



Writing Southeast Asian security: regional security and the war on terror after 9/11

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BOOK REVIEW

Writing Southeast Asian security: regional security and the war on terror after 9/11, by Jennifer Mustapha, Routledge, 2019, 167 pp., New York, hardback £115.00, ISBN: 9781138957787

That the war on terror as discourse(s) and practice(s) has shaped security measures and counter-terrorism around the world is widely accepted in Critical Terrorism Studies. However, despite its global(ising) character, the way this has been implemented in regions outside the “Western world”, and shaped their practices of security, has received less attention in the critical literature. By bringing a Southeast Asian perspective on the war on terror, Jennifer Mustapha’s work fills this lacuna. This is a region central to discourses of security and counterterrorism, but one that has been largely understudied from critical perspectives.

In *Writing Southeast Asian Security: Regional Security and the War on Terror after 9/11*, Mustapha guides the reader through the security dynamics boosted by the war on terror in this region. This work is grounded in a “weak ontology” – which does not reject making foundational claims – and in an empirically grounded critique. Two main questions drive her research: “What can a critical security analysis tell us about the production of insecurity that a more conventional security analysis cannot?” and “What can a critical security analysis tell us about the impact that the war on terror, operating as a hegemonic security narrative, has had on Southeast Asia after 9/11?” (6).

The author’s answers to these questions are explored throughout the book. First, as she argues, a critical approach allows a deconstruction of mainstream securitised understandings and assumptions about Southeast Asia. These are mainly the idea that political Islam is an imminent threat for the world and that, in the region, there exists a network of evil and irrational terrorists with links to al-Qaida and ISIL. These claims are (re)produced by local and area experts, and, as Mustapha argues, these assumptions support and trigger specific kind of state-responses, based on state-centred security measures and the securitisation of society. Nevertheless, through Mustapha’s critical gaze, it is not only possible to deconstruct these claims but, perhaps more importantly, their consequences on societies in the region can be examined.

Second, and in contrast to mainstream approaches, the author focuses on the various insecurities the War On Terror (WOT) has created. On the one hand, its discourses of (in) security have securitised large populations of people who are now pre-emptively governed through the security practices of the state. On the other, but linked to this, these counter-terrorism discourses have reinforced the power of the ruling elites in these countries. These processes were thus not successful in countering terrorism. Moreover, they became counter-productive because, as the author remarks, “counter-terrorism measures and CVE policies may, in some instances, hasten radicalization and the formation of anti-establishment or revolutionary Islamist identity” (8).

After analysing mainstream approaches to security and foreign policies in chapters two and three and deconstructing experts’ claims in chapter four, Mustapha centres her analysis on three specific aspects. Chapter five focuses on the post-colonial and gendered implications of the WOT regional security policies and the gendered insecurities the WOT has created in the region. The feminist post-colonial gaze allows the author to highlight how the state can be a source of insecurity for its population within the context of the War on

Terror. Moreover, the post-colonial view permits the author to analyse the implications of the War on Terror and its security discourses for Southeast Asian countries' sovereignty and identity, shaped by the US imperial and hegemonic presence in the region.

Chapter six examines the impact of these regional security policies on the creation and (re)production of identity in these countries. Through the theoretical framework of regionalisation and regionalism, the author unpacks the socially constructed category of "Southeast Asia", the deriving regional narratives, and the security and counterterrorism concepts of "regional resilience" or "national resilience". These categories, she argues, "are deployed by governing elites in order to maintain *regime* security in a variety of repressive ways" (9, emphasis in the original).

Finally, chapter seven looks beyond the Bush doctrine and enquires into Obama's administration and his foreign policy approach in the region, as well as the early days of Trump's administration. Beyond Obama's different rhetoric, little in the new administration's security practices changed. This observation leads Mustapha to a theoretical reflection on the sedimentation of security discourses and the possibilities for discursive transformation. The author thus analyses the (re)formulation of the war on terror discourses and the consequent maintenance of the deriving security practices in the region, allowed by the previous sedimentation of the discourse in the region.

Overall, Mustapha's work offers an original contribution to Critical Terrorism and Critical Security Studies. On the one hand, it offers a specific kind focus on an important region in counterterrorism logics which is not widely studied in CTS. Moreover, differently from mainstream approaches, this book offers new and important insights into the consequences of the war on terror on societies and challenges its state-centred logics. As the author points out in the conclusion, it is only through a critical approach and a "weak ontological" foundation that this work can deconstruct these discourses of security and reveal the insecurities that the war on terror created.

In this sense, *Writing Southeast Asian Security: Regional Security and the War on Terror after 9/11* will not only be of interest for scholars focusing on Southeast Asia. As the author points out, the war on terror is a global and globalising process. Therefore, its consequences should not be read only as locally contingent, but as local manifestations of the broader discourses and practices of security of the war on terror. Mustapha's work thus complements the existing literature not only by focusing on a so-far understudied area. By uncovering the logics and consequences of the war on terror, in terms of insecurity outside state-centric logics, Mustapha's work is a contribution to the study of these processes at a global level. This book will be an important work for critical scholars interested in the region, but also those concerned with the insecurities created by discourses of international security and terrorism – a topic central to the CTS agenda.

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