

# Dr M's remarks widen debate among Arabs

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**NEW YORK:** Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been denounced in the West and applauded by many Muslims for voicing the old anti-Semitic belief that "Jews rule the world."

But the former Malaysian premier's remarks have also widened the debate among Arabs about whether they should look to themselves, not the Jews and Israel, to explain their predicament.

"Isn't it time that Muslims look at the reasons for the state we're in or do we really live in the Dark Ages?" said columnist Bakr Oweida.

"Those who cheer or jeer (Dr Mahathir) have paid little attention to most of what Dr Mahathir said," Oweida wrote in an editorial last week in the Arab daily *Asharq Al-Awsat*.

"Dr Mahathir put his finger on some points of extreme importance. Why have Muslims lagged behind in all aspects of life for five centuries?"

The questions reflected a growing introspection among Arab thinkers over issues such as lack of democracy, lagging economies, crumbling relations with the United States, Islamic fundamentalism and the spread of extremist violence.

The debate has long been hampered by the conflict with Israel.

Proponents of reform and critics of Arab governments are sometimes branded as promoting the agenda of Israel or its greatest ally, the US.

But that stigma is beginning to lift, at a time when Arabs feel they're at a crisis point.

The invasion of Iraq was seen

by some as a humiliation but fuelled others' demands for political change in their own nations.

Many resent the US war against terror – seen as a war on Muslims – but at the same time fear violence by Islamic militants at home.

"The issue of democracy in Arab nations must not remain a prisoner of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," wrote Hassan Muneima in a commentary on Dr Mahathir in the *Al-Hayat* daily which like *Asharq al-Awsat* is published in London but distributed across the Arab world.

Calls for reform have increased since the Sept 11, 2001 terror attacks.

An UN-sponsored report by a group of Arab experts issued last month pointed to the lack of freedom of expression, access to knowledge and empowerment of women as key impediments to Arab development.

Some of what Dr Mahathir said in his speech to an Islamic summit echoed that sentiment.

But when he advised Muslims to learn from the Jews, who "rule the world by proxy" and "get others to fight and die for them," he raised a storm in the West.

European and US leaders condemned Dr Mahathir for anti-Semitism.

But for many Arabs, he had tapped into a deep, resentful feeling that American policy is dictated by Israel.

"Thank you to Dr Mahathir for his courage and manhood.

He put his finger on the wound of every Arab and Muslim," wrote Abdul Bari Atwan, editor-in-chief of the London-based *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* in a front-page editorial.

The US-led war on terror is "first and foremost an Israeli war fought for the interests of the Jewish state" and the war on Iraq aims only "to consecrate Israeli hegemony in the region," he said but added Dr Mahathir was wrong "to generalise."

Former Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdul-Illah Khatib, whose country has a peace treaty with Israel, wrote in Jordan's *Ad-Dustour* daily that Dr Mahathir didn't condemn Jews harshly enough.

"This is too little for what should have been said," he said.

There were also denunciations.

Ahmed Abd el-Qadir, a Yemeni human rights activist writing in Yemen's *Al-Tagamu* newspaper, said Dr Mahathir's comments "come at the wrong time" and would only hurt Muslims' image.

Gamil Matar, an Egyptian analyst, regretted that Dr Mahathir's attack on Jews tainted a potential leader of an Islamic "Third Way" that rejects fundamentalism and seeks prosperity and modernity without bowing to the US.

This "Third Way" could "lead Muslims out of the situation they are stuck in