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This Policy Bulletin
summarizes the primary
findings of the conference as
interpreted by the rapporteur
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Participants neither reviewed
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tions, and conclusions.

Islam in Southeast Asia: What Should US Policymakers Know?

When Southeast Asia was designated as a “second front” in the US war against terrorism in late 2001, Muslims in the region became the subject of an intense “hearts and minds” campaign, as did those in the Middle East and South Asia. Despite this new focus, approval of the United States has plummeted among Southeast Asian Muslims. Some analysts point to obvious and immediate reasons, such as the unpopularity of the war in Iraq among Southeast Asians in general, Muslim or not.

A more subtle but complex source of discontent with the United States lies in US policy paradigms for Muslim Southeast Asia. Many Southeast Asians complain that the American view of Muslims is monolithic and inaccurate, based upon the image of the radical “Arab street.” They argue that US policy needs to be based upon a more nuanced understanding of Islam in Southeast Asia and of the complexities of Muslim politics and society in the region.

To aid policymakers in this regard, the Stanley Foundation organized a roundtable on Islam in Southeast Asia in San Francisco in November 2004. This event was the fourth roundtable in an 18-month program on Southeast Asia in the Twenty-First Century: Issues and Options for US Policy. Cosponsored with the Asia Foundation, the meeting brought together American and Southeast Asian government officials, scholars, and nongovernmental

representatives to consider recommendations for US policymakers. An essential prelude to the recommendation process was an examination of Islam in Southeast Asia, its place in the global Muslim community, and present US policy toward Southeast Asian Muslims.

The Difficulty With Definitions

A common paradigm in US counterterrorism policy for Southeast Asia divides Muslims into “moderates” and “extremists” and aims to strengthen the former while weakening the latter. Many Southeast Asians object to this and any other categorization of Muslims in the region. In applying labels under such sensitive circumstances, American and Southeast Asian participants found that the caveats invariably outnumbered the categories.

Underneath these semantic difficulties are problems of understanding the Muslim spectrum in Southeast Asia and the tendency to group all extremists together. This encourages a confusion of ends and means, and ultimately can cause

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policymakers to conflate Muslim fundamentalism or extremism with terrorism. In an extreme worst-case scenario, this practice can turn hasty and injudicious tagging of Muslim groups into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To avoid making enemies in Islamic communities, policymakers should take a more cautious and calibrated approach when it is necessary to parse Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. Many Southeast Asians find the categorization of “mainstream” and “fringe” groups more acceptable, because it describes the relation of groups to one another, rather than rating them according to Islamic intensity. In addressing the radical end of the spectrum, US policy should reflect an understanding that personal piety does not necessarily lead to violence. Distinctions should be made between groups that advocate jihad as an internal struggle to follow the teachings of Islam and those to whom it means armed struggle—violent extremists are “the radical fringe of a radical fringe.” However, both American and Southeast Asian participants acknowledged that the term *jihad* may be so linked to violence in popular perception that it is no longer a useful term.

To be sure, there are difficult gray areas, such as between fundamentalists who adhere strictly to Muslim law in their personal lives and those who would impose that practice upon others, even on non-Muslims in Muslim-majority areas. On the other end of the spectrum, policymakers should note that “moderates” are not limited to those who favor secular government over theocracy and eschew violence but also include a number of progressive groups that believe Islam can make a major contribution to democracy. In addition, policymakers should avoid rigidity in their assessments of Muslim groups, as they can be extremist on some issues but moderate on others.

Southeast Asian participants pointed out that Muslims in the region themselves use terms such as “moderates” and “extremists,” and allowed that some working division is probably necessary for policymaking. In many cases, the problem is not

with the terms as much as with the arrogance of outsiders attempting such linguistic engineering—Americans do not have the credibility in Southeast Asia to label Muslims. Moreover, Southeast Asians themselves are engaged in a struggle over Islamic terms, particularly in the political arena. In Indonesia and Malaysia both, secular leaders are inclined to represent themselves as religious nationalists, so as to co-opt the agendas (if not the images) of their more radical rivals.

