

## ASEAN's Humanitarian Conscience: SEAHUM's Collective Support for Gaza through English School Lens

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**Abstract.** This paper analyzes the Southeast Asia Humanitarian Committee, known as SEAHUM, through the English School theory in International Relations. The research shows how humanitarian cooperation in the region helps the development of global moral order. SEAHUM as an Organization Alliance that was established in 2012, brings together 24 humanitarian groups and 9 observers from ASEAN nations brings a network that coordinates disaster response, advocacy, and transnational humanitarian assistance in the region. This paper examines how non-state regional actors like SEAHUM as a case study can embody solidarist principles by their humanitarian response to Gaza within an evolving regional international society. The English School framework used to highlight SEAHUM's role in expanding humanitarian responsibility beyond the pluralist norms of sovereignty and non-interference that traditionally define ASEAN as a region. Based on SEAHUM official data between 2023 and 2025, member organizations collectively distributed more than IDR 165 billion or approximately 10 million USD in assistance to Gaza. Humanitarian assistance organized by SEAHUM members including food, medical services, shelter, and water. These coordinated efforts illustrate how regional solidarism formed by SEAHUM can materialize through organized humanitarian action to link moral concern among the region with practical cooperation. This study contributes to the existing English School literature by demonstrating that solidarism is not limited to interstate relations only but can also be institutionalized through regional civil society networks. This study also expands theoretical understanding of international society by revealing how SEAHUM as a Southeast Asia's humanitarian community can operate as a moral actor in global politics.

**Keywords:** SEAHUM, Gaza, English School, ASEAN, Humanitarian, Civil Society

### Introduction

The humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza following 7 October 2023 has emerged as one of the gravest crises of civilian protection in the contemporary international order. Extensive civilian casualties, mass displacement, the destruction of hospitals, schools, and water infrastructure, and prolonged restrictions on humanitarian access have transformed Gaza into a paradigmatic humanitarian emergency after the ongoing genocide carried out by Israel. International responses to this crisis have been deeply polarized. While Western governments have largely framed their positions through strategic, legalistic, and alliance-based considerations, the Global South, particularly Southeast Asian countries, has exhibited a notable surge in humanitarian mobilization driven by civil society rather than by states.

This phenomenon is analytically significant because Southeast Asia has historically been normatively cautious in responding to extra-regional conflicts. ASEAN's diplomatic culture is often described as the "ASEAN Way," which emphasizes sovereignty, non-interference, consensus, and quiet diplomacy. These norms reflect a pluralist conception of international

society in which order and coexistence take precedence over shared moral enforcement (Bull, 1977; Acharya, 2014). As a result, ASEAN, as a regional institution, has rarely acted collectively in response to humanitarian crises beyond its immediate region, particularly when such crises involve contentious questions of international law and great-power politics.

Against this backdrop of Southeast Asian states and ASEAN as the most relevant institution in the region, the emergence of the Southeast Asia Humanitarian Committee (SEAHUM) as a central coordinating actor in the humanitarian response to Palestine, particularly Gaza, represents a meaningful departure from established regional patterns, especially after 7 October 2023. SEAHUM was founded in 2012 by several NGOs in the region. It is a transnational network of humanitarian organizations from across Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, and other countries. Its mandate encompasses disaster preparedness, emergency response, and post-crisis recovery, especially in the Southeast Asian region, by responding to disasters and conflicts through humanitarian assistance. During the 2023–2024 Gaza crisis, SEAHUM members collectively mobilized approximately IDR 165 billion, or around USD 10 million, in various types of humanitarian assistance to several areas in Gaza, including food aid, clean water provision, medical convoys, ambulances, shelters, and winter relief.

Scholarly work on ASEAN regionalism has consistently emphasized the organization's foundational commitment to country sovereignty, non-interference, and consensus-based decision-making (Acharya, 2014; Jones, 2012). These norms historically emerged from post-colonial experiences and fears of external intervention in several Southeast Asian countries. From an English School perspective in International Relations, ASEAN as a regional institution exemplifies a pluralist international society in which the primary goal is to maintain order rather than to advocate justice (Bull, 1977).

