Legitimacy, Syncretism, and Bangsamoro Jihad: Discourses of Struggle and Community within the Moro Islamic Liberation Front

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Abstract

Islam’s influence in nationalism and political legitimacy is frequently studied, but diversity across the umma warrants continued investigation into how Islamic tradition shapes its style, content, and potency. Investigating the discourse of 1980s Mindanao’s Moro Islamic Liberation Front, this article adopts a syncretic approach for understanding encounters between Islamic traditions, particularly jihad, and nationalist symbols. Through discourse analysis, this article creates a textured understanding of the power of Islamic-nationalism, focusing on both intellectual genealogy and textual practice. It concludes that in this instance, Islamic-nationalism can be an inherently legitimising phenomenon, animated by the uniquely moral, temporal drive of jihadi tradition.

Keywords

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) – syncretism – Islam – nationalism – legitimacy – jihad

1 Introduction

The interpolation of Islamic belief and nationalist sentiment has been an oft-studied phenomenon in Islamic studies. Islam in politics is “adaptable and tough,” and while having an endless vitality, “its viability in any given area rests finally on the possibility that the national context affords,” according to James Piscatori (1983, 10). Robert Elson (2010, 334), for instance, outlines how the demographic ascendancy of an educated, urban middle class of
Muslims into government and business hierarchies created a gradual pairing between Indonesia’s modern state apparatus and Islamic values. In Malaysia, intersections of Islam and ethnic politics at the grassroots have been argued to reinforce communal cleavages and intra-national “othering,” where religion becomes a key marker of difference and, resulting, national identity (Neo 2006, 95–118). In both cases, Islamic traditions – rather than monolithic “Islams” per se – were instrumentalised by political elites to solidify identities and urge political allegiances that were increasingly local. In some instances, this was far from allusion to pan-Islamic trends that castigated any adherence to nationalist politicking.

This mixture of Islam and nationalism into consistent schemas of meaning, genuinely held by believers across the world, is a well-trodden path of cultural and ideological change. Delving deeper into individual cases, however, reveals that within this broadly recognised phenomenon there is an enduring diversity in the aesthetic, conceptual, and ultimately discursive choices made by oppositional elites. The early Moro Islamic Liberation Front, a prime mover of oppositional Islamist nationalism, serves as an ideal-type in this trend in Southeast Asia’s Islamist organisations. It emerged in a unique milieu characterised by a deep, centuries-long integration between Islamic and local religious customs (McKenna 1998, 163–65). However, it was faced in the 1970s and 1980s with the nascent global trend of a modernist brand of liberationist Islamic thinking. This was in tandem with growing, and even armed, discontent against a non-Islamic central Philippine government seen as insensitive to the aspirations of a largely Muslim Moro Mindanao. The local ideas of conflict, liberation, and communities in struggle with a modern state apparatus became mutually constitutive with particular jihadi Islamic traditions imported from abroad, creating discourses qualitatively and contextually different from comparable Islamic movements throughout twentieth-century Southeast Asia.

The key research problem thus emerges in exploring the underlying commonalities and utility of different Islamic-nationalist case studies across the region, while also assessing the impact of particular, politically-potent Islamic traditions emphasised by believers and local diversity in discursive practice. This unravels three core questions this article hopes to answer. Firstly, what are the foundational features of the Islamic-nationalist synthesis that make this ideological mixture alluring for elites in the first place, regardless of context? Secondly, moving from the broad to the specific, are there then particular concepts across Islamic traditions that energise these Islamic-nationalist discourses and make them more attractive as tools of political mobilisation? Thirdly, what does this look like locally in terms of style and textual practice?
This article takes a multidisciplinary approach to investigating these questions surrounding the rationale and style of discourse. First, this article hypothesises that Islamic-nationalism can be inherently legitimising, as the syncretic process by which it is created translates new ideological-religious traditions into readily accepted, local structures of belief at the grassroots, imbuing familiar ideas with renewed religio-moral vigour. Second, theological concepts within these traditions can energise the discursive practices of oppositional movements, creating an inherent diversity between Islamic-nationalist groups that is dependent on what traditions movement elites adopt, and how they integrate them with pre-existing ideas. This results in the oft-repeated concept of jihad, common across many activist non-state actors, revealing its potential as a potent mainstay in some Islamic-nationalist discourses because of its unique ability to bridge worldly action, communal justice, and spiritual-moral imperative. Third, the analysis will unveil how the concept of jihad, utilised with much more texture than simply as a warlike injunction against non-believers, became a driving force for early MILF propaganda, creating a bridge between religio-moral norms and proto-nationalist activism within the physical world.

Suitably, the case of the MILF during its formative years will act as a poignant demonstrative case for these questions of discursive style and substance. The article begins with a view of the theoretical framework shaping the analysis, followed by a survey of the theological traditions from which MILF elites drew. By way of primary materials, eighteen editions of the self-produced magazine Maradika, dated between 1984 and 1986 and hitherto un-researched in the context of religious-cultural change, will then offer a window into the early discourse of the movement. A combination of a content analysis for news articles published in the serial and a more thorough discourse analysis will be used to deconstruct how the MILF created a world for its readers where the mixing of their particular interpretation of modernist Islamic tradition and pre-existing Moro nationalism and religious tradition was framed as both natural and legitimate – the Moro cause was enmeshed within the moral codes and spiritual benefits imparted by their particular brand of modern Islam.

2 Theological Precedents and Ideological Content

Firstly, what is the theoretical foundation that makes Islamic-nationalism appealing as a schema for political legitimacy? To begin with, Islamic-nationalism is largely a phenomenon of how Islam undergoes processes of
cultural change and amalgamation in the context of highly modern political structures. For instance, Piscatori (1986, 94–98) surveys how Saudi ‘ulama’, albeit subconsciously, engage in “linguistic acculturation” to mesh Qur’anic hermeneutic surrounding the malleability of classical ideas of *shūrā* and *ījmāʾ* with contemporary democratic sentiment and statecraft. In the Southeast Asian context, Formichi (2010, 145–46) notes how the influence of pan-Islamism waned and recalibrated to match the changing political structures of post-independence Indonesia, and Aspinall (2007, 256) highlights how the Free Aceh Movement blended Muslim tradition into its definition of Acehnese nationalism to differentiate itself from the Indonesian political mainstream. Neo’s (2006, 103–8) Malaysian study explores the efforts of Malaysia’s PAS to define Malaysian nationalism and practices of state within the strictures of Islamic conservatism. Across these cases, Islamic traditions were reformed to accommodate new political understandings, often to motivate and legitimise opposition movements.