Southeast Asia in the Muslim World

Despite the awkwardness of defining Muslim identities, Southeast Asians and Americans alike view the great majority of Muslims in the region to be moderate in their orientation and practice. On a policy level, this would seem to give Southeast Asia the potential to play an important role in the Muslim world. Indonesia is the world’s largest Muslim-majority democracy, and Malaysia stands out as an example of a modern Muslim state. But is Southeast Asia positioned to play such a demonstration effect in the global Muslim community?

Scholars point out the need to separate theology from culture in the Islamic world, and point to six major cultural zones in the global Muslim community: Arab, Persian, Turkish, sub-Saharan, Indian, and Malay. Each of these zones has a distinct religious identity, forged by theology, legal frameworks, and interaction with other religious and cultural groups. Malay Islam, the result of voluntary rather than forced conversion and filtered by passage through India, has historically differed from Muslim cultural zones farther away.

At the same time, this distance has narrowed in recent decades, particularly with the influence of petro-dollars from the Middle East. At the present time, in both theological and economic dimensions, the influence of the Middle East over Southeast Asia is essentially a one-way street. Prior to the 1970s, many Southeast Asians went to Cairo, Jordan, and Baghdad for education and were exposed to different theological strains. Today the educational flows to Saudi Arabia are far heavier.

Although Middle Eastern aid to mosques and Muslim schools has played a key role in some Southeast Asian areas, trade itself is lackluster—for Indonesia and Malaysia, trade with the Middle East is less than 5 percent of the total volume.

Middle Eastern views of Islam in Southeast Asia, as well as in other regions, do not encourage two-way transfers and influence in the near term. For the most part, Middle Eastern Muslims see Southeast Asia as the periphery. A dangerous exception to this is Al Qaeda's view of the region, which regards Southeast Asia as an important operational theater. On the Islamic world stage, however, this dynamic is beginning to change. Malaysia plays an important role in the Organization of the Islamic Conference. When Prime Minister Badawi addressed the United Nations last year, he warned Muslim leaders that they needed to pay greater attention to governance and education in their countries.

On the whole, however, ambitions for Southeast Asia to serve as a moderating example for more radical corners of the Muslim world are probably unrealistic. A more critical policy objective may be for Southeast Asians to focus on influencing one another, by sharing best educational practices and stimulating dialogue across the region among moderate and progressive groups.

Religious Flashpoints or Failed Governance?

Almost immediately after the September 11 attack, Southeast Asian leaders, such as President Arroyo of the Philippines, stressed to American policymakers that fighting terrorism was as much or more a matter of tackling "root causes" as it was fighting insurgents. "Root causes" has become code for poverty in Southeast Asia, but that may be too simplistic and facile an explanation for the rise of extremism in a small, but potentially dangerous, minority of Muslims in the region.

Most analysts grant that terrorist groups are able to recruit poor and disenfranchised young

Muslim men in Southeast Asia and manipulate tensions within impoverished Muslim communities as well as between Muslims and other religious or cultural groups. It does not follow, however, that an infusion of funds would necessarily reverse these trends. The missing link in this process is the quality of governance in Southeast Asia, particularly in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Southeast Asian disillusionment with the performance of their leaders is broad, encompassing all religious groups. Discontent over the failure of governments to achieve sustainable economic development in the mid and lower economic tiers in the region and to control corruption is widespread. However, these disappointments are particularly acute in Southeast Asian Muslim communities. Indonesia has yet to recover fully from the 1997 crisis. Among Muslim minorities in the Philippines and Thailand, poor governance has exacerbated economic gaps with other groups. Muslims are also critical of government performance on the protection of human rights, and here too they often find themselves on the losing end.

