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`Saudi Arabia can be world power

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OIL-RICH Saudi Arabia is in a position to become a world power to protect the well-being of the ummah and the religion.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, speaking to the Saudis at a symposium yesterday, said this was not because the Muslim world wanted to embark on world conquest but simply to ensure that the ummah is not oppressed as they are today.

"Allah knows that the Muslim ummah is in dire need of a Muslim country which is a world power. Saudi Arabia is well positioned to become one if it chooses to do so, and is helped by the ummah worldwide," he said in his keynote address at a symposium on the future vision for the Saudi economy.

Among those at the symposium were top Saudi government officials and corporate figures.

The three-day symposium, organised by the Saudi Ministry of Planning and supported by the World Bank, was opened by Crown Prince Abdullah Abdul Aziz. It is aimed at preparing a long-term sustainable development plan for the country.

Dr Mahathir said if Muslims adhered strictly to the teachings of Islam, they could be economically and politically strong without losing their identity or faith.

"What I have said is entirely possible, subject, of course, to there being the will to do what is needed. The choice is yours. Islam is not in the way.

"In fact, Islam enjoins us to do all that I have said can be done."

Dr Mahathir said there were Muslims who believed that being modern and advanced was un-Islamic, and that there were also those who believed that the religion was not for all times.

As a result, they neglect the modernising role of Islam and they have become backward, he added.

"We forget the modernising effect of Islam on the Jahilliah Arabs. It was Islam's modernising effect, in the context of Arab society of those days, that helped the spread of the religion and built the Muslim Empire."

The Prime Minister said that in the present information age, information and communication technology was the driving force for economic progress.

He said there was no need for a big workforce but there was certainly a need for workers highly educated in science and mathematics.

"These are subjects which the Arabs excelled in the past. Unfortunately at a certain stage, the Muslims turn their backs on science and mathematics.

"Since then, their civilisation has declined and until today, they are among the least educated and least advanced people in the world."

Dr Mahathir said in neglecting these essential subjects, they had actually disregarded the injunctions of Islam to seek knowledge.

"The fact is that Muslims today cannot neglect science and mathematics if they want to avoid being weak and oppressed.

"Our holy places will remain our holy places even if Saudi Arabia becomes a great industrial and financial power."

Earlier, Dr Mahathir explained how Malaysia grew from an agriculture-based nation which depended on rubber and tin exports to a manufacturing-driven economy.

He said due to the labour shortage, Malaysia today had to go for high-tech, capital-intensive industries to nurture the economy and give its

people and the nation a better income.