The diverse array of existing research, however, presents opportunities for investigating theoretical umbrellas that could be used to understand the mechanics and mobilisational utility of Islamic-nationalism. At the same time, the existing body of research raises the question of how the interplay between religion and nation can be theoretically parsed, reconciling the fact that local contexts are endlessly diverse, and that Islamic traditions themselves are not merely ideological “putty” that follow what the nation or local tradition decrees. A theoretical framework that captures the legitimising mechanics of Islamic-nationalism while exploring the granularity of where Islamic traditions are dominant, and where it melds more seamlessly with local structures, is the focus of this article.

A novel approach to understanding this nexus of religious nationalism and legitimacy may be located in Birgit Meyer’s (1992) anthropological treatment of syncretism as a translational process. In her study of Ghanaian Ewe Christianity, Meyer illustrates how the encounter between pre-colonial indigenous belief and European Christianity was rooted in power relations and grassroots negotiations of meaning, resulting in a popular, hybridised Ewe Christianity (Meyer 1992, 122; Shaw and Stewart 2005, 29) driven by the integration of Ewe conceptualisations of the devil and witchcraft into the external ideological-moral framework of Christianity (Meyer 1992, 119–20). Indigenous conceptions of evil began to define the value and legitimacy of the new Christian god for Ewe believers, particularly as Ewe theology surrounding evil was a vocabulary for comprehending real-world grievances and economic troubles – the Christian god thus became desirable as he would provide potent deliverance from worldly devilry (ibid., 118–19). And while material benefits offered by missionaries
certainly facilitated the syncretic process (ibid., 107), Meyer persists that the grassroots influence of locals (clerical or lay) undergirded the translation and transmutation of genuinely-held Christian ideas into corresponding local Ewe beliefs. Accordingly in this article’s case, a successful, accepted syncretism or translation between a specific tradition of modernist Islam and Moro nationalism underscored by long-extant local Islamic understandings would rely on two levers: ideological “latches” between new and pre-existing traditions (such as Ewe concepts of devilry) and the temporal impact of these ideas (in Meyer’s study; colonial power, but also importantly the connection of religious ideological structures to local socio-economic concerns).

Islamic-nationalism’s legitimating force thus operates within what Bourdieu (1989, 23–24) labelled the “mysterium of the ministerium,” where legitimacy is created and sustained through symbolic power. In other words, it is a power of “world-making” that repackages the past to create a view of the present where movement elites are seen to have the right to rule, and constituents the responsibility to follow. This power to make worlds, groups, and identities, however, is constrained by the movement’s political and material successes, and any symbolic discourse must be “founded in reality,” or rooted in local experience for popular legitimacy to take hold (ibid.). For the issue of syncretism, it becomes clear that the mixture of external and local belief systems in the symbolic space, rather than being optional, is an enabling condition for the successful import of external ideas.

However, this should not solely imply the conclusion that, somewhat axiomatically, new ideas need to be familiarised to be accepted. This would place a disproportionate weight on pre-existing ideas and symbols (in this case, nationalism and its indigenous religio-cultural artefacts) in determining legitimising power. In contrast, the added strength of Meyer’s approach to syncretism-as-a-process is its underlying assumption that cultural change is a multi-dimensional encounter where there is value in old and new. In the context of Islamic-nationalism, this illustrates there is another layer to the phenomenon beyond that of an “external” formulation of Islam granting a new moral shroud to nationalist action. There is importance in the content of the two interacting traditions – particularly the “Islamic” side of Islamic-nationalism – and the specificity of what religious concepts are enmeshed into the political space to inspire action.

2.1 The Potency of Ideological-Religious Content: Jihad and Political Action

The second research question is thus raised: what ideological content or Islamic concepts can then be examined within Meyer’s framework, amplifying
the legitimating power of Islamic-nationalist schemas? Here, this research draws attention to the concept of jihad which, although being far from the only theological tool employed in political discourse, obtains unique salience in the MILF’s early discourse and in Islamic-nationalist agitation more broadly. This is because jihad, across many Islamic traditions and especially in those that permit armed action against an adversary, is particularly temporal. In many contexts where it is deployed, its explicit purpose is to strive within the physical world in order to create living conditions more amenable to Islamic morality (however defined), and to place the mujāhid in higher spiritual standing. Mairaj Syed’s (2013, 141–42) study of classical thinking on jihad highlights how early Hanafi and Shafi’i scholars framed jihad as a duty to “command the good and forbid the evil,” where the worldly dominion of Islam – moral, political, or otherwise – would be expanded for both the material and spiritual benefit of the Muslim community. Similarly, Sherman Jackson’s (2002, 8) historicist reading of the origins of the jihadi tradition located jihad’s origins within a seventh century Arabian peninsula that was locked in a state of war (as per Qur’anic description), where the new force of Islamic kinship was set against an “old order” of familial kinship systems hostile to the Prophet’s new political community. In such chaos, Jackson (ibid., 9) argued that the first Qur’anic injunctions to fight were just and morally necessary for “preserving the physical integrity of the Muslim community ... when fighting, sometimes pre-emptively, sometimes defensively, was understood to be the only way to do so.”

In the Southeast Asian context, this pattern is still present. Azra (2004, 140) recounts the scholarship of ‘Abd al-Samad al-Palimbani, an eighteenth century Arabia-based, Malay-Indonesian scholar who appealed to Malay-Indonesian Muslims to wage jihad against the Dutch colonial authorities specifically, and more generally contended that jihad was a moral duty against “hostile unbelievers.” Similarly, Hadi (2011, 185–89) emphasises how Acehnese hikayat prang sabi (story of war in the path of God) narratives defined this war as “a defensive act against the aggression of Dutch infidels,” with the injunction based on restoring moral justice by both eliminating Dutch immorality and their suppression of Muslims.

In Muslim Mindanao, Saber (1986, 9) outlines how Maranao in the late nineteenth century defined jihad as “a holy war of defense,” especially in light of the anti-American posturing of local rulers. Kawashima (2006, 90), too, with a robust corpus of Maranao texts and oral histories, illustrates how the 1930s anti-colonial legend of Dimakaling, the “fearsome ruler of Lanao” and outlaw, was embodied within in popular Maranao storytelling as upholding both a spirit and power to violently resist non-Muslim abuses of power. This legitimised Dimakaling’s jihad-like actions as a means of self-defence
and moral retribution (ibid.; see also Riwarung 2009, 174–75). Anti-colonial and temporally-restorative themes would continue threading through Moro texts, whether in the form of Cairene Moro student publications advocating for external and internal struggle against oppressors and fāhilīyya (Kawashima, 2011a, 207), or in the form of local Maranao narrations praising the retribution against the immoral, oppressive adversaries of Husayn (as a mirror of the context of Maranao oppression in the 1960s; Kawashima 2011b, 72–73). A common thread emerges of the concept’s role in connecting worldly action, focused communal justice, and moral welfare.

