



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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IS ASEAN THE NEW THEATER OF MIDEAST NEUROSIS?

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As ASEAN nations cozy up to Middle East countries in a bid to boost trade, most are discovering that their “New Silk Road” strategy is a path laden with explosive intentions. More than a destination for petrodollars and all things gold, ASEAN is fast emerging as the proxy battleground for Middle East fallouts.

Earlier this month, Bangkok was rocked by a series of bomb blasts perpetrated by what Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak alleged to be Iranian “assassins.” Iran’s foreign ministry in Bangkok has disparaged Israel for attempting to jeopardize its relations with Thailand. This is the second Mideast-related threat to Thailand this year. Last month, authorities arrested a Lebanese man, suspected of being a member of Hizbullah, after a tipoff from Israel warned of a potential attack in Bangkok.

Another ASEAN country, Indonesia, has also found itself embroiled in the Arab-Israel conflict. Last year, U.S. diplomatic cables on Wikileaks revealed that Israel has “aspirations” to establish an embassy in Indonesia, though no dates have been fixed.

If so, this will be Israel’s third embassy in ASEAN, after Thailand and Singapore. It will also be its most controversial to date, given that Indonesian groups like Hizbut Tahrir vehemently oppose Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians. The sensitivities of this move is likely the reason why the Israeli embassy in Singapore decided to host its second annual *iftar* (breaking of fast) last Ramadan, which saw its officials engaging with representatives of

Muslim groups from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Yet ASEAN has not just become the theater where neuroses between Mideast nations play out. Neuroses contained within a single Mideast nation are also on display. The recent case of Saudi journalist Hamza Kashgari is instructive. Arrested in Malaysia, Kashgari was deported to his home country for tweeting doubts about the Prophet Muhammad. He will be charged with blasphemy, which is punishable by death in Saudi Arabia. While there was no obligation for Malaysia to deport Kashgari given that it has no formal extradition treaty with Saudi Arabia, it did so in response to a request by the Saudi government.

Such aspects of Mideast strife are occurring in Southeast Asia precisely because the region is so far away from the epicenter of conflicts. This makes the nations of ASEAN “neutral” and “safe” sites for transgressions, where repercussions can more easily be managed. Had Bangkok’s bomb blasts taken place in a Mideast nation, the region could have exploded into war. After all, tensions between Iran and Israel have been high in the past few weeks over Iran’s nuclear program.

ASEAN is also a region where alliances have not yet been fully concretized, thereby causing belligerent Mideast countries to clamor for influence. Singapore, for instance, has close relations with Israel, but its ministers have also visited Iran to explore trade opportunities and improve diplomatic relations.

Meanwhile, Israel’s diplomatic goals in Indonesia should not be discounted. Not only is Indonesia an emerging second-tier BRIC economy, but it also has the potential to become Israel’s much-needed ally in the Muslim world, especially after the souring of Israeli relations with Turkey following Israel’s handling of the 2010 flotilla aid mission to the Gaza Strip and the uncertainty of Israeli relations with Egypt following the fall of the pliant Mubarak regime.

As ASEAN opens trade routes with the Middle East, its governments must master the art of nuanced diplomatic maneuvering if they wish to manage the strife coming their way.

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