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The Israel-Palestine Conflict Reveal Political Divisions within Thailand

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A woman hugs her husband, who was among six Thai workers who returned from Israel at Suvarnabhumi Airport on 4 December 2023. Photo by VARUTH HIRUNYATHEB/Bangkok Post/Bangkok Post via AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- There are distinct divisions in Thailand between Muslim communities, particularly the Malay Muslims in the southernmost provinces, and the mainstream Thai population. These contribute to a spectrum of political ideologies that carry significant domestic and international implications.
- As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict drags on, divergent views in Thailand on the issue continue to grow. This is most obvious between views held by the broader Thai population on the one hand, and those held by Thai Muslims, especially those who are Malay Muslims from the country's southernmost provinces, on the other.
- Although the Thai government voted in favour of an immediate humanitarian ceasefire at the United Nations General Assembly meeting on December 12, Thai netizens have expressed contrary views on the matter on social media. Conversations with officials from international organisations based in Thailand also suggest that many Thai authorities collaborating with them tend to demonstrate solidarity with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF).
- While many Thais and media outlets focus on the demise of Thai workers on October 7, the 172 deaths of Thai workers in Moshav and Kibbutz in Israel over the years should be given attention as well.
- The Thai government will need to exercise greater sensitivity in its foreign policy towards Israel and Palestine, bearing in mind the unrest in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. It is crucial that it avoids inciting resentment among the Malay Muslims.

INTRODUCTION

Tensions in the Middle East continue to escalate. On October 7, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, resulting in 1,200 deaths, and Israel has retaliated with bombing of Gaza, an action that critics have described as ‘collective punishment’. Israel asserts that its sole intention is to eliminate Hamas. However, the sustained bombing has led to widespread destruction of homes, mosques, churches, schools, universities, and hospitals. This outcome raises suspicions that the initial expressed targeting of Hamas was meant to mislead. To date, Israeli military action has killed more than 26,000 Palestinians.

Meanwhile, world opinion has polarised into two camps: pro-Palestine and pro-Israel. The Israel-Palestine conflict has long been a complex issue, and many mistakenly perceive the conflict as a clash between two religions, Islam and Judaism, fanning both Islamophobia and anti-Semitism around the globe. It reveals widespread ignorance of the history and complexities of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The shockwave from the war spread as far as Chicago, where a 6-year-old Palestinian American boy was stabbed to death for being a Muslim. At the same time, anti-Semitic incidents have also intensified after October 7.

The rising death toll of Palestinians has sparked global protests against the Israeli government for continuing the air strikes in Gaza. Like much of the world, Thailand grapples with divergent views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More significantly, there is a marked difference in opinion between the broader Thai population and Thai Muslims, especially Malay Muslims from the southernmost provinces.

One particular factor affecting public opinion in Thailand as a whole is the fact that Thai workers were among the victims of the Hamas attack on October 7. According to the Thai Ministry of Labour website, as of October 21, 31 Thai workers had died, 16 sustained injuries, and 19 remained captives by Hamas. This situation has significantly heightened awareness in Thailand about the large number of Thai workers stationed in Israel.

This article highlights the distinct political identities and divisions between Muslim communities—particularly the Malay Muslims from Thailand’s southernmost provinces—and the mainstream Thai population, and discusses how these divisions contribute to a spectrum of political ideologies that carried significant domestic and international implications.

We can take the May 2023 general election as a point of departure. Voting patterns then show a significant divergence: a majority of voters supported the progressive-liberal Move Forward Party, while the Malay Muslim community primarily cast their ballots for the Prachachart Party, an ethno-religious party with a strong base in the southern provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. This outcome underscores the distinct political views among these communities.

Similarly, perspectives on international issues, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, vary markedly—and that is the focus of this article. We explore these differing viewpoints and responses to see how such divisions contribute to the diverse ideologies that influence Thailand’s domestic and international strategies.

THE THAI GOVERNMENT AND THE THAI PRIME MINISTER'S STANCE ON THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

Thailand's foreign policy has consistently followed a 'Bamboo Diplomacy' approach, characterised by flexibility and adaptability to changing international dynamics. As a member of the United Nations, Thailand has recognised both the State of Palestine and the State of Israel, and maintains strong diplomatic relations with Iran. This approach enables Thailand to navigate the current crisis with a malleable strategy towards Israel, Palestine, and Iran. Despite pressure from both Pro-Palestine and Pro-Israel advocates for the Thai government to take sides, it has chosen to remain neutral and silent in order to preserve its positive diplomatic relationships with all involved parties.