To be sure, there are exceptions to the armed manifestation of jihad (for example, readings that situate jihad as a primarily spiritual or internally-purificatory exercise; see Babou 2007, 3–4; Pieri et. al. 2014, 39). However, it remains that this tripartite interlinkage of temporality, justice, and morality endows many jihadi traditions with a utility for oppositional politics, distinct from other ideas within the Islamic tradition that encourage material activism. It is, for instance, divergent from the drive to enjoin good and forbid evil (al-amr bi-l-maʾrūf wa-l-nahī ‘an al-munkar), an imperative to advise against (or in some instances, forcefully prevent) more general sin in society as a means for preserving correct practice (Pieri et. al. 2014, 39–43). The adversarial dimension of jihad also sets it apart from another pillar of faith, zakat, which fiqh scholars Mahmud and Haneef (2008, 118–21) framed as a largely monetary, social act, but one designed to simultaneously purify the spirit of a zakat payer and bring developmental assistance to the poor. Importantly, returning to Syed (2013, 141), jihad also differs from Islamic readings of rebellion – conflicts against a Muslim ruler driven by hermeneutical difference and/or political grievance – given that jihad is seen as warfare against “non-Muslims who have not submitted to the authority of an Islamic political and legal order.”

Therefore, whatever that final order may be, it becomes clear that key themes of jihadi interpretation, as opposed to other Qur’anic encouragements of correct and moral action in the world, may have a definitively existential and communal texture. It then becomes less surprising that this pattern of religious thinking can act as a rallying call for national narratives steeped in in-group, out-group distinctions. It synergises effectively as an idea that provides not only a religious vocabulary, but also a genuine spiritual-moral focus for the believer who is engaged in oppositional, and even armed forms of nationalist politics.

In this regard, one cannot ignore the importance of ideological content in shaping the valency of Islamic-nationalism. It is indeed a necessary mixing of new ideologies into familiar, local belief structures that makes the phenomenon an attractive system of legitimisation in the first place. However, not all
ideas within these new traditions will motivate constituents in the same way, and understanding the strength of Islamic-nationalist discourse will require a more textured assessment than that of Islam simply giving a holy veneer to nationalism, just as Meyer assessed that particular religious ideas were the hinge in translating Christianity for the Ewe. In this process, organisations like the MILF actively re-negotiate these specific Islamic traditions to syncretise and enmesh with the popular sentiments that preceded their arrival, in order to grant legitimacy to their movement.

3 Moro Nationalism and the Early MILF

The article’s third question – how Islamic-nationalism operates stylistically and discursively – will be addressed through a detailed investigation of the MILF texts, although not before outlining how the fundamentals of Islamic-nationalism and its interplay with an energising jihadi tradition apply to this particular case. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front emerged officially in March 1984 as a breakaway faction of the Moro National Islamic Front (MNLF). Salamat Hashim, an al-Azhar educated rebel leader, initiated the intra-front agitation in 1977. He claimed the MNLF under Chairman Nur Misuari was abandoning the struggle of the “Moro,” or the “Bangsamoro,” a term used by members to describe the collective indigenous Muslim population of the Southern Philippines. Its internal ethno-linguistic and structural-political cleavages notwithstanding, the Moro have been framed by the two fronts as a distinct national community, grappling with the legacies of Spanish colonial aggression, American intervention, and Catholic-Manila-directed settler-colonialism in the heart of Moro Mindanao (Majul 1985, 17–26, 37).

Exacerbated by the latter point, and due to the demographic reality of Bangsamoro being mostly Muslim, the ethno-nationalism of the two fronts has always attended to Islamic sentiment, whether religiously or in a more communal, oppositional sense. From the Spanish colonial era, Islam had already been a demarcating force in communal identity, as Spanish incursions into Mindanao reinforced the oppositional relationship between Christians and Muslims, synonymising territorial defence and anti-colonialism with Islamic commitment (ibid., 17). This adversarial relationship continued to solidify throughout the American period as anti-colonial grievances were amplified, and the burgeoning American education system was perceived as displacing local religious institutions with foreign “kapir, or non-Muslim knowledge” (Kawashima 2006, 86–88). So strong was this influence of powerful outsiders
that Tan (1977, 148) argued that under the American authorities in the early twentieth century, Moro unity was largely driven by the existence of the American “colonial superstructure and not by Muslim culture.”

What would have been more immediate for the MILF, however, would have been the new discourse emerging from the MNLF and its contemporaries from the 1960s, as the first iterations of modern Islamic-nationalism took form. Kawashima (2011a, 208) notes that Moro scholars in Cairo during the 1960s were already animating their discourse with themes of Islamic reformism, with some engaging in politics upon their return to Mindanao. This drive would soon manifest in the MNLF (as well as its smaller predecessors), which deployed Islamic concepts in its political dialogue as “a vigorous ideological movement with Islam as its banner (Majul 1985, 98).” While the MILF was eager to deploy (in their view) more stringent pronouncements of Islamic concepts, particularly around jihad, the MNLF was not an entirely secular force.

Accordingly, an opportunity arose for the nascent MILF-MNLF cleavage to obtain a fuller, more political salience in latching onto growing discontent with the MNLF’s perceived concessionism to the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) in the late 1970s. It inspired Hashim’s statement upon initiating his breakaway faction in 1977, that “The MNLF Leadership was being manipulated away from its Islamic bases, methodologies and objectives and fast evolving towards Marxist-Maoist orientations” (Mastura 1986, 52). Misuari thus expelled Hashim and his followers from the MNLF, leaving the latter no choice but to establish a rival front in 1984, replacing the “National” with “Islamic,” and embarking on a renewed wave of violence against the GRP.

As MNLF negotiations continued, even after the Marcos dictatorship fell in 1986, the MILF maintained its armed operations against the GRP and its allies in the South. Concurrent to the resulting decline in MNLF personnel, the MILF rapidly outstripped its secular-nationalist rival in firepower and grassroots support (Gutierrez and Guialal 2000, 266), and although some of its teachings concerning personal conduct (forwarded by its cadre of al-Azhari ‘ulama’) were resisted, its Islam-inspired call for social justice was readily accepted by the mass base (McKenna 1998, 231–33). In any case the MILF’s ruling stratum, whose opinions would have also collectively driven the MILF’s discursive posturing, held blended backgrounds that likely facilitated cross-fertilisation between secular-nationalist and more Islamist worlds. Murad Ibrahim (current head of the Bangsamoro government) was an engineering student from a religious family; Aziz Mimbantas (then part of the Executive Jihad Committee) was an al-Azhar alumnus like Hashim with standing as an ‘ālim; political and communications elites Ghazali Jaafar and Mohagher Iqbal, with fewer religious
and military certifications, brought experience from secular institutions to drive communication of the MILF’s ideology to broader audiences (Mastura 2012, 64–66).