These popular views of governance often translate directly into politics. In 1999 the Malaysian Islamic opposition party, PAS, gained support and control of two states at the local level because of perceptions of gross injustice from the ruling party. In Indonesia, although Islamic parties are not dominant, their support is based on their anticorruption positions. In recent years, mainstream secular Muslim leaders have attempted to give their parties and policies an Islamic cast, to stem the popularity of more radical groups. There are signs that Prime Minister Badawi of Malaysia is attempting to pull away from competitive discourse with PAS. However, as with President Yudhyono of Indonesia, this is unlikely to happen until their governments have gained more solid support based on their performance.

US Policy: Development Aid or Public Diplomacy?

Despite the seemingly abrupt turn by US foreign policy to focus on counterterrorism in Southeast Asia after September 11, ongoing programs in the region that were launched before 2001 may be better suited to improve relations with Muslims than more targeted “hearts and minds” campaigns. US assistance programs to promote good governance and economic development, particularly in Indonesia, addressed “root cause” problems and offered broad outreach to Muslims as a happy byproduct. Similarly, pre-2001 assistance in the Philippines focused on governance issues that affected all Filipinos, but also gave considerable attention to Mindinao. Reaping greater benefit from these programs may be primarily a matter of increasing their scope. However, US policy is hampered by the absence of aid programs in Malaysia and Thailand, both of which have “graduated” from official assistance because of their economic levels. In these countries, American NGOs may have a greater role to play in promoting relations with Muslim communities.

In contrast to development programs, US public diplomacy programs aimed at Southeast Asian Muslims have been poorly conceived and poorly executed, largely because they have not been tailored to the region. The “shared values” campaign launched immediately after September 11 was unsuccessful in Southeast Asia because treatment of Muslims in the United States is not an issue in the region. Although Indonesian and Malaysian television stations obligingly ran the campaign videos, they inspired more derision than admiration and were ultimately a negative factor.

A more serious issue is that of visas and the perception that stricter policies in this area are a manifestation of anti-Islam feeling in the US government. Transition to new visa regulations left hundreds of applications in limbo in many US consulates in Southeast Asia. In some countries, recipients of Fulbright grants to study in the United States have been refused visas. Applications

from Southeast Asian students to study in the United States have dropped dramatically—in Indonesia, by 40 percent. Responsibility for improving the visa situation is not restricted to the US government alone. Some universities are reluctant to complete the more complex documentation requirements of the new visa policies, which contributes to the dwindling numbers of Southeast Asians studying in the United States.

Although the visa gridlock has eased somewhat, resentment toward the United States because of the visa situation in Southeast Asian Muslim communities, and among Southeast Asians in general, has not abated. This new climate has harmed other US efforts to gain support among Southeast Asian Muslims. The situation extends beyond the educational sector and has affected trade, as Southeast Asian business people have found it more difficult to obtain visas to travel to the United States.

Recommendations

Without question, improving the image of the United States among Muslims in Southeast Asia is a delicate undertaking. It requires not only a consideration of new initiatives but also a hard look at some of the assumptions that undergird US policy in Southeast Asia.

1. **Consider the impact on Southeast Asian Muslim views of US actions in other areas of the Islamic world.** Efforts to improve relations with Muslims in Southeast Asia may be wasted if policymakers do not fully appreciate the impact of policies in other regions, particularly the Middle East. US policymakers have tended to view Southeast Asia as parochial, concerned only with its own conflicts and development. This assumption ignores the rapid spread of a global Muslim identity in Southeast Asia, as in other regions. International Muslim consciousness does not negate the diversity of the Islamic world, but reflects the impact of globalization. US policy in the world’s Islamic “hot spots”—the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, Iran—may influence Southeast Asian Muslim views of the United

States as much as or more than US actions in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, or Thailand.

Beyond factoring this phenomenon into global policy, the United States should willingly engage Southeast Asians in dialogue on issues in other regions of the Muslim world. Washington is not likely to change direction on the Arab-Israeli conflict and other trouble spots solely in deference to Southeast Asians, but it can do a better job of explaining US policies to them.

