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## Oiling the scales of justice

THERE is no doubt about the value of oil as a strategic commodity and how much dependence the world places on the Middle East for its supply. Just look back to 1973 when panic gripped the United States and sent its economy reeling over an Arab oil embargo that quadrupled petroleum prices. Five years later, when the Shah of Iran was deposed during a revolution in that country, petroleum exports were diminished to virtually negligible levels, causing crude oil prices once again to soar and hurt economic growth in the rich countries. Then there was the Gulf War in 1991, which also inflated oil prices, albeit for only a short time. These trends have coloured Washington's policies in the Middle East, leading to an extended bout of double-dealing that keeps the region in barely-suppressed turmoil.

So when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said on Thursday that Muslim oil-producing countries were not really exploiting the power of oil for the defence of the Islamic world, it was merely a stark reminder as to how helpless and vulnerable they have become despite being major oil producers and holding two-thirds of the world's oil reserves. And a lot it has to do with the constant disunity and bickering in the Arab world itself.

Iraq came out with the suggestion recently, urging Arab countries to use oil as a weapon to pressure the US to force Israel to withdraw its forces from Palestinian areas. But it generated very little enthusiasm among oil-producing states like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which came out with their own arguments as to why the move wouldn't work. Iran, which has not exported oil to the US since 1995, was also cool to the idea, probably only because it came from Iraq.

Muslim countries should learn from history and deploy this most valuable of industrial resources to meet the challenges facing them, especially the oppression and manipulation of outside forces. Bickering will certainly make the subjugation easier. Oil can provide the leverage to turn the tide. But the trouble is, as the Prime Minister said, they quarrel among themselves. When one party wants to cut supply, another increases his and in the end, oil becomes a burden for the terrorists to turn into a grievance rather than a blessing for the weak.