Ultimately, while core MNLF-government discussions in 1986 and 1993 intentionally sidelined the MILF, the Islamic Front, rather than orchestrate wide spoiler campaigns to derail the MNLF, focused on building grassroots organisational support, armaments, and “governments-in-waiting” in thirteen Mindanao provinces (Gutierrez and Guialal 2000, 276). Boasting an armed operative count of approximately 15,000 (Abuza 2005, 463), the MILF bided their time to become the de-facto power in Central Cotabato by the early 1990s (Gutierrez and Guialal 2000, 276).

3.1 Precursory Traditions

Just as the MILF’s propaganda is shaped by its temporal power and achievements, an appreciation of not only of its nationalist origins but also its precursory religious traditions is necessary to examine the fundamental structure of Islamic-nationalism, with the encounter between a modernist, jihadi-oriented Islamic tradition and a local framework of pre-existing Moro national-cultural sensibilities. On the Islamic side of the equation, McKenna’s observations of grassroots resistance to the MILF ideology highlights that local Moro “customs,” or ʿādāt in Arabic and Islamic parlance, were not so easily extinguished by the MILF’s foreign-taught ‘ulama’. For instance, some Maguindanaoan Muslims inclined towards what a number of anthropologists call a “folk” Islam in which spirits and dead ancestors were supplicated for worldly intercession, and thus seeing a seamless relationship between spiritual wellbeing and temporal power (Williams 1997, 34–63). Such belief structures hardly emerged in official MILF discourse, but front elites would have nevertheless been aware of the appeal of ʿādāt when considering their outreach. The MILF was not born into an entirely secular world, despite the allegedly secular lean of the MNLF – there were clear, localised traditions of Islam widely held across the population, which, in any case, may have been prerequisite for the MILF’s support base to adopt a more Qutb and Mawdudi aligned ideology.

Contestations from pre-existing customs notwithstanding, Mastura (1986, 54) argues that “[the MILF’s] vocabulary of motives are essentially Islamic unlike the MNLF Misuari leadership who has harnessed the mixture of anti-Western

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1 ʿAdāt is a pluralisation of the term “custom” or “habit,” used especially in the Islamic context to refer to local customs for social operation.
2 The ethnic group that forms the core of the MILF’s membership.
and socialist language.” To put it succinctly, in the official announcement of the MILF’s foundation in 1984, Hashim wrote:

All Mujahideen under the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) adopt Islam as their way of life. Their ultimate objective in their Jihad is to make supreme the WORD OF ALLAH and establish Islam in the Bangsamoro homeland.

ibid.

Where the Misuari faction sought a homeland first, the MILF – allegedly – pursued a more essentialist Islam, with the homeland destined to follow shortly after. This was at least indicatively an early glimpse of a newer vision of Islamic commitment, claiming a “purer” application of religion than its competitors in Mindanao.

Yet, the Islamic-nationalism articulated by MILF elites was not wholly indigenous, nor did it use in full the traditions it imported from abroad. As highlighted by Lingga (1997), Mercado (2008, 237), Quimpo (2008, 179), and Macasalong (2014, 8), the Islamic modernist scholars Sayyid Qutb and Abul A’la Mawdudi were instrumental in shaping the MILF’s thought. Even Hashim (1998, 239) acknowledged in a 1998 interview that Qutb and Mawdudi were inspirations in his decision to push for a more Islamically-oriented revolution. The foremost concept inherited, as evidenced by much of the MILF’s early texts and action, is that of jihad, an oft-repeated imperative of Hashim (2006b, 388–89) and considered by him as an individual duty3 for Moro Muslims, to the point of it being necessary to uphold one’s Islamic faith. Here, a reflection on Qutb’s and Mawdudi’s theology reveals some similarities. Qutb (2005, 33–49) was known for his division of the world into the Islamic society, and the ignorant (jāhilī) society, wherein Muslims were obliged to engage in jihad until the world was liberated from ignorance (and its associated oppressions) into Islam. Regarding rebellion against a ruler, Abou El Fadl (2001, 338–39) argues that while Qutb condemned rebellion against a just ruler, he rejected those who resisted the application of God’s law – symbolising the persecution of the Brotherhood at the hands of secular Egyptians, and drawing parallels with how Salamat Hashim might have seen his own government. Mawdudi (2008, 261–63), similarly, contended that in a world replete with injustice, Islam

3 He relies on the concept of farḍ al-ʿayn which is the Qur’anic term for decreeing one’s personal obligations, as opposed to obligations one may delegate to a community leader, police officer, head of state, etc.
must be established, and it becomes central to faith to undertake jihad – even violently – for the sake of God and human justice.

Despite the almost universal language of Islamic struggle, the outcome of the MILF’s jihad was shaped by the proto-national boundaries of Moro territory and identity. After all, the MILF sought an independent homeland for Moro people, and remained (in its formative years, at least) relatively silent on what this might mean for the global umma of Muslims. Further, the MILF emerged at a time when discursive blending was already occurring between Islamic traditions and nation-statist thinking. Although not necessarily widely accepted at the grassroots, resistance sentiment in the 1970s (particularly from the MNLF and their contemporaries) began to speak explicitly of “bangsa” and nationhood, likely due to the demands of the modern context where self-determination and justice were being expressed in national terms (Kawashima 2011a, 200–203). Nur Misuari and the MNLF also emerged in the shadow of Nasser’s brand of anti-imperialist nationalism and Islamic socialism, which concorded with similar nationalist sensibilities across the Islamic world that reconciled the nation-state with Islamic heritage (Kawashima 2011a, 208; Mastura 2012, 39). This, however, would clash fundamentally with the traditions of Qutb and Mawdudi which were borne out of discontent with state-based abuses of power, especially as the MILF pursued active national recognition in international fora.

A divergence from the MILF’s more jihadi inspirations thus becomes clearer. Both Qutb and Mawdudi were opposed to the idea of nationalism, seeing it primarily as a non-Islamic ideology that divided Muslims. Qutb (2005, 81) states that a Muslim “has no nationality except his belief ... no relatives except those who share the belief,” and Mawdudi (2008, 257) argues “if you, submit ... to your nation and motherland, then again Allah’s Din [ideology/religion, i.e. Islam] will have no place in it.” Qutb, owing to his division of the world into Islamic and jāhilî spheres, also looked down upon national affiliations and even condemned the idea that Arab nationalism could act as a necessary precursor for greater Islamic unity (Piscatori 1986, 108–9). In the end, Islam was to remain the only factor for determining one’s worth in the Qutbi tradition.