2. **Include a broader spectrum of Muslims in public diplomacy efforts.** While there is an obvious logic to making common cause with moderate Muslims in Southeast Asia, it risks further alienating radical Muslims and pushing them toward violent groups. In addition to supporting moderate Muslims, policymakers should attempt to widen the distance between nonviolent and violent radical Muslims by increasing dialogue with nonviolent groups and including them in exchange programs. This is a high-risk policy with a potential for high return. However, administrators of official and NGO exchange programs should select participants for these programs carefully, in view of US regulations prohibiting funding of groups that may be associated with terrorist groups.
3. **Don't focus exclusively on Muslims in complex and volatile situations.** In a policy heavily focused on terrorism, US officials tend to focus reflexively on the role of Muslims in communal conflicts. This may in fact exacerbate such tensions. US policies in conflict areas of Southeast Asia—for example, Mindanao or southern Thailand—should aim for objectivity and address the needs and complaints of all sides. In these areas, US assistance should avoid championing, and therefore booby-trapping, one side against the other.
4. **Educate a broader range of US policymakers on Islam, from congressional members and staff to Homeland Security officials.** American legisla-

tors have responded enthusiastically to seminar programs on Islam when offered. These can be a conduit to educating both authorizers and appropriators on the nuances of Islam in Southeast Asia, as can increased attention to this area by the Congressional Research Service. Both official and NGO policy dialogues on Southeast Asia should also make an effort to include Homeland Security officials, who tend to be forgotten in these exercises.

5. **Fix problems with the visa process and those relating to ports of entry.** The Bush administration should consider establishing a Track 2 blue-ribbon national commission on visa policy to assess the impact that post-9/11 changes in visa regulations have had on relations with the Muslim world. The commission should include members from the executive branch, Congress, business, and the education community and make recommendations for improvement without compromising security.

A separate but related issue is the need to ensure that Transportation Security Administration workers and other port-of-entry officials receive training on Islamic culture and the Muslim world. Correcting visa problems will be of little use if Muslims visiting the United States are met with hostile or nativist attitudes from US officials upon arrival.

6. **Support Muslim education but take a broader approach.** President Bush emphasized education for Southeast Asian Muslims in his 2003 visit to the region, but programs promised for Indonesia and the Philippines have yet to be implemented. In fleshing out this new initiative, policymakers should follow the lead of development programs. They should not only target Islamic schools but also pay attention to secular schools, public or private, that serve large groups of Muslim students.

Beyond improving the overall quality of education for Muslims, the United States should

promote understanding of America through the Southeast Asian educational system. In Malaysia, for example, the US government and NGOs should support American studies programs at public universities, where the subject is seldom offered.

7. **Make longer-term study and exchange the foundation of a public diplomacy program.** Public diplomacy programs often support the sound bite, with video campaigns and whirlwind tours of the United States for busy Muslim leaders. Longer-term programs that encourage in-depth study or experience are likely to provide a greater payoff. A greater proportion of funds should be channeled to Fulbright and American Field Service programs. However, this measure should be matched with improved visa policies, or these programs will not be fully utilized. Beyond increasing funding to existing programs, the Bush administration and Congress should consider President Yudhyono's invitation for the Peace Corps to return to Indonesia.
8. **Promote dialogue between American Muslim intellectuals and their Southeast Asian counterparts.** The growing group of American Muslim academics is an untapped resource in public diplomacy programs and even as informal diplomats in Southeast Asia. These scholars are experienced in interfaith dialogue and so can offer insights on other religions in the United States to their coreligionists in Southeast Asia. Moreover, they see no contradiction between Islam and democracy.
9. **Facilitate intra-Muslim networks and dialogue in Southeast Asia behind the scenes.** In many areas of Southeast Asia, the issues most likely to give rise to violent extremism are not between Muslims and other religious groups, but within the Muslim community. The United States should support intra-Muslim dialogue but cannot be an obvious broker in this process. Beyond

ad hoc opportunities, the United States should provide assistance for ongoing regional networks of Muslim scholars and civil society groups to help build permanent scaffolding for such dialogue. Given the obvious sensitivities, such assistance should be channeled through field-based American NGOs. ■

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