualifications so that they can be assessed and can further their education either locally or in foreign institutions;
- To encourage students to further their education in institutes of higher learning.

Development of Educational Facilities of Government Institutions:
- To improve the quality of schools that have already developed a reputation for excellence;
- To encourage Islamic models of education management and teaching in government institutions at every level in accordance to the needs of students;
- To provide opportunities for degree-holders as well as qualified and well-known religious teachers to be instructors in government schools;
- To build and develop a range of special schools, such as boarding schools for orphans, children of the poor and disadvantaged, as well as schools that focus on science for students who possess advanced qualifications in sciences in the three provinces and Songkhla (Education District Three);
- To encourage government education institutions to get involved in community activities in order to provide opportunities for these communities to take an active interest in the development of their children. This echoes the advice of the government motto of “intimate understanding and progress”;
- To raise the standard of religious education in public schools to a level equal to that in private religious schools.
Development and Improvement of Private Educational Institutions:

- To develop the qualification/standard of foundation committees, school committees, administrators, and teachers in Islamic private schools so as to raise the quality of education for all students, to foster the “correct” knowledge and understanding of the religion and history of the area (the three southern provinces);
- To encourage the study of academic and vocational skills such as agriculture, finance, and accounting. With the help of private schools, educational centres, and vocational institutes in the three provinces, these subjects should be gradually introduced in Islamic private schools and pondok;
- To strengthen the supervision of private schools so as to enable smooth administration;
- To provide encouragement and support for Islamic studies in tadika (Islamic kindergartens) by providing the opportunity for local religious leaders and experts to get involved in matters of curriculum, administration, organization, and selection of textbooks in these schools.

Career Development and Public Education

- To create opportunities for public education for students who did not complete twelve years of compulsory education;
- To upgrade the management of education administration in youth education with the cooperation of relevant working groups;
- To manage and coordinate the process of assessing knowledge and experience of students and faculty;
- To coordinate the teaching of the Malay language to government officials, soldiers, police, and others;
- To coordinate vocational training and tuition according to the needs of the community, such as, among others, the production of halal (permissible in Islam) food, production of local products in each district, and support for small businesses.

Development of Higher Education

- To brand Prince of Songkhla University, Pattani Campus, a free university and its College of Islamic Studies as an international institute;
- To strengthen the capability of Narathiwatrachanakharin University and links between its faculty of Islamic studies and other departments of modern sciences with the Muslim world through cooperation with Al-Azhar University, Egypt;
- To construct, strengthen, and expand the standards of the acceptance of students in the educational community;
– To encourage universities in the south to provide skills upgrading training for teachers in government and private schools;
– To encourage and support the management of education with the aim to overcome problems and foster success for education policy in the provinces;
– To encourage and support monks in advanced education in order to produce good and competent Buddhist graduates in the surrounding regions.

Development of Skilled Labour
– The Skill Development Centres operating in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat will continue to work with schools to provide vocational courses for students in the south;
– The current coterie of courses that comprise training in computers, needlework, batik production, dress-making, English language, culinary skills, etc. will be expanded.

Though an important blueprint for the advancement of Islamic education in southern Thailand and, more broadly, of relations between the central government and the population of the southern provinces, this latest policy paper arguably raises more questions than it answers. Several in particular stand out. For instance, there is little information on what practical initiatives are envisaged that might fulfil the lofty objectives set forth. Moreover, while the policy paper’s recognition of the need for a transformation of content in Islamic education is encouraging, there is little information on how and where this transformation is expected to take place. This is a particularly salient consideration given that the curriculum of Islamic schools has always been a highly sensitive arena. Finally, there is an acknowledgement of the importance of “local history” which should be lauded, if only because this reads on the surface to be a major concession on the part of the state. Yet given the mutual suspicion and distrust between the Thai state and the Malay-Muslim community, which has undoubtedly been further aggravated by recent events, without any articulation of concrete measures it is difficult to envisage how either party may be prepared to compromise on their seemingly obdurate positions on questions of history and identity.

