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BEWARE OF POURING FUEL ON RADICAL EMBERS

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As the Bush administration ponders the potential consequences of an attack on Iraq, it would do well to anticipate repercussions in Southeast Asia. In the Cold War, Southeast Asia was seen as important for its strategic location astride key waterways. In the current war on terror, the region cannot be ignored, either. It is home to a fifth of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims. Indonesia alone has more Muslims than any other country.

Radical Islam in Southeast Asia has always had a strong regional identity and content, evolving in response to political repression and poor governance. Globalisation has added a new dimension: Southeast Asian Muslims have in the past two decades become increasingly aware of developments in the Islamic world. In recent months many have expressed disquiet over intensified Israeli military action against the Palestinians.

Accompanying this enhanced global consciousness has been a discernible increase in anti-American sentiment. This is because of the gradual penetration of a hard Arab form of radical Islam through religious schools funded by Middle Eastern sources and through returning Southeast Asian veterans of the Afghanistan war against the Soviet Union. Southeast Asian Muslims remain overwhelmingly law-abiding and moderate in the sense of being willing to articulate their interests within established political frameworks. But this does not mean that they do not struggle honestly with the argument advanced by radical ideologues that the problems of the wider Islamic world are due to a biased U.S. foreign policy, and that their national governments have done little to help change Washington's policy mind-set.

Failure by the Bush administration to move more decisively to support Palestinian statehood, coupled with a new war in Iraq, would only strengthen the credibility of radical Islamic agents provocateurs.

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This would have potentially serious implications for Southeast Asia. The multiethnic, multireligious states in the region are relatively young and fragile. Carefully constructed national identities have yet to completely eclipse competing transnational ethnic and religious allegiances. Moreover, the task of nation-building has been greatly complicated by the religious fundamentalist reaction against globalisation evident in the region since the 1980s.

For some Southeast Asian Muslims, religious faith has acquired a deeper emotional resonance than secular national affiliations. Some in the region, while not in any way disloyal citizens of their respective countries, see themselves most strongly as members of a transnational Islamic community whose core affections are directed toward Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. Like fundamentalists of Christianity and other faiths, they have sought to actively spread Islamic values throughout their respective societies.

A minority of these Islamic fundamentalists believe that the only way to Islamise society is by force. Due to external ideological influences in the 1990s, some of them now think that there is an obligation to defend the wider Islamic community against encroachment by American and allied "infidels." A U.S. attack on Iraq might provide powerful support for the radical Islamic position that Southeast Asian governments are too closely identified with an American agenda to seriously accommodate concerns about the welfare of ordinary Iraqis or Palestinians.

Al Qaeda itself or a Southeast Asian group with a similar ideology would need to recruit only a small number of radicalised individuals to attack U.S. and Western interests in Southeast Asia, as the thwarted Jemaah Islamiah plot in Singapore last December clearly attests. Had that plot to mount several truck bomb attacks succeeded, it would have caused heavy Western and Asian casualties. It would have been the single most significant terrorist strike since September 11.

Because Saddam Hussein can almost certainly be expected to disperse his military assets in ways calculated to maximize the civilian damage and political fallout of U.S attacks, Washington must tread with great circumspection. Bombing Iraq might precipitate disastrous blowback effects on U.S. and allied interests in Southeast Asia.