However, immediately after the news broke that Hamas had captured Thai migrant workers in Israel, Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin publicly denounced Hamas for its atrocious acts.¹ In response, Thai scholars criticised Srettha for this, arguing that caution was necessary since Thai hostages remained in custody. Given the delicate situation, the complexities of foreign policy in the Middle East and the involvement of major world powers, Srettha's hasty actions may have plunged Thailand into a complex diplomatic situation.

Although the Thai government voted in favour of an immediate humanitarian ceasefire at the United Nations General Assembly meeting on December 12, some Thai netizens have expressed contrary views on social media. Conversations with officials from international organizations based in Thailand reveal that a significant number of Thai authorities collaborating with them demonstrate solidarity with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Remarkably, some supporters of the Move Forward Party, who are typically advocates for democracy and human rights, openly support the Israeli government's collective punishment in Gaza, which has been labelled by some as genocide. Furthermore, many Thai social media influencers derive their news and analytical perspectives from the Israel Defense Forces' X and Instagram profiles.²

THAI PUBLIC AND MUSLIM COMMUNITY: CONTRASTING OPINIONS ON ISRAEL-PALESTINE

Scholars and experts who have shared their insights and views on the Israel-Palestine conflict have encountered a strong backlash, including slurs and derogatory comments on social media. Thai Muslim scholars and experts, in particular, have been subjected to prejudiced remarks, been labelled as supporters of a specific side or been called spokespersons for Hamas. Some comments have been extreme and offensive, such as "Of course, you are Muslim, so you support them"; "You sound like a spokesperson for Hamas."; "We should throw pigs at people in Palestine as a retaliation", and many more. The term *khaek* is often used in these comments, a derogatory term for Muslims in Thai. Many comments further alleged that these scholars and experts were betraying Thailand. These commenters reasoned that if Hamas killed Thais, those who expressed sympathy for Palestinians should no longer be considered Thais.³

Amidst growing tensions in the region, on October 21, over 300 Thai Muslims and Palestinians gathered at the Israeli Embassy in Bangkok.⁴ The assembly was a peaceful demonstration of support intended to express solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, with participants calling

for a ceasefire. On November 4, more than 4,000 Malay Muslims gathered to perform *Salat-ul-Hajat prayer* (the prayer of need) in front of Pattani's Central Mosque.⁵ On December 17, Malay Muslims in Pattani Province held a second rally under the banner "I Promise".⁶ Demonstrators pledged to continue advocating for peace for the Palestinians in Gaza. Despite global rallies, in Thailand, only a small number of Thai and Malay Muslims mobilised to protest against the war in Gaza.

THAI WORKERS IN ISRAEL

The motive behind Hamas' strategy of kidnapping remains unclear. From a tactical standpoint, taking hostages in a conflict zone is often seen as a means to gain bargaining power. Consequently, Hamas' hostage-taking may be less about nationality than it is about enhancing their negotiation capabilities. Thus, it is conceivable that Hamas indiscriminately kidnapped any individual present to increase their leverage. Media analysts and speculators have been diligently examining Hamas's reasons for kidnapping Thai nationals. Some of them posit that Hamas disapproves of Thai workers occupying jobs in the Kibbutz that Palestinians could fill. Others suggest that Hamas views Thai workers in Israeli agriculture as indirectly supporting Israeli policies towards Palestinians. Hamas may perceive Thais working in Israel as collaborators with the Israeli authorities. Besides, speculation has been rife that some Thai paramilitaries, previously active in the conflict-ridden southernmost provinces of Thailand, have joined the Israeli Defense Forces, potentially sparking retaliation from Hamas. However, Thai netizens discovered that at least one of the Thais who enlisted in the Israeli Defense Forces was raised in Israel, debunking rumours that he was a mercenary, as social media had suggested without substantiation.

The presence of Thai workers in Israel is not a recent development. Following the first Intifada in 1987, the Israeli state began replacing Palestinian workers with workers from Asia and Africa, primarily for roles in the agricultural sectors. Many Thai workers poured into Israel in the 1990s, the majority of them employed at the cooperative agricultural communities of Moshav and Kibbutz.

Although Israel and Thailand formalised a labour welfare agreement in 2011, a Human Rights Watch report found that Thai agricultural workers still faced labour rights abuses. A BBC investigation also revealed that many Thai workers lived under squalid conditions, suffering exploitation and abuse. Between 2012 and 2018, reports indicated that 172 Thai workers had died in Israel.⁷ One such worker, Mr. Praiwan Seesukha, tragically died in his sleep in 2013. Human Rights Watch stated that Praiwan had been working an exhausting 17 hours a day, seven days a week, with no days off.⁸ Israel refuted the claims, arguing that the BBC report distorted the reality.⁹ The Israel Ministry of Health stated deaths during sleep were attributed to Brugada syndrome, a genetic condition prevalent among certain tribes from the northeastern region of Thailand.