EDUCATION AND THE NARRATIVE OF SEPARATISM
At the heart of the Thai government’s perceptions informing the formulation of policy towards Islamic schools was the belief that, because these schools were firmly established in the region prior to the creation of the modern Thai
nation-state, they are to be seen as a barrier to attempts at assimilating the Malay-Muslim minorities. On their part, the Malay-Muslim religious elite came to comprehend the educational policies emanating from Bangkok, in particular the emphasis on secular and academic education based on the Thai language, as a strong threat to the Malay-Muslim identity, prompting them to spearhead resistance movements.54

The secular and academic educational policies of various Bangkok administrations disrupted traditional forms of Islamic education and precipitated resistance on the part of Malay-Muslim elites who had gained a significant amount of symbolic capital in their local communities through their position as religious teachers. Subsequently, Islamic schools were instrumental in prompting a separatist insurgency and in providing the institutional structures and leadership for separatist organizations. Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN or National Revolutionary Movement) emerged in the early 1960s, largely in response to educational policies such as the PEIP. Its founder, Karim Hassan, was a religious teacher from Narathiwat who taught at a famous pondok in Yala, and who was known to have tapped students from pondok schools and later Islamic private schools for the organization’s support base. Similarly, another separatist organization, Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Patani (BNPP or Patani National Liberation Movement), also relied primarily on religious teachers to recruit students for organized militant activities. In 1968, the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) was established and gained the support of disillusioned Muslim intellectuals who shared the perception that the government’s education policies constituted a threat to the very institutions that preserved Malay-Muslim heritage, not to mention the social prestige and status of the feudal elite in the community.55

On the back of material support from Syria and Libya and ideological support from Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, and, to no small extent, an active recruitment process among Malay-Muslim students sojourning in the Middle East, PULO would eventually emerge as the strongest and most organized separatist organization in the south. In fact, the recruitment processes that took place overseas, primarily among southern Thai students attending religious schools in these countries, continues to this day.56 In his exploration of the historical dimension of separatism and its links with Thailand’s Malay-Muslim diaspora, Wan Kadir Che Man estimated that as many as 30,000 Malay-Muslims lived in Saudi Arabia during the 1960s and 1970s, and during the late 1980s at least 10,000 lived there, with most of them “involved in activities of separatist groups”.57

The emergence of separatist groups out of Islamic schools in the southern provinces should not however be taken to imply widespread and formal
support from these educational institutions for the movement. Indeed, just as many Malay-Muslims chose to take up arms, so many more recognized the necessity of gaining the skills and accreditation facilitated by the Thai state’s transformation of traditional schools. Uthai notes that most Malay-Muslims came to believe that education grounded on academic and vocational skills not only allowed them to protect their rights against government authorities, but also permitted upward socio-economic mobility. Even separatists came to recognize the importance of assimilating into Thai society. This was exemplified in the following quotation from a PULO member when asked for his views on the importance of gaining a Thai education:

I am a Malay Muslim. I must stay with my people. The Thai government does not respect us. The villagers are treated with contempt and the educated Muslims are regarded with suspicion. We have a right to self-determination, to remain Malay Muslim. On the other hand, it is a long and difficult struggle. Maybe it is better to stay with Thailand and take as much advantage of the educational and economic opportunities as we can — at least until the movement comes stronger.

Calculated compliance, if not outright assimilation, on the part of Malay-Muslims towards educational changes was even more apparent by the early 1980s. Forbes, for instance, surmised that “a degree of cultural assimilation is acceptable to many Thai Malays” and many are “anxious to learn Thai” and enter higher education. Clearly, the importance of advancement up the socio-economic ladder was not lost on many Malay-Muslims, even as the impetus to resist Thai hegemony and preserve religio-cultural identity weighed heavily on the community. In any case, broader policies of a conciliatory nature towards the Malay-Muslim community in the south were enacted from the early 1980s and encompassed a more assuaging approach to Islamic schools. These marked a gradual but discernible shift in the tenor of the relationship between the Thai state and Islamic education institutions, not to mention the Malay-Muslim religio-political elite. Be that as it may, this progress ultimately proved insufficient and subterranean mutual distrust continued to linger. Consequently, when violence erupted again at the turn of the century, attention shifted once more to the Islamic schools of southern Thailand.

**ISLAMIC SCHOOLS AND CONTEMPORARY VIOLENCE**

A major consideration that links Islamic schools and the ongoing violence in southern Thailand today pertains to the role of religion in the contemporary
conflict. Since 4 January 2004, when suspected militants mounted an audacious raid of an army camp in Narathiwat, violence has become an almost daily affair in southern Thailand claiming more than 2,000 lives, the vast majority being Malay-Muslims killed at the hands of state security forces as well as of militants who are also believed to be Malay-Muslims. According to a recent report, by February 2005 an estimated 875 out of 1,574 villages in the southern border provinces had been infiltrated by militants.61 The alarming casualty toll clearly indicates that violence has intensified since January 2004, even as the perpetrators’ identities remain for the large part frustratingly clouded in mystery, notwithstanding the efforts of many both in the government and in the terrorism and conflict studies community to uncover them.