This study employs the English School as its primary theoretical framework. The English School conceptualizes world politics as comprising three analytically distinct but interconnected layers: the international system, international society, and world society (Bull, 1977; Buzan, 2014). International society exists when states recognize common rules, norms, and institutions such as sovereignty and international law that regulate their interactions, while world society refers to the domain of individuals, NGOs, and transnational moral movements. Within international society, the pluralism–solidarism debate concerns the extent of shared moral responsibility. Pluralist international societies prioritize order, sovereignty, and non-intervention, whereas solidarist international societies recognize collective moral obligations to protect individuals from mass harm, even beyond borders (Wheeler, 2000).

ASEAN, as an institution in the Southeast Asian region, has historically embodied pluralist principles that prioritize order and sovereignty. Its commitment to non-interference has limited collective responses to humanitarian crises, particularly those occurring outside the region. However, English School scholarship also highlights that international societies are not static. Normative evolution may occur through the interaction between international society and world society. Solidarism, as part of the English School perspective, often emerges incrementally through practice rather than through formal institutional reform (Wheeler, 2000), as can be seen in SEAHUM as the case of this study.

In this article, SEAHUM is understood as a world society actor. SEAHUM operates primarily within the realm of world society as a network of humanitarian organizations and is not constrained in the same way by the diplomatic sensitivities that shape state behavior. Its activities intersect with international society by influencing public discourse, shaping expectations of moral responsibility, and indirectly affecting state preferences. In this sense, SEAHUM functions as a bridge between moral concern and regional order.



Parallel to this theoretical debate, the literature on humanitarianism and global civil society documents the growing role of non-state actors such as SEAHUM in humanitarian governance. Kaldor (2003) and Weiss (2013) similarly argue that humanitarian action has increasingly shifted from state-centric intervention toward network-based coordination involving Non Governmental Organizations, faith-based organizations, and transnational advocacy groups. Critical scholars further caution that humanitarianism is never politically neutral, since it can involve both the alleviation of suffering and the depoliticization of structural violence (Fassin, 2012).

Despite these insights concerning the characteristics of institutions in Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian civil society remains under-theorized in the literature on humanitarian norm production. Existing studies tend to focus on Western NGOs or UN-led interventions and offer limited findings on other regions, especially the Global South. Therefore, previous insights cannot be easily generalized to institutions formed by civil society such as SEAHUM. This paper addresses this gap by examining SEAHUM as a distinctly Southeast Asian humanitarian institution that contributes to solidarist norm development from within Global South countries, particularly in the Southeast Asian region.

This paper argues that SEAHUM's humanitarian engagement with Gaza cannot be adequately understood as episodic charity or merely religious solidarity. Rather, it reflects the emergence of solidarist norms within Southeast Asia driven by civil society actors operating beyond formal state diplomacy. Through sustained coordination among NGO members, institutionalized cooperation, and moral framing centered on civilian protection, SEAHUM as an NGO network articulates a regional humanitarian conscience that challenges ASEAN's traditionally pluralist normative order.

Therefore, this study asks: How does SEAHUM's humanitarian response toward Gaza demonstrate the emergence of solidarist norms within Southeast Asia? This study hypothesizes that SEAHUM's coordinated humanitarian response toward Gaza demonstrates that solidarist values are expanding within Southeast Asia, driven by regional civil society networks that articulate shared moral obligations beyond sovereignty-based and state-centric norms.

## Methods

This study employs the English School as its primary theoretical framework. The English School conceptualizes world politics through three interconnected layers: international system, international society, and world society. Within this framework, ASEAN reflects a pluralist international society that prioritizes sovereignty, order, and non-intervention, while SEAHUM can be understood as a world society actor that articulates solidarist norms through humanitarian practice.