Corollary to the MILF’s imaginings of Islam and nation is the issue of their engagement with non-Muslims. This manifests in two dimensions, again displaying the MILF’s divergence from its theological inspirations and subsequent syncretisation of Islamic tradition. First, on the issue of non-Muslim rule, the MILF did not reject the Philippine government solely on its non-Islamic nature. The MILF’s founding letter did not frame opposition to the GRP based on its Christian-ness, but rather its failure to adhere to the agreements it had made with the MNLF (MILF Central Committee 1984). It indicated a modicum
of respect for the GRP’s non-Islamic system, which departs from Qutb’s and Mawdudi’s theoretical resistance to jāhiliyya. Second, in their informal rule of sympathetic territories, the MILF did not indicate in their propaganda a stratification of Mindanaoan society according to faith. Indeed, considering the MILF’s intention to establish an Islamic system, the just treatment of minorities reflects what Qutb would have granted non-Muslims (Khatab 2002, 185), while departing from Mawdudi’s denial of citizenship for non-Muslims (Nasr 1996, 99–100). However, the approach remained a syncretic one, negotiating the core tradition of liberationist jihad more readily with the Mindanaoan reality of ethno-linguistic and religious diversity.

Considering these precedents in tradition, the MILF drew from a new tradition of ideas imported from the global umma, but not without substantial moderation by realities on the ground in Mindanao. At this more general level, at least, the syncretic experience of Islamic-nationalism for the MILF interlinked ideas of jihadi activism with Moro communal priorities developed over decades of deeply-felt political marginalisation.

4 Islamic-Nationalist Discourse in MILF Texts

Returning to this article’s third research concern around actual style and textual practice, particularly for the issue of political legitimacy, this article now examines the degree to which the Islamic-nationalist syncretism was expressed in early texts at the local level. Maradika, in a corpus stretching from 1984 to 1986, attests to this Islamic-nationalist dynamic in greater detail and interlocks Islamic and Moro nationalist traditions, with the jihadi, anti-oppression theologising of Qutb and Mawdudi seeing substantial prioritisation, but also modification in the process. The MILF’s legitimising formula, as laid out within Maradika’s texts, clearly elucidates how a new, jihadi tradition melded with nationalist predispositions to obtain local relevancy. Yet this did not occur without leveraging the unique strength of jihadi traditions in creating a narrative link between spiritual benefit and the temporal combat of adversarial injustice, all in pursuit of nationalist political goals.

Maradika was an official monthly print publication of the Central Committee of the MILF, which between 1984 and 1986 claimed to be “published in the Bangsamoro Homeland, [aiming] to portray the real picture of the struggle waged by the Bangsamoro people.”4 Mastura (2012, 66) also acknowledges the newsletter’s role in generating official publicity for the cause and organisation;

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4 This quotation was attached to all editions cited between 1984 and 1986.
accordingly, it is probable that it was subsidised by the movement. In terms of reach, from at least 1999 *Maradika* (MILF Central Committee 1999) listed an editorial PO Box in Cotabato City, and claimed distribution in the “homeland and elsewhere in the Philippines,” with a 2000 and 2011 edition claiming also overseas distribution (MILF Central Committee 2000, 2011). Further, most editions surveyed contained letters to the editor from local residents, many of whom requested that *Maradika* copies be sent to them (with no mention of payment). Additionally, overseas distribution may have occurred as early as May 1986, with that month’s edition exhorting sympathetic foreigners to donate funds to the MILF, listing the recipient as a Cairo-based account with Bank Faisal al-Islami (MILF Central Committee 1986e). However, the paper, while official and distributed locally, was published entirely in English, which would have limited its readership mostly to foreign observers and locals who had been educated in English.

Beginning with a broad view of the publication, news (both quantitatively and spatially) consumed the majority of each edition’s pages, and reported on local events in Muslim Mindanao and progress in the rebellion, with an obvious editorial bias in favour of the MILF. As Table 1 illustrates, the topics that dominated *Maradika*’s presentation of the world, especially in its first three years, are the incidence of crime and disorder, negative actions of the GRP, and the MILF’s own activities. A typical issue, for example, would dedicate most of its stories to recent armed robberies and criminal killings, and then allocate other pieces to alleged AFP/GRP abuses of civilians and armed MILF “mujahidin” reprisals.

Interestingly, although perhaps unsurprisingly given the inclinations of the MILF ideology, *Maradika* dedicated space to international and domestic Muslim issues in its reportage. In 1985 and 1986, the papers began allocating two articles per issue to syndicated coverage of mujahidin resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (MILF Central Committee 1985, 1986). On a more local scale, the May 1984 issue reported on the Philippines’ first da’wa conference, composed mainly of civil society groups (MILF Central Committee 1984a). At the very least, this solidifies the Islamic component of the Moro identity that, while not unique to the MILF approach, was nonetheless central to the MILF’s project of group-making and self-legitimation, and the blending of moral rectitude and nationalist practice. This content analysis highlights how the textual world of the MILF was one of inherent danger to the Moro community, but met with religious resilience and armed activism on the part of the movement.
TABLE 1  All Maradika news articles by category, n = 265

| Issue   | MILF exploits | Abuses/failures of GRP | Crime and disorder | Muslim affairs (int.) | Muslim affairs (Dom.) | Economics | Novelty/Other | Total |
|---------|---------------|------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------|--------------|-------|
| May-84  | 1             | 3                      | 1                  | 0                    | 1                    | 0         | 0            | 6     |
| Nov-84  | 1             | 4                      | 3                  | 0                    | 2                    | 1         | 0            | 11    |
| Dec-84  | 3             | 3                      | 3                  | 0                    | 0                    | 1         | 0            | 10    |
| Mar-85  | 0             | 6                      | 8                  | 0                    | 2                    | 2         | 0            | 18    |
| Jun-85  | 0             | 5                      | 8                  | 0                    | 1                    | 0         | 1            | 15    |
| Jul-85  | 3             | 8                      | 3                  | 0                    | 0                    | 1         | 0            | 15    |
| Aug-85  | 1             | 5                      | 6                  | 0                    | 1                    | 0         | 0            | 13    |
| Sep-85  | 2             | 1                      | 6                  | 2                    | 0                    | 1         | 2            | 14    |
| Oct-85  | 2             | 3                      | 9                  | 2                    | 1                    | 0         | 1            | 17    |
| Nov-85  | 3             | 2                      | 7                  | 2                    | 0                    | 0         | 2            | 16    |
| Dec-85  | 1             | 3                      | 5                  | 2                    | 1                    | 2         | 2            | 16    |
| Jan-86  | 2             | 4                      | 8                  | 1                    | 0                    | 0         | 1            | 16    |
| Feb-86  | 2             | 3                      | 5                  | 2                    | 0                    | 1         | 1            | 14    |
| Mar-86  | 2             | 4                      | 9                  | 2                    | 0                    | 0         | 0            | 17    |
| Apr-86  | 5             | 1                      | 5                  | 2                    | 1                    | 0         | 3            | 17    |
| May-86  | 2             | 5                      | 7                  | 2                    | 0                    | 0         | 1            | 17    |
| Jun-86  | 2             | 4                      | 4                  | 2                    | 1                    | 0         | 1            | 14    |
| Jul-86  | 2             | 4                      | 8                  | 3                    | 0                    | 2         | 1            | 19    |
| Totals  | 34            | 68                     | 105                | 22                   | 11                   | 8         | 17           | 265   |
| As %    | 12.8%         | 25.7%                  | 39.6%              | 8.3%                 | 4.2%                 | 3.0%      | 6.4%         | 100.0%|