There are indications that what is being witnessed today heralds the emergence of a new phenomenon in the southern Thai conflict. For one, the almost routine targeting of civilians was unheard of in the 1970s, when separatist violence had hit its previous peak. More disconcerting is the fact that, while a large number of civilian casualties in recent years may have come about as “collateral damage” during bombings, a not-insignificant number have been deliberately targeted. Tactics have also been transformed from rural-based guerrilla skirmishes to bombings in urban centres, though the explosive devices used have yet to demonstrate high degrees of sophistication. Finally, while traditionally confined to the Malay-Muslim provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, the violence has gradually expanded northwards, prompting the Thai government to extend controversial emergency legislation into Songkhla as well.62 While these are important topics that demand rigorous academic and analytical scrutiny, the details of the conflict and counter-insurgency measures need not pre-occupy us here.63 Of immediate relevance is the fact that recent attempts to explain this resurgence of violence have, on the part of certain quarters within the Thai government as well as of the academic community, increasingly pointed to Islam as a source of ideological inspiration for a call to arms — and to the institution of the pondok as a conduit for the call and as a conveyor belt for militants and foot-soldiers.

At first glance, the fixation with Islamic schools as the first place to “look” for militancy is perhaps not without reason. Bearing in mind the difficult historical relationship that southern Thailand’s Islamic education institutions have had with the Thai state, the attention that schools have garnered is to be expected, given some measure of precedence for the purported nexus between these schools and separatist violence. It has already been illustrated that, since the recent emergence of separatism and armed resistance in southern Thailand, insurgents have attempted to penetrate the region’s
In the course of a typical day at a private Islamic school in southern Thailand, lessons are divided into three sessions of instruction: formal religious classes in the morning, academic and vocational lessons in the afternoon, and unofficial “study groups” in the evening. If mobilization indeed takes place through the school system, it is likely that the unofficial “study groups” provide ready avenues and mechanisms. That said, this implies that (1) school administrations may not be directly involved in violent activities, nor are they necessarily complicit in militant activities, as the Thai government has been wont to assume, and (2) effectively monitoring the activities of such elusive groups has proven, and will continue to prove, an arduous prospect, not just for state security officials, but even for members of the Malay-Muslim community itself. Beyond indoctrination, these religious schools have according to some reports figured prominently as avenues for paramilitary training in the guise of extra-curricular sporting activities, though such speculation have thus far been proven by and large to be unfounded.

Repeated references to the role of religious schools in the contemporary conflict draw on their tradition of involvement in sustaining narratives of victimization and in imparting the ideological impetus of ethno-nationalism to a younger generation. As a result of this, these institutions have commanded the attention of the Thai security apparatus and of politicians, some of whom view the pondok as a bastion of radical and militant Islam and who have gone so far as to call for its eradication. In August 2004, for example, the Intelligence Division of the Fourth Army, under whose command Thailand’s southern provinces fall, estimated that at least thirty religious schools were suspected to be active in the ongoing insurgency. Recently, several high
profile attacks have featured militants who can purportedly be traced back to Islamic schools where they were either students or teachers. In particular, a number of cases have revolved around Yala-based Thamma Witthaya, a prestigious Islamic private school with approximately 3,000 students. Local education foundations have also at some point been accused of funding militancy in the south.

**Thamma Witthaya**

Thamma Witthaya Islamic Private School was formed in 1951 as a traditional *pondok*. Its founder, Haji Haran Surong, was a locally trained *tok guru* known to have been a member of the BRN. In 1984, the school registered with the education ministry and became an Islamic private school. Today, it is the largest Islamic private school in southern Thailand, operating six programmes under the Islam Witthaya Foundation including a school for girls and two kindergartens. The school owns a fleet of more than 100 school buses — a common gauge for the wealth of an Islamic school in southern Thailand.