## Results and Discussion

### Scale, Coordination, and Institutional Capacity

Between 2023 and 2024, SEAHUM members collectively delivered approximately IDR 165 billion in humanitarian assistance to Gaza with the assistances that included food packages, wheat and flour trucks, clean water infrastructure, medical convoys, ambulances, mobile clinics, temporary shelters, winter clothing, hygiene kits, and emergency mosques. Seeing this from a humanitarian governance perspective, scale and coordination, it indicates that SEAHUM

shows institutional maturity rather than episodic charity (Weiss, 2013). Large-scale coordination also reflects what Kaldor (2003) identifies as networked humanitarianism where transnational actors from several countries succeed to pool resources together and put their legitimacy beyond national boundaries.

The regional coordination of this response challenges conventional understandings of Southeast Asian regionalism as exclusively state-led. Acharya (2014) argues that ASEAN's institutional design marginalizes civil society and relegates it to a more consultative role. SEAHUM's sustained cross-border cooperation demonstrates an alternative form of regionalism rooted in societal actors like NGOs that reinforces Buzan's (2014) claim that world society increasingly shapes regional normative orders. In this sense, SEAHUM represents a form of people-centered regionalism that operates parallel to ASEAN rather than as an opposition.

### **Operationalizing Solidarism through Practice**

SEAHUM's humanitarian engagement reflects solidarism through three interrelated practices. First, SEAHUM extends moral responsibility to distant populations beyond borders with solidarism as defined by Wheeler (2000) as the entailment of obligations toward strangers suffering mass violence. SEAHUM's sustained commitment to Gaza exemplifies the principle of moral responsibility by prioritizing civilian protection beyond geographic proximity and even regional identity.

Second, solidarism shown by SEAHUM coordination among their members is institutionalized through coordination mechanisms. Bull (1977) emphasizes that institutions function as carriers of norms by stabilizing expectations and practices and this coordination mechanism shown in SEAHUM's joint fundraising, standardized operating procedures, coordinated advocacy and workshops embedded by humanitarian obligations within organizational routines. These practices within SEAHUM members transform moral concern into durable institutional behavior that suggests the internalization of solidarist norms within Southeast Asian civil society.

Third, SEAHUM exercises moral entrepreneurship by framing Gaza as a humanitarian emergency rather than only a geopolitical or ideological conflict. This framing aligns with humanitarian principles centered on human dignity and civilian protection (Weiss, 2013; Fassin, 2012) and also to state that catastrophic event in Gaza is beyond conflict and should be labeled as genocide made one sided by Israel. By foregrounding suffering rather than sovereignty disputes, SEAHUM broadens the moral constituency of concern and lowers the political cost of solidarist engagement in a sovereignty-conscious region and could become the inspiration by the states and governments in the region to advocate the same mutual goals toward Gaza and Palestine.

### **Humanitarianism, Politics, and Norm Contestation**

Humanitarian action in Palestine is inherently political as many critical scholars argue that humanitarianism can obscure structural violence and defer questions of accountability (Fassin, 2012) and at the same time, humanitarian practices often serve as entry points for moral norm diffusion in politically constrained environments (Bellamy, 2009). SEAHUM navigates this tension by prioritizing more immediate life-saving assistance while maintaining a cautious stance toward overt political advocacy as we can see from the kind of humanitarian assistance given by SEAHUM to Gaza.

This strategy reflects what Bellamy (2009) describes as incremental solidarism with normative advancement constrained by existing political realities. Rather than confronting



ASEAN's non-interference norm directly, SEAHUM works with normative value by enabling solidarist values to emerge gradually through practice. This approach by SEAHUM resonates with Acharya's (2018) argument that norm diffusion in Asia tends to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary and this evolutionary diffusion of norm can be seen in this Southeast Asia region with SEAHUM as a case.