4.1 Commitment to Struggle

It is discourse on the necessity of struggle, or jihad, that perhaps appears as the masthead of the MILF’s early Islamic-nationalist representations; in particular its armed activism in the world and the moral reasonings behind it. The front’s graphic design, often drawing the reader’s initial attention, is emblazoned with references to armed combat. The banner for Maradika (which translates to
“freedom” in the local language) seen in Figure 1, carries an indigenous Moro shield, spear, and kris at the centre of the MILF emblem. The Qur’anic verse of 2:193 at the top of the image exhorts Muslims to fight against persecution and those who prevent Islam from being established, while also constraining fighting to engage only those who are “oppressors.” Similarly, the flag for the MILF features both an Islamic crescent and star, alongside a large Moro kris/kampilan. Such an emblem appears on the uniforms of MILF “mujahidin” who were frequently photographed for Maradika in and out of uniform, talking with civilians, praying, or posing before battle (Figure 2). Such images, particularly the photographs of rebels, provide the reader visual proof of the MILF’s commitment to resistance.

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5 The verse’s translation approximates to: “Fight them until there is no [more] fitnah [persecution] and [until] worship is [acknowledged to be] for Allah. But if they cease, then there is to be no aggression except against the oppressors.”

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**Figure 1** Scan of Maradika issue (MILF Central Committee 1986), cropped to the banner at the top of each issue’s front page. Graphic published by the Maradika editorial team, individual artists uncredited by Maradika.

**Figure 2** Images of MILF rebels. Scan of photograph published in Maradika, July 1986, page 7. Image published by the Maradika editorial team, photographer uncredited by Maradika.
Jihad, through the impressions granted by images alone, becomes a concept institutionalised in the MILF’s military organs, demonstrating a semblance of ownership of resistance. Table 1 shows that 12.8% of Maradika reports focused on MILF operations, constituting the third most common category of reporting. In the July 1985 edition of the paper a stand-alone quote from Salamat Hashim in January of that year states:

Given the ever-worsening and depressing conditions that had befallen our community for more than a decade, all our endeavours and efforts to defend our religion, the dignity of the Bangsamoro people, and to regain our legitimate rights to self-determination fall squarely within the category of jihad in the way of Allah deserving great reward from Allah.

MILF Central Committee 1985c, 7

The December issue of the same year includes two passages from the Sahih Muslim extolling the nobility of dying in the cause of jihad (MILF Central Committee 1985h), and every Maradika issue collected contains a lengthy column entitled “Mujahid Speaks,” wherein an anonymous MILF fighter attempts to dispel rumours against the front and clarify or explain official positions of the group. For instance, in May 1986 the mujāhid lambasted former Marcos-aligned datu Ali Dimaporo for being “used by anybody [in power]” (MILF Central Committee 1986e, 3), and criticised in February Marcos’ decision to hold elections, stating that it “is the game of the rich, influential and strong. The weak, poor and toiling class have no way to win (MILF Central Committee 1986d, 3).” Even in this broad sense, Maradika orchestrates a harmony between moral beatification and the urgencies of temporal, political action.

Furthermore, central to the MILF’s outlining of jihad is the injustice that necessitates this temporal action, aligning well with the delineations of jihadi tradition offered earlier by Jackson, and Syed. An abusive, neglectful central government constitutes the main “enemy” or “oppression” the MILF’s jihad is pitted against. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the most common categories of news reportage are those of societal disorder and government abuse, as per the findings in Table 1; Maradika’s reporting on the local world of Mindanaoans fuels the injustice-centred narrative of jihad that the MILF’s struggle relies on. For instance, a May 1984 editorial blames the Marcos’ government’s foreign indebtedness for the South’s economic malaise (MILF Central Committee 1984a, 2). In the same vein, Hashim’s January 1985 statement clearly attributes the need for jihad to the government’s attack on Bangsamoro religion, security, wellbeing, and individual rights. He mirrors this in a December 1984 issue, commenting that to create a system of “justice and
fairness,” jihad must overthrow persecution and oppression, albeit under the resistance leadership of “righteous and God-fearing” individuals (MILF Central Committee 1984c, 6).

This remains mostly consonant with the jihadi thinking of Qutb and Mawdudi, although Hashim's initial book of ideas elucidates far more stringent ideas than those forwarded in *Maradika*. While the magazine material is unequivocal in furthering Qutb's and Mawdudi's position that an oppressive order warrants a liberationist response of jihad, it does not match the fervour that Hashim had once displayed for the primacy of the Islamic system. In his 1985 book, *The Bangsamoro Mujahid*, Hashim (2006b, 388–89) declares jihad an individual obligation for all Muslims, and states that oppression is any suppression of the freedom that exists only in an Islamic system. He follows the Qutbi position that Islam is “the decisive declaration of man's freedom,” which can only be eventuated through jihad against an oppressive, non-Islamic system (Qutb 2005, 40).

Such a strong alignment with the Qutbi position is present throughout *The Bangsamoro Mujahid*, wherein a majority of the content is dedicated to explaining a totalising view of jihad. This is limited not just to liberationist warfare, but also the spiritual underpinnings of jihad (general Islamic īmān and correct knowledge of the reasons for jihad), while also contributing guidelines for practicing individual and organisational discipline (Hashim 2011, 14–43). Similarly, Lingga (1997) assessed that “Salamat's political goal is not just the liberation of the Bangsamoro homeland from what the Moro fronts perceive as Philippine colonial rule but the application of the Islamic ideology,” subsequently outlining Hashim's belief in the inalienable authority of God, dovetailing again with the Qutbi and Mawdudi tradition. *The Bangsamoro Mujahid*, however, was an early text written largely for the purposes of inducting mujahidin into the renewed moral and practical framework of the MILF (Hashim 2011, 5); accordingly, its tenor would have matched the fervency Hashim expected of his recruits. Hashim’s contemporary Salah Jubair also concorded with these sentiments. Jubair (1999, 244, 262–65) noted that resistance was only natural given that the Moro suffered endless tyrannies through colonialism that pressed on the “physical and moral existence of the Moros,” while also noting that recourse to an Islamic system would also ward off ruin from internal traditionalism and secularism. This is of particular concern given that...
the editorial direction of Maradika overwhelmingly faults the Marcos government for being dictatorial, economically incompetent, and corrupt – rather than being un-Islamic per se.