On 16 December 2004 four individuals were arrested, all teachers in Thamma Witthaya Islamic Private School. They were alleged to have connections to BRN-Coordinate, a revamped separatist organization suspected of orchestrating much of the recent violence and of involvement in a raid on an army camp in Narathiwat on 4 January 2004. These four were Yusof Waedurame, a former teacher and supervisor at the school and alleged chief of BRN military affairs; Mohammad Kanafi Doleh, a teacher at Satri Tham Witthaya, the female campus of Thamma Witthaya; Ahama Bula, assistant headmaster of Thamma Witthaya; and Abdul Razak Dolo, a religious teacher at the school. The headmaster of Thamma Witthaya, Sapa-ing Basoe, was accused of being a major leader of BRN but had evidently escaped the dragnet. In particular, he was accused of masterminding the 4 January 2004 incident which is widely seen to have triggered a new cycle of violence in southern Thailand. Masae Useng, a former Thamma Witthaya teacher and secretary of an education foundation in Narathiwat, was alleged to have been Sapa-ing’s lieutenant and stood accused of planning a series of attacks on security forces and security installations in the south. At the height of the crackdown, up to twenty-one teachers from Thamma Witthaya were shortlisted as suspects by Thai authorities, and eight continue to be “wanted” for suspected involvement in the ongoing violence, including Sapa-ing and Masae. According to government sources, several of the school’s students were identified among casualties from the 28 April coordinated insurgent assault on twelve government buildings and police outposts across Pattani,
Islam and Malay-Muslim Identity in Thailand

Yala, and Songkhla. Apart from this incident, several teachers have also been killed, as has the chief administrator, while some others remain in custody in Bangkok. A large number of teachers have been incarcerated for questioning and interrogation, nineteen on one occasion, though most have been released without having charges brought against them. Until recently, the Thamma Witthaya campus in Yala had also been subjected to regular searches by Thai security forces. As a consequence, by end of 2005 1,000 students had dropped out of Thamma Witthaya.

To be sure, suspicions of Thamma Witthaya are not entirely without basis. The school itself is known to be a bastion of BRN activism. Lately, it has come to attention that certain study groups had in fact been formed in Thamma Witthaya for the purpose of instilling a deeper consciousness of Malay identity and history, though it was unclear if the lessons taking place had moved on beyond “history” to the incitement of violence. 72

Pusaka

Another matter drawing the attention of security officials were the alleged links that Pusaka, an Islamic education foundation, had with militants.73 The immediate connection was Masae Useng, a senior administrator at the foundation who is alleged to have links with BRN-Coordinate.

Pusaka was formed as an Islamic education foundation in 1994 in Narathiwat by Najmuddin Umar, until recently a member of parliament and leader of the Wadah faction of Muslim parliamentarians.74 The foundation sponsors up to 100 Islamic kindergartens or tadika in southern Thailand (fifty-six alone in Narathiwat). Despite the fact that it was a legitimate organization, intelligence officials allegedly only came to know of its existence after documents surfaced during a raid on the home of Masae Useng in 2003. Authorities have consequently articulated concerns that Pusaka may be working in tandem with BRN-Coordinate to perpetuate violence. This cooperation is believed possibly to be behind larger scale attacks that require sophisticated levels of skill and coordination such as the 4 January 2004 arms heist.75 Thus far no evidence has surfaced to substantiate this speculation. Masae Useng remains at large, and the prosecution’s case against Najmuddin Umar has been dismissed for lack of substantial evidence.

Revelations of this nature, often grounded on little more than conjecture, have nevertheless fed the view in certain quarters of the Thai political establishment that harsh policies towards Islamic schools — including the blanket shutting down of all pondoks — are necessary to solve the ongoing crisis.
UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC SCHOOLS IN ITS PROPER CONTEXT

There are three considerations that are critical in analysing the specific role that schools might be playing in the contemporary southern Thai separatist conflict. First, while it is probably true that religious teachers from certain schools have been involved in violence, it would be a cardinal mistake to extrapolate from this a causal relationship between Islamic education and violence that implicates all religious schools. This was a major policy faux pas of previous administrations (including the recently deposed Thaksin administration). The misinformed policies that resulted did little more than to disrupt traditional forms of Islamic education, aggravate disenchantment towards central authority, ignite resistance on the part of prominent Malay-Muslim religious leaders, and fan flames of separatism. Religious schools, it needs to be stressed again, are more than educational institutions in the eyes of local communities. As earlier described, for the Malay-Muslims of southern Thailand they are a bastion of history and identity. Hence, even if elements within the system are complicit in the insurgency, policy-makers have to tread carefully to avoid targeting the entire system of Islamic education.