### Alternative Explanations and Analytical Rebuttals

Several alternative explanations could account for SEAHUM's engagement with Gaza. One common interpretation emphasizes religious solidarity as a particular Islamic charity tradition in Southeast Asia. While religious motivation undoubtedly plays a role, this explanation alone is insufficient and SEAHUM as a multi-organizational network includes more explanation to this with its diverse humanitarian actors and employing of professionalized humanitarian standards, suggesting that this network is institutionalized by the norms rather than spontaneous religious giving only (Paffenholz, 2015).

Another explanation frames SEAHUM's actions as an expression of post-colonial or anti-Western sentiment. This interpretation of SEAHUM action risks reducing humanitarian action to ideological opposition while historical experiences of colonialism shape Southeast Asian moral perspectives. The English School perspective in this case offers a more nuanced explanation by situating SEAHUM as an institution within world society where moral agency operates independently of state ideology (Buzan, 2014; Zarakol, 2011).

Finally, some may interpret SEAHUM's response to Gaza as purely reactive humanitarianism driven by media visibility. However, the sustained and institutionalized nature of SEAHUM's engagement that spanned multiple years and diverse forms of assistance suggest deeper normative commitment rather than short-term responsiveness (Weiss, 2013).

### SEAHUM and Implications for ASEAN's Normative Order

SEAHUM's Gaza response contributes to a more broader debate on Global South norm production that shown in the literature on humanitarian intervention and solidarism remains Eurocentric, focusing on Western-led interventions and liberal institutional frameworks (Tickner & Blaney, 2012; Chandler, 2010). SEAHUM demonstrates that solidarist practices can emerge organically within post-colonial regions through civil society networks. This case supports Zarakol's (2011) argument that non-Western societies develop alternative pathways to international legitimacy and moral agency as we can analyze on SEAHUM. SEAHUM's practices reflect a form of solidarism that is morally assertive yet politically cautious, balancing humanitarian obligation with regional sensitivity to sovereignty.

SEAHUM's Gaza response reveals a growing normative divergence within Southeast Asia if we take a look at ASEAN that remains institutionally pluralist and on the other hand civil society actors articulate solidarist values that challenge the limits of non-interference from ASEAN. This supports Acharya's (2018) argument that normative change in regional orders occurs through layering and contestation rather than abrupt transformation. Southeast Asia is thus developing a dual-layer normative order in which state-led pluralism coexists with civil society-driven solidarism.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that SEAHUM's humanitarian response to Gaza provides compelling empirical evidence of emerging solidarist norms within Southeast Asia. SEAHUM

challenges the dominance of state-centric pluralism in ASEAN's normative order through its coordination with regional action, how it gets institutionalized humanitarian practice, and the moral framing centered on civilian protection towards the institution. The study demonstrates how solidarism can emerge from world society rather than from state-led initiatives by employing the English School theoretical framework. SEAHUM functions as a moral actor that bridges humanitarian concern and regional order by illustrating Wheeler's (2000) argument that solidarist obligations often originate outside formal state institutions before diffusing more broadly. In a broader way, this case advances debates on Global South norm-making and international order by challenging Eurocentric assumptions that humanitarian solidarism is primarily a Western construct (Bellamy, 2009; Tickner & Blaney, 2012). SEAHUM illustrates how post-colonial regions can generate their own humanitarian institutions and moral vocabularies and this illustration supports Acharya's (2018) claim that global normative change increasingly reflects non-Western agency.

The findings suggest that Southeast Asia is developing a dual-layer normative order with ASEAN as an example of a state-led pluralist international society coexisting with SEAHUM as an example of a civil society-driven by a solidarist humanitarian community. This configuration does not undermine sovereignty but supplements it with moral responsibility by offering a more inclusive foundation for regional order. Future research should examine whether these civil society-driven solidarist norms shown by SEAHUM diffuse into formal ASEAN mechanisms or remain confined to the societal sphere and comparative studies across regions in the Global South could further illuminate how humanitarian norms evolve under conditions of sovereignty sensitivity and geopolitical constraint.

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