There were also instances in Maradika where correct Islamic practice was of issue – take a July 1985 editorial that condemns Marcos-established shari’a courts being secondary to the Philippine Constitution, where “any Muslim who upholds this view [of the submissiveness of the shari’a to secular law] is guilty of heretical crime” (MILF Central Committee 1985c, 7). However, the statement does hint towards a tone of rejection of a tyrannical system rather than of anti-scripturalism specifically, and Maradika largely leans towards employing Islam against generalised injustices and abuses rather than as a detailed rubric for personal conduct. As seen later that year in November, responding to a letter to the editor that queried the MILF’s use of militancy as opposed to negotiation, Maradika’s staff replied:

Militantness is never against the principles for the spread of Islam. Militancy is simply over-sensitiveness to issues condemning the faith and the umma. In Islam there can be no compromise between truth and falsehood, justice and wickedness.

MILF Central Committee 1985g, 7

This tendency cements further in the edition of August 1985, where an excerpt of Mawdudi’s writings on jihad – emphasising the infallibility of the Islamic system – is printed behind a guest article entitled “The Christian Moros,” emphasising an anonymous Christian MILF fighter’s retention of his religion, but also his willingness to fight against the injustices enabled by the GRP (MILF Central Committee 1985d, 5).

The MILF members in charge of publications nevertheless chose to frame jihad in the light of specifically local problems throughout much of the corpus. The condemnations levelled by Qutb and Mawdudi against non-Muslims/non-Islamic systems were not as present in these official and serialised MILF texts as condemnations of socio-economic inequality and government abuse. The identity of resistance leadership constructed by the MILF, in support of their broader Islamic-nationalist direction, rests upon this paradigm that encoded jihad into the structural order of nationalist sensibility.

At the same time, MILF elites used the specific language of this new jihadi tradition to legitimise themselves through a moral-religious frame. All their articulated political-economic grievances were also used by competing Communist rebels and Misuar’s MNLF. It was the commitment to jihad, however, that bolstered their legitimising narrative. It was likely the reason why
Hashim, in the initial founding letter of the front re-published in Maradika, stated that his was “the only organization waging jihad in the Southern Philippines” (MILF Central Committee 1984b, 4). It was also what likely led Vice-Chairman of Internal Affairs Urabbe Abowidad to criticise collaborationist and MNLF-aligned ‘ulama’ for “not joining the jihad” (MILF Central Committee 1985a, 5), excoriating those unaligned with the MILF’s renewed application of Islamic tradition and ideology. In this formula, the MILF presented themselves as having the right to lead not only because they knew what to fight against, but also because they could articulate the moral end for which they were fighting.

4.2 Reconciling Jihad and Nation

The jihad of the MILF, however, was not just a mode of political activism but a multi-staged narrative from injustice, to worldly response, and finally to an ideal end state where Mindanao’s Muslims are secure. It is in the contours of this ideal end state that the ideological-religious form of the new, jihadi tradition gives way to the predispositions of pre-existing nationalism, garmenting their Islamic-nationalist discourse with grassroots familiarity. The MILF’s unwavering discourse on Moro nationalism, from Maradika pieces to even Hashim’s earliest treatise on the Bangsamoro jihad, proves the greatest point of cleavage with Qutb’s and Mawdudi’s tradition. Referring to Figure 1, the weaponry included in the MILF emblem are conscious selections of local armaments, melding symbols of resistance with Moro cultural artefacts. Moreover, the Muslim crescent and star on the right side cradles a silhouette of the Southern Philippines – far from a global umma or pan-Islamic state. Referring again to Table 1, all news save for the 8.3% dedicated to international coverage were dedicated to local affairs, submerging the reader within a world constructed thoroughly out of local concerns, with at most a secondary concern for how the Moro nation was to fit into a global assemblage of pure Islamic states.

Literary texts in Maradika provide a fuller expression of the centrality of Moro-ness to the MILF’s discourse. Seen in Table 2, the February 1986 poem “Dauntless Strivers” carries an overt interlinkage of personal dedication to nation and God. Al Amin declares that the “Bangsamoro people of the South” are “but one” in Islam, and then emotively details the geography of the Moro home. They then declare the Moro people as “Mujahideen,” implying a sanctified form of struggle for “freedom and truth … to make Allah’s words supreme/And to free our motherland.” In another poem, “A Dedication to my Fellow Mujahideen,” Siddique calls upon Allah and declares himself “Moro in blood & soul” in the same stanza. While it ends using similar symbols to Al Amin, it also pinpoints “the government” as the centre of Moro ire, synchronising with the general intonation of anti-oppression struggle.
TABLE 2 Excerpts from selected politically-intoned poems published in Maradika (Al Amin 1986, 7; Siddique 1986, 7). Formatting and language have been reproduced faithfully from original prints, regardless of grammatical correctness.

(February 1986)

POEM

DAUNTLESS STRIVERS

By

Qamar Al Amin

Kidpawan, Cotabato

“TO you our beloved
Oh! Bangsamoro people of the South
In Islam we are but one
You’re our parents and brothers dear
Worry not for us
For in Allah’s hands
There’s no fear nor harm;

The Jungle is our habitat
Amid the tallest trees and grassy hills
There we use to dwell
We feel no hunger nor thirst
For Allah’s mercy is self-evident;

Mujahideen we are known
Fighting for freedom and truth we are
For our generations’ sake
Deep in our hearts, engraved our
definite stand
To make Allah’s words supreme
And to free our motherland;”

(July 1986)

LITERARY

A DEDICATION TO MY
FELLOW MUJAHIDEEN

By

Abdul Jabbar Siddique

“OH! Allah, The Almighty God
give me strength
that I may never fall
let courage in my being dwell
I am a Moro in blood & soul

For in my existence
I have to fight
for whatever reason should
by the crook
that dark (the government) commands
for the right
that I must hold”

A more extended poem, excerpted in Table 3, illustrates a deeper syncretism between Islamic and ethno-cultural imperatives. Yousuf, a MILF commander, urges the three core ethnicities of Muslim Mindanao to reclaim their historical – and distinctly Islamic – place in the contemporary struggle. For Yousuf, there is an Islamic imperative to struggle against the oppressors of the South, although it is one rooted in Tausug, Maguindanaon, and Maranao religio-political traditions.
Table 3

Excerpt of *Mindanao is Moaning* by Al Haj Mohammed “James” Yousef (1985, 7), published in *Maradika*, August 1985. Formatting and language have been reproduced faithfully from original prints, regardless of grammatical correctness.