While many Thais and media outlets focus on the death of Thai workers on October 7, it is crucial for the Thais and the Thai government to examine the 172 deaths of Thai workers in Moshav and Kibbutz over the years as well.

PRACHACHART PARTY NEGOTIATE FOR THE RELEASE OF THAI HOSTAGES

Since the 14 May general election, the spotlight has been directed at the turmoil in the heart of the nation; the political atmosphere in Thailand's three southernmost provinces was equally tense. The stakes became particularly pronounced when Pita Limjaroenrat, the leader of the Move Forward Party—who secured the most votes—was barred by parliament from becoming Prime Minister of Thailand. The emotions in Thailand's Deep South have run as intensely as in Bangkok, albeit with a different connotation; it melds elements of ethno-religious identity politics with pro-democracy ideals, and stands apart from the rest of Thailand.

From July 19 to August 22, the parliamentary process for nominating, selecting and voting for the Prime Minister was in disarray. On July 19, Wan Muhammad Noor Mata (Wan Nor), the House Speaker and Prachachart Party leader, rejected MP Rangsiman Rome's urgent motion to reconsider the nomination of Pita Limjaroenrat for the position of Prime Minister. In response, the Move Forward Party's supporters expressed their discontent with Wan Nor. Following Wan Nor's ambivalent role as House Speaker, and in light of the Prachachart Party's decision to align with the Pheu Thai Party and with pro-military groups such as the Palang Pracharath Party and the United Thai Nation Party, many Malay Muslim pro-democracy advocates have expressed their discontent. A considerable number have pledged to withhold their support in subsequent elections.

Amidst this domestic unrest, Prime Minister Srettha's harsh denouncement of Hamas marked a sharp turn in foreign affairs. Wan Nor, the House Speaker, alongside his team, initiated outreach within their closed-circle networks, particularly among the Thai-Shia community, to establish contact with senior authorities in Iran and Hamas to negotiate the release of Thai hostages. Simultaneously, a distinct group of mediators, consisting of Thai officials from the Foreign Ministry and the military, actively sought to broaden their diplomatic channels through nations such as Turkey, Malaysia, Qatar, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Their objective was to secure the most favourable terms for the hostages' release.

While the Srettha administration's prompt diplomatic actions to secure the release of Thai hostages are acknowledged, the efforts are perceived by many, particularly the hostages' relatives, as tardy. To be sure, prominent figures such as Wan Nor, the House Speaker; Areepen Uthasint, his advisor; Syed Sulaiman Husaini, the leader of Thailand's Shia community; and Lerpong Sayed, a lecturer at Iran's Al-Mustafa International University and the head of the Thai-Iran alumni association, who is also Syed Sulaiman Husaini's younger brother, have been instrumental in the negotiation process. These negotiators hail from Thailand's three southernmost provinces and share the Muslim faith, and therefore, they exert a pivotal influence behind the scenes. In an interview with VOA Thai, Lerpong asserted, "I think Thailand was the most successful in the world in helping the hostages."¹⁰

On October 30, when 17 Thai hostages were returned to Thailand, each returnee wore a T-shirt featuring both Israeli and Thai flags, signifying that the Thai government had sent ambiguous messages to the public. Furthermore, each returnee also donned a necklace inscribed in Hebrew and English with the phrase, 'Release them (hostages) back home now!' While the government attempts to maintain a neutral stance, the T-shirts emblazoned with the Israeli flag suggest otherwise. Syed Sulaiman Husaini, a key negotiator for the release of hostages from Hamas

and the leader of Thailand's Shia community, told an interviewer that during negotiations, he had assured Hamas that Thailand did not support Israel. However, the presence of both Israeli and Thai flags on the t-shirts worn by the released Thai hostages may have contradicted his statement. Syed expressed feelings of betrayal after witnessing the return of the hostages via the media, feeling that the Thai government disregarded him and his team's efforts.¹¹ The Thai government has faced severe criticism from both Thai and Malay Muslim communities for its perceived insensitivity and lack of foresight regarding potential adverse consequences for the remaining Thai hostages still in captivity.

CONCLUSION

Even if all of the hostages have been freed, this action alone is unlikely to mend the longstanding division between the Thai state and the predominantly Muslim region of Southern Thailand. While the people in Southern Thailand undoubtedly welcome the release, this does not resolve or lessen the existing tensions. The reason is that most Thai hostages are from Northeastern Thailand (Esan). The election results and the local response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which this article mainly focuses on, underscore the disconnect between Thailand's three southernmost provinces and the rest of the country. This situation highlights a division in political leanings between Muslim communities and the mainstream Thai population, leading to fissures in both the domestic and international domains.