Second, since the militants seem to be capitalizing on the infrastructure of the Islam school system, it is important to consider what legitimizations of militancy might be perpetuated through schools. At an abstract level, schools may well be very efficient vehicles of Islamization, since social and political crises may easily be framed in terms of religion for impressionable young minds. Yet in the context of southern Thailand, the nexus between religious schools and separatist conflict has taken a somewhat different form. For instance, as Chapter Four will discuss in greater detail, while the concept of *jihad* is indeed taught and studied, it has not been articulated by most Islamic teachers with any notable frequency, especially in relation to the ongoing violence. On the contrary, evidence suggests that it is more likely subversive “liberationist ideology”, as alluded to in the earlier quotation from the ICG report, that has features most prominently; the very fact that the nationalist song *Bumi Patani* continues to be sung widely in schools across the region testifies to this. Furthermore, local schools, as alleged of the study groups at Thamma Witthaya, do emphasize local narratives of Malay history that teach of unjust subjugation of Malay-Muslim lands by Siam regardless of the accuracy of such accounts. The proliferation of the “local” version of the Patani historical narrative is not confined solely to southern Thai religious schools. Elsewhere across the Malay world where many from southern Thailand have flocked, Malay-Muslims are being exposed not to the sanitized version of Patani history promulgated by Thai
education authorities but to this “authentic” local history. Curiously though, contrary to what some analysts might suggest, this unwavering belief in Patani’s proud Islamic heritage has had the extenuating effect of denying foreign actors, including elements of the international jihadi movement, an ideological foothold in southern Thailand.

Finally, the role that Islamic schools is believed to have assumed in the contemporary conflict is all the more striking because of a prevailing belief that the Bangkok government has enjoyed at least some success in integrating the pondok, which until recently fell outside its purview. Indeed, if one were to scrutinize the Islamic education institutions on the Thai government’s “blacklist”, one would be struck by the fact that the vast majority are likely to be state-funded Islamic schools that should have been integrated into the mainstream national academic system through the introduction of academic and vocational subjects, not to mention the Thai language, into their curriculum. This is telling on two counts. First, confidence that the Thai state had “successfully” integrated the Malay-Muslim community and managed the southern conflict over the period of the 1980s–1990s would seem at least to some extent to have been misplaced. Second, local narratives of identity and victimization are patently more resilient than some would have expected, and these narratives continue to feed the Malay-Muslim community’s understanding of self and other vis-à-vis the relationship with Bangkok.

It has already been argued that Islamic schools in southern Thailand are not merely institutions of religious knowledge like the madrasah in Pakistan or the pesantren in Indonesia but also repositories and bastions of Malay ethnic identity and historical memory. The link between Islamic schools and violence may arise more from the role of these schools as defenders of ethnic Malay identity than as producers of “radical” religious ideology. Indeed, the last may function as a meta-ideology of sorts that lends further meaning and intelligibility to the ethno-nationalist narrative rather than anchoring it.

This is an important observation considering the interest in religious extremism and militancy of some who closely follow the ongoing violence. In their attempts to unravel the links between Islamic schools and violence in southern Thailand, most observers have approached the question from a distance and bandied about terms such as “Wahhabi” and “Salafi” without properly understanding what these terms mean in the specific context of Islam in Thailand. In order to better understand the convoluted plot involving schools, religion, separatism, and violence in southern Thailand, and to go beyond the already well-documented surfeit of antagonism between the Malay-Muslim community and the Thai state, it is necessary first to understand the dynamics of the Malay-Muslim community itself — and notably, the increasingly
intense contestation for legitimacy and authenticity that is taking place within this community and which is captured in its system of religious education. It is to this objective that the book now turns.

Notes

1 In Malay, the area is known simply as Tiga Wilayah or the three provinces.
3 This is evident in how Malay-Muslim families of villages surrounding Pattani Bay continue to retain traditional methods of fishing despite the fact that this local industry is becoming increasingly untenable with commercial firms now monopolizing fishing in the bay.
7 Ibid., p. 284.
8 The National Reconciliation Commission was an ad hoc body consisting of fifty scholars, officials, and policy-makers. It was formed in February 2005 by the Thaksin administration with the endorsement of the king. Tasked to investigate the security problems of the south, the NRC came up with a set of recommendations at the end of its year-long tenure. Thus far, no action has been taken on these recommendations, either by the previous Thaksin administration or the current military government of Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont.
10 The allusion to “Jawi” or “Yawi” as a Malay dialect is problematic as Jawi is more accurately described as a written script rather than a spoken dialect. Scholars
Islam and Malay-Muslim Identity in Thailand

refer to the spoken dialect as either Kelantanese or simply the Pattani dialect or language.


