

Message that the West distorted

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COMMENT BY BUNN NAGARA

MALAYSIA'S attempt to rally members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) on the first day of its 10th Summit session on Thursday sought to rouse them from various states of stupor, apathy and semi-paralysis. It had to be a kick-start to push an otherwise disparate array of 57 nations to rise above their rut, torpor and defeatism.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's opening speech was as usual expansive and provocative. It challenged OIC member states to rise to the occasion, and that occasion was the politically weakened state of their shared faith.

The speech covered many areas and topics, among which was the global dominance of Jewish entities. This was enough for much of the Western media and some Western leaders to single out the point with which to denounce the prime minister and his message.

It would have been better if all these critics had read the speech in its entirety, rather than just responding to isolated "statements" or reports of the comment. As it is, their urge to clamp down on Dr Mahathir's blunt comments sits oddly with their proclaimed adherence to free speech.

The result is not unfamiliar: condemnation of views taken out of context, by people out of sync with the conference in Putrajaya. The atmosphere in the Convention Centre was far from uncivil, as the 57 national delegations rose to give Dr Mahathir a standing ovation for his speech.

Dr Hamid Karzai, President of post-Taliban Afghanistan and criticised by some as a stooge of Washington, held his ground by calling Dr Mahathir eloquent and denying that his speech was "anti-Semitic". This was echoed by other OIC leaders, including ministers from Egypt and Palestine – yet some Western media still said they skirted the issue.

Meanwhile continents away, the speech was lambasted by people who had neither heard nor read it. News reports quoted them as saying this was predictable stuff from Dr Mahathir, but if it was so stale then why was it news?

That singular point about Jews had coloured and shaped the entire



speech for them, as they remained blissfully ignorant of how Dr Mahathir also argued that suicide bombings and other forms of violence had to stop. Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre (Los Angeles) called the speech "profoundly shocking and worrying ... coming in the time we're living in."

Indeed, it is a time when Muslim countries minding their own business are attacked and their people killed "pre-emptively", and Palestinians continue to be massacred in their homes and their land defiled. It is also a time when Israel has again become a rogue state, attacking Palestine and Syria, while the United States vetoes any UN attempt to condemn Israeli atrocities.

At such a time, these self-righteous critics worry about hurtful words while turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the bullets and missiles destroying real lives of multitudes of innocents. If this is not sheer ignorance it must be gross hypocrisy, with vile duplicity to match.

Israel had considered attacking Iraq for some time, but lacked the sustainable firepower and geographical distance to do it properly on its own. This has now been done for them, thanks largely to friends and associates in Washington, an act swiftly welcomed with bipartisan support in the Israeli Knesset.

As Dr Mahathir's speech was being savaged, it was equally predictable to find the detractors firing volleys of "anti-Semitism" charges. Yet, the speech also acknowledged Jewish grit and savvy, without belittling

Jewish capabilities in any way.

The prime minister similarly pressed Muslims to emulate the ways of Jewish people which have led to such success around the world. Pulling together, working hard and planning for the future were all better than pessimism, destruction and self-destruction.

He even appealed to the world's Muslims to work with non-Muslims, including Jews, who shared their struggle for equality and respect. All of this was applauded in Putrajaya by more Arab Semites than the self-righteous variety who dominate the Western and international media.

Just as the mood in the Convention Centre was positive, so was the reception to the speech in much of the Asian media. The *International News* in Pakistan took it as a challenge to Muslims to improve themselves, while *The Manila Times* in the Philippines saw the message as stopping violence and starting to think.

But in the Western media – in Europe, the United States and Australia – this condemnation and distortion went overboard to the extent that even Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar's attempt to explain Dr Mahathir's comments was seen as Malaysia apologising.

Headlines beginning with "Malaysia apologises" spanned the print and broadcast media in Europe, the United States and Israel. In Australia, *The Australian* and the *Herald Sun* ran their stories headed "Malaysia: Sorry about Mahathir".

Yet Syed Hamid said he did not apologise, but only said he felt sorry that these people had misunderstood the prime minister on such a scale. The global furor over a single point in a wide-ranging speech has given critics of Israel their best justification yet: that Jewish interests and concerns dominate the global and Western media.

Dr Mahathir said all he said in the way he said it because he was Dr Mahathir, and he knew that conference delegates would agree with him. Those who know Malaysia also know that he has done more for national unity and race relations than any of his critics or detractors anywhere.