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The Gaza Crisis: Impact on Southeast Asia

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A key dimension of the Gaza conflict which has attracted little attention is the security consequences for the stability of Southeast Asia. While regional governments have to balance domestic agenda with foreign policy, Islamists appear to have gained most on both political and ideological fronts.

AS EVIDENT from the three-week violence on the Gaza Strip, both Israel and Hamas tend to believe that it is “just” to fight fire with fire. This approach is indeed a major stumbling block to peace initiatives. The Gaza ceasefires, independently declared by both sides, have been violated frequently and will not necessarily end violence in the area. On the contrary, the conflict in the Gaza Strip has significantly affected the perception of the broader Muslim community with wide implications for the global jihadi movement. It would not come as a surprise, therefore, if it turns out to be the catalyst for another wave of violence involving suicide terrorism similar to what happened after the first intifada in the late 1980s and 1990s. The conflict in Gaza is also having reverberations elsewhere, especially in Southeast Asia, where historical grievances generate anger and hatred against the West in general and the US and Israel in particular.

“Victory” Puzzle

Israel claimed that it has achieved its military objective to deter Hamas from firing rockets. The offensive, however, has also damaged Israel’s international standing, as evidenced by the myriad calls for war-crimes investigations on the Israeli side. Furthermore, Israeli bombardment has done little to get rid of Hamas’ network of tunnels where guns, cash and other essential commodities are smuggled. Israeli actions, instead, have further reinforced the already strong resentment in the Muslim world.

Though Hamas could never defeat Israeli militarily, the current Israeli (mis)adventure seems to have given Hamas a significant psychological advantage. Israel’s disproportionate use of force which resulted in civilian casualties and large-scale damage and destruction has helped Hamas in particular and Islamists in general to gain sympathy as well as recruits for jihad.

While the governments appear to have little leverage to influence the public hysteria about the Gaza conflict, political hardliners and Islamist groups gained most on both political and ideological fronts in

galvanising the support of the Muslim community. The Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and other Islamic groups in Jakarta, for example, have seized the momentum ahead of the April 2009 elections. Others have seized the opportunity to further the public debate on the Islam-vis-à-vis the West dichotomy.

Southeast Asia: the Dilemma

It seems unlikely that there will be a direct impact on Southeast Asia's security and foreign policies. Regional countries have expressed uneasiness with Israel's disproportionate military response in Gaza while joining the international efforts to provide humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians affected by the conflict.

However, many Muslims perceive the Gaza crisis differently from their own governments. As elsewhere in the Muslim world, many Southeast Asian Muslims have long harboured misgivings about Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories. At the same time, deep resentment against the US foreign policy -- i.e. its lopsided support for Israel and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for example -- have strengthened the belief that there is a Crusader-Zionist conspiracy to destroy Islam and Muslims. Nearly 1,300 Palestinian civilian deaths as a result of the Israeli aggression has added fuel to the fire.

Along with nonviolent campaigns showering condolences to all victims in Gaza, there are mass protests, student demonstrations and boycotts against US/Israeli products in the region, notably in Malaysia and Indonesia. No doubt, these activities have been treated with caution as they do more harm than good to the national economies. Still, marginalising the US currency and goods such as, for example, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, KFC, and McDonald's, as indicated by former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is commonly understood as a means to push the US into dissuading Israel from further assaults against Palestinians. It would be difficult, though not impossible for the governments in the region to stop these mass demonstrations or prevent negative perceptions of Washington's policies and double-standards that are supportive of Israel's actions.

Indonesia: Gaza fuelling Jemaah Islamiyah?

Indonesia is probably the centre of attention as it is the world's most populous Muslim country and is experiencing the greatest level of contestation involving religion and political issues between radicals and moderates.

Following the Gaza conflict, there have been numerous calls to fund the war against Israel in Indonesia. Waves of Mujahideens and volunteers have emerged eager to leave for Palestine to fight against the "Crusader-Zionist Coalition", a euphemism for the US, Israel and allied regional governments. Islamist organisations in Java, Sumatra, and Aceh, for example, have mobilised, recruited and trained Muslims interested in waging jihad against Israel. Muslim militant groups like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) vowed to send fighters as well as martyrs to Palestine. Other Islamist groups such as the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and PKS urged Jakarta to seek a "coalition of the willing" against Israel or dispatch military troops to Palestine. About 200 volunteers attempted to reach Palestine via Batam-Johor-Kuala Lumpur but were halted by the authorities in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Demonstrations were held in front of the Egyptian, Syrian, American and British embassies as well as UN offices in Jakarta.

Arguably, deep resentment towards the US has receded sharply, perhaps due to the President Barack Obama's personal childhood links with Indonesia and promises of "change" in Washington's policy toward the Muslim world. This, together with assistance during the tsunami, might have helped marginalise the appeal of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) which was based on an anti-US rhetoric. Moreover, Indonesian security forces have been effective in killing and capturing many top JI operatives, thereby weakening the organisation's operational capability. As such, "the political context in the region", as argued by Sidney Jones of the International Crisis Group, "has changed radically and conditions that

helped JI command a following no longer exist”.

However, it is almost impossible to halt the dissemination of jihadi thoughts. Radicals have turned to spread extremist propaganda through print media, CDs, DVDs and internet. The Gaza factor is just one of the inspirations for Jihad literature. The expanding groups and networks of publishers, distributors and consumers could provide a continuing source of terrorist recruitment. As a result, while terrorist operations in Indonesia and the region in general have reduced significantly, there has been little decline in radicalisation and extremism.

In the short term, attempts to send militants to Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan must be discouraged as tit-for-tat patterns will not help the Middle East peace process. In the long term, governments must take the initiative to depoliticise the Israel-Palestine conflict and mitigate the polarisation between Islam and the West. Ultimately, however, a lot also depends on how the Obama administration demonstrates transparency and fair-play in its dealing with the Muslim world.

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