For instance, Bangkok brought the Muslim legal code, built on the shari’a and adat and adjudicated by the local qadi, under the influence and control of Thai Buddhist officials. Such policies provoked conflict not only between the Thai politico-bureaucratic elite and the feudal Malay leadership, but also with the ulama, thereby bringing the religious leadership into the slowly burgeoning resistance movement.


23 Scupin, “Muslim Accommodation in Thai Society”, p. 236.


25 The office of the Chularajmontri had been dissolved following the 1932
revolution. The first Chularajmontri of the post-revolution milieu was Haji Shamsalladin Mustapi (Cham Promyong), who was a government official from Bangkok and schooled in Islamic studies in Egypt.

For instance, Andrew Holt, "Thailand’s Troubled Border: Islamic Insurgency or Criminal Playground?”, Terrorism Monitor (Jamestown Foundation) 2, no. 10 (20 May 2004). Holt writes that “The Thai provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala and Satun have long acted as a zone of Islamist discontent and violence”.


See Joseph Chinyong Liow, “International Jihad and Muslim Radicalism in Thailand? Toward an Alternative Interpretation”, Asia Policy 2 (July 2006). A similar dynamic was observed by Olli-Pekka Ruohomaki who studied Muslim fishing communities in the southern Islands such as Phangnga. See Olli-Pekka Ruohomaki, Fishermen No More: Livelihood and Environment in Southern Thai Maritime Village (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1999).


These sentiments were expressed to me by members of a wide spectrum of Malay society, including religious elite and teachers, politicians, as well as academics and researchers, over the course of several visits to southern Thailand in 2004–2005.


This observation was recorded in Peter Riddell, Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses (Singapore: Horizon Books, 2001), p. 198.

It certainly did not help that many of these “national schools” were in fact located within the compounds of Buddhist temples.

Critics, however, opine that this spirit of compromise served only to embolden the Malay-Muslim community and culminated in Haji Sulong’s seven demands, to be discussed later.

Because these initiatives to “improve” the religious studies curriculum are mostly impressionistic in nature, I have decided not to dwell on them here. For information on how curriculum hours were adjusted in accordance with new directives, see Ibrahim Narongraksakhet, “Pondoks and their Roles in Preserving Muslim Identity in Southern Border Provinces of Thailand”, in Knowledge and Conflict Resolution: The Crisis of the Border Region of Southern Thailand, edited by Uthai Dulyakasem and Lertchai Sirichai (Bangkok: The Asia Foundation, 2005), pp. 98–105.


56 Discussion with Thai military intelligence officials, Singapore, 23 December 2004. This was confirmed in an interview with a PULO leader in Gothenburg, Sweden, 11 September 2006.
57 Wan Kadir Che Man, “The Thai Government and Islamic Institutions in the Four Southern Muslim Provinces of Thailand”, Sojourn 5, no. 2 (1990): 110. He did not, however, elaborate on what form this involvement took.
58 Dulyakasem, Education and Ethnic Nationalism, p. 86.
64 Che Man, “The Thai Government and Islamic Institutions”, p. 113.
65 Interview with Thai Special Branch, Bangkok, 13 July 2005.
67 Indeed, exiled militants I interviewed re-affirmed that this was indeed the recruitment process of the current groups active in southern Thailand. Interview with PULO officials, Gothenburg, Sweden, 11 September 2006.
68 Anthony Davis, “Thailand faces up to southern extremist threat”, Jane’s Intelligence Review, 1 October 2003.
“TRT MPs propose shutting down Pondok schools”, *The Nation*, 14 September 2005.

70 Interview with Fourth Army intelligence, Pattani, 15 August 2004. No clear reasons were provided for why these schools were “blacklisted”.

71 At the time of writing there was a 10 million baht reward for the capture of Sapa-ing Basoe.

72 Email interview with a Thai media source, 12 November 2005. The Thai journalist obtained this information from an *ustaz* teaching in Thamma Witthaya.

73 Pusaka is an abbreviation for *Pusat Persatuan Tadika Narathiwat* or the Centre for the Narathiwat Kindergarten Associations.

74 Wadah was a faction formed by Muslim members of parliament in Thailand.

75 Interview with Thai military intelligence, Bangkok, 24 January 2005.

76 I was informed of this peculiar development by a journalist contact in Singapore (22 March 2005) who is following the southern Thailand situation closely, and who had noticed this during a trip to Bandung, Indonesia.

77 This was told to me by three religious teachers during the course of an interview in Pattani on 21 January 2005.