(August 1985)

POEM

**MINDANAO IS MOANING**

By

Al Haj Mohammad “James” Yousuf

Ranao del Norte

Bangsamoro Homeland

“O Bangsamoro, holder of the swords, where is the noble origin and honour, and where are the acts of heroism by our noble and royal masters? Where are the Tausogs, the advocate of Islam, descendants of the pious Makhdum, the sons of the brave Kamlon, wake-up and rise, your religion is dimming like perfume when fading. Where are the Maguindanaons, the Puritans of Mindanao, the inheritance of Sharif Kabungsuan and the offspring of history’s famous Kudarat, think and widen your spirit for Mindanao is no more. Where are the Maranaos, the legendary offspring of Bantugan, the blood kindreds of Tawan-Tawan, your culture is departing like colour when fading, wake-up and fight to the end for Mindanao is no more. Few men dare to fight and less had taste the cup of martyrdom, the sounds and staccato of cannons made them disappeared ... Martyrdom is not considered sacred, save by those led by them Qur-an and Hadith. Men and women have died, the sword is lost, and the horse too, and to the knees have people plunged in disaster.”

That MILF editors chose to publish these works is a striking departure from Qutb’s and Mawdudi’s opinions on nationalism, given the inspiration credited to the scholars. Editorials render this image with even greater clarity: a September 1984 editorial notes that Mindanao’s Muslims and Christians had suffered equally under Manila and could not be divided against each other, stating that “the present MILF leadership under Brother Salamat Hashim equates the present struggle as between ‘evil and good’ thus [*sic*] declares all forms of oppression as evil” (MILF Central Committee 1984c, 6). Also, for all of Hashim’s (2006b, 389) earliest similarities with the two modernists, his seminal work states that the Bangsamoro mujāhid must adhere to Islam, but “with
similar zeal, he must study the history of the Bangsamoro people.” Moreover, perhaps indicating an evolution of Hashim’s (2006a, 266) personal beliefs, he stated later in 1999 that “[the MILF] is not after Islamic law. We are after independence, we are after freedom.”

Furthermore, Lingga (1997) also raises that Hashim did not intend to specify the form of a final Bangsamoro state because the Qur’an “does not recommend a definite form and structure of government.” Rather, the form should be decided based on shūrā that accounts for the experiences of Mindanao’s diverse citizenry (ibid.), indicating Hashim’s and his successors’ recognition of the demographic realities of Mindanao (Liow 2016, 122–23). Mastura (2012, 106–8) also argues that “people more receptive to citizenship saw their Moro cause as a ‘nationalist’ one but also a jihad against oppression.” The MILF consciously did not pursue an “all-out radicalization” in the lineage of Qutb and Mawdudi because the political culture of the Bangsamoro would not readily accept it (ibid.).

Aware of their growing status as the potential leaders of a new nation, the MILF gradually accepted diversity in the Moro and allied community to draw the final layer of connection between the spiritual goods of jihad, the necessity of militancy, and communal justice at the grassroots. Even though the MILF would never abandon its Islamic idiom, and Maradika would continue to publish content pertaining to general day-to-day Islamic practice, there was rarely any urging of non-Muslim conformity to Islamic rule. Throughout late 1985 and 1986, Maradika syndicated Islam and Other Faiths, a series of writings by Prof. Ismail al-Faruqi that, despite its praise of the virtues of Islam, acknowledged that non-Muslims could never be compelled to follow (MILF Central Committee 1986c, 6). In June of 1985, the Maradika editorial section disavowed the assassination of local church leaders and instead blamed the GRP as attempting to sow disunity, as “the insurgents need multi-sectoral supports to win the revolutionary war” (MILF Central Committee 1985b, 3).

Despite the printed English format of Maradika and the natural limitations this would create in constituent readership, these texts in aggregation still clearly demonstrate an Islamic-nationalist re-negotiation of what would otherwise be a stringent, anti-parochial jihadi political ideology. Mercado, Quimpo, and Macasalong were only partially correct in attributing the inspiration to Qutb and Mawdudi. MILF elites indeed keep the concept of jihad as a liberationist pillar of faith, but present themselves as comfortably melding modern jihadi Islamic and local symbols (both secular and ethno-religious) in order to animate their anti-government aspirations, and legitimise their unique vision of Moro Mindanao, all shaped by local political dynamics as per Meyer, Shaw, and Stewart. Nation and all its ethnic, cultural, and religious constructs, for the
MILF, co-existed comfortably in the 1980s with a new modern jihadi Islamic tradition in their syncetic framework, layering empathy, rootedness, and immediacy upon the front’s self-presentations. It seamlessly interpolates into the jihadi narrative of government oppression and morally-driven justice for Muslim communities, expressed in Maradika through the hallowed vocabulary of nationalism. Simultaneously, the jihad lead by the MILF, rather than aspiring for an ambiguous elimination of all non-Islamic rule over Muslims, instead syncretised with local concerns to make government aggression and socio-economic injustices the primary adversary against which jihad was geared.

5 Conclusion

This article contends, through recourse to the MILF’s early discourse, that Islamic-nationalism has an inherent legitimising strength in being a potent translational encounter between two belief structures – one centred on a new, jihadi ideological drive and the other tied to local nationalist sentiment. Accordingly, the initial research questions surrounding the inherent political value of Islamic-nationalism, the power of particular Islamic traditions, and its usage in practice have been resolved. First, the confluence of a rejuvenated moral attitude to political action on the one hand, and a steady adherence to local cultural and ideological preferences on the other, underpinned success for the final syncretism in Islamic-nationalist discourse. Second, what enlivened this syncretism, however, was the MILF’s exceptional use of the ideological content of jihad to accentuate and sanctify the call-and-response narrative of communal oppression and national justice. As much as the ideas surrounding the ideal Moro nation remained a common thread in Maradika’s texts, jihad stood out as a beacon for the reader’s activism that bridged spiritual impetus with temporal action and political grievance. Third, these principles and their underlying logic have been shown to be emanant throughout the MILF’s published periodicals in the 1980s.

This article provides a novel framework and a clear discursive lineage for tracing this evolution of the MILF’s legitimising formula from the first decade of its existence, offering insights into how it might evolve further into the current era where MILF members are transitioning to serve the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Even beyond the MILF, Islam and the ways people represent it cannot escape the cradle of context. As the temporal fates of non-state opposition groups shift over time, the continuities of Islamic traditions, the ideas that are promoted and discarded, and the
nationalist structures they are mixed with can be traced to better understand how movement elites inspire their followers.

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