While Srettha's government endeavours to repatriate Thais wishing to return home, the aftermath has compelled the government to reassess and enhance its protocols for similar future situations. This scrutiny has highlighted deficiencies in the Thai government's bureaucratic processes, especially within the Ministry of Labour, which has been criticised for not fully informing workers about the risks of working in conflict zones and for failing to safeguard the welfare of its citizens abroad consistently. Furthermore, the Thai government needs to exercise greater sensitivity in its foreign policy towards Israel, bearing in mind the ongoing unrest in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. It is crucial that it avoids actions that can incite resentment among the Malay Muslims.

Finally, and above all, nationalist Thais must recognize that expressing sympathy for Palestine does not equate to disloyalty to Thailand. It is a misrepresentation to equate all Palestinians with Hamas. Moreover, it is not the case that all Jewish individuals support Israel's stance towards Gaza. It is essential to refrain from generalizing about religions, ethnicities, and nations when discussing conflicts and violence.

TIMELINE OF THE RELEASE OF THAI HOSTAGES:

- The October 7 incident resulted in 39 Thai fatalities and 4 injuries, with 25 Thai individuals being taken as hostages.
- A ceasefire agreement, spanning four days, commenced on November 24 (Friday), which included terms for an exchange involving 50 members from Hamas and 150 from Israel.
- On the evening of November 24, the first day of the hostage swap, Israel and Palestine conducted an exchange involving 13 Israelis and 39 Palestinians.
- Between November 24 and 25, Hamas released 14 Thai hostages.

- On November 26, an additional 3 Thai hostages were released.
- On November 29, 2023, Thai Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara travelled to Israel to welcome the released hostages.
- On November 30, Hamas released 14 hostages, including 4 Thais, in exchange for Israel releasing 30 Palestinian hostages. The released individuals travelled through Egypt on their way back to Israel.
- Israeli officials stated that the Qatari government brokered the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Palestine. However, a different set of mediator actors orchestrated the agreement concerning the 25 Thai hostages and 2 Russians.
- However, as of December 4, 8 (or 9) Thai hostages remained in captivity.

ENDNOTES

¹ PM Srettha denounces attacks on Israel. (2023, October 8). The Nation.

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² For additional perspectives on the situation of Thai hostages and comments regarding Muslims, refer to the comments section of @SleeplessBKK's Twitter (X) coverage. Marianna Spring. Millions on Thai Social Media Exposed to Distorted Information and Fake Videos of Israel-Hamas Conflict. (In Thai). (2023, October 16). BBC News Thai. <https://www.bbc.com/thai/articles/cjm4y39ke3xo>

³ For additional perspectives on the situation of Thai hostages in Gaza, refer to the comments section of @Suthichai's Twitter (X) coverage. Matichon TV also provides an insightful session titled 'Talking with Daungyewa,' discussing President Biden's unsuccessful mission to the Middle East and the potential escalation of war, aired on October 19, 2023 (Matichon TV, 2023). For further reading on the impact of the Israel-Hamas war on social sentiments, see Sucheera Maquire's analysis on the rise of Islamophobia in Thai social media, published by BBC News Thai on November 29, 2023 (BBC News Thai, 2023).

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⁴ Anti-Israel protest draws 300 at embassy. (2023, October 21). Bangkok Post. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2668714/anti-israel-protest-draws-300-at-embassy>

⁵ Call to Action at the District Level: Protest Against Israel (In Thai). (2023, November 4). Isra News Agency. <https://www.isranews.org/article/south-news/south-slide/123500-duapalestine.html>

⁶ "I Promise" Rallies for Palestine in Pattani Province (In Thai). (2023, December 17). The Reporters TV. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjVKW5p6Teg>

⁷ Thai Labourers in Israel Tell of Harrowing Conditions. (2018, November 23). BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-46311922>

⁸ Israel: Serious Abuse of Thai Migrant Workers. (2015, January 21). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/21/israel-serious-abuse-thai-migrant-workers>

⁹ Israel rejects 'distorted' BBC report on abysmal conditions of Thai Farm Workers. (2018, November 29). The Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-rejects-distorted-bbc-report-on-abysmal-conditions-of-thai-farm-workers/>

¹⁰ Yiamyut Sutthichaya & Supakit Pattaratearanon. Thai Scholar in Iran Plays Role in Hostage Release. (2023, December 15). VOA Thailand. <https://www.voanews.com/a/thai-scholar-in-iran-plays-role-in-hostage-release-/7400553.html>

¹¹ Negotiation Team for Thai Hostages' Release Feels Betrayed by Government (In Thai). (2023, December 4). Public Post Online. <https://www.publicpostonline.net/69836>

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