

Malaysia's prime minister gives voice to the international frustration over Washington's hardheaded approach to Iraq

'War Solves Nothing'

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For much of his career, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has enjoyed poking a finger in the eye of the West, pitching himself as a spokesman for the world's smaller nations. Yet initially at least, he was also one of the Muslim world's staunchest supporters of the war against terror. So when he addressed the World Economic Forum in Davos last week with a blistering, thinly veiled attack on the way Washington has waged that war—"Sanity has deserted both sides," he railed—he sent a strong signal about just how much resentment the United States has inspired internationally, particularly over the question of Iraq. Shortly after his speech Mahathir spoke with NEWSWEEK's Lally Weymouth and Farced Zakaria. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: After September 11 you strongly supported President Bush's war on terror, and denounced Al Qaeda and suicide bombing. Do you no longer support U.S. policy?

MAHATHIR: I still support the war on terrorism, but the United States has gone overboard. It is delaying and turning back visitors, stopping cargo, boarding ships on the high seas. These actions are becoming counterproductive; they feed anti-Americanism.

And now there is Iraq. Iraq is a problem that has existed and still exists. But it has little to do with the war on terror. **But over the years you have been very tough on terror in Malaysia.**

Yes, we have had a policy of preempting terrorism. But we also asked ourselves, "Why is this happening?" I am trained as a doctor, and I don't treat symptoms. I treat the malady itself. We tried to address the root causes of the problem, providing opportunity and education. Of course, when we would lock people up we got heavily criticized, mostly by the Americans. **Do you believe that the United States is isolated in its policy toward Iraq?**

It is completely isolated. Only Australia has signed up enthusiastically, in the role of deputy sheriff. Even Britain is now having some second thoughts. **Is this any different from times in the past, say during the Vietnam War?**

Very different. During the Vietnam War many governments, particularly in Southeast Asia, supported the United States. We thought it was stopping the spread of communist insurgencies that could destabilize the region. And people in those days fell in line with their



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governments. But now with the rise of global media, people make up their own minds. And it is they, not governments, who are at the forefront of opposition to the United States' policies. It is very sad what has happened. America used to be such a popular country. No longer. Today the United States Embassy in Kuala Lumpur has high walls around it. In the past the only embassies that had such walls were those of the Soviet Union and Maoist China. **Why does Islamic fundamentalism have some appeal in almost every Muslim country today?** Because it is easy to misinterpret Islam and claim that the problems people face are because of others—foreigners, outsiders—rather than themselves. But it is a complete misinterpretation of Islam. Islam tells us to seek knowledge. Properly

understood, it is a modernizing force for societies, as it was in the Arab world when it was introduced to a nomadic people. That is how we have used it in Malaysia.

But over the last 20 years you have seen the rise of Islamic fundamentalism even in Malaysia. Is this the globalization of an Arab movement?

You now have the globalizing of everything. Even terrorism has been globalized. But you can't change this trend. We have to deal with these mobile Arabs, and we do. But remember, even in the Arab world the fundamentalists are a minority. **Looking at how Malaysia has been able to embrace Islam and modernity, do you have any advice for the Arab world?**

Economic and political development is the answer. The Arab regimes must ask why groups of young people in their societies are so deeply disaffected. These people used to attack their governments; now they attack the United States because they believe it supports repression in their countries. **Wouldn't one way to help solve this problem be to remove the repressive regime in Iraq and help build a modern democratic country that could spur reform in the Arab world?**

It's a big risk that has not been thought through. It could cause all kinds of problems. It might work, but it is a huge risk.

Don't you think that with precision bombing the collateral damage in Iraq will be substantially reduced?

I don't believe there is any such thing as precision bombing. Bombs fall where they will. And innocents die. That's why I believe that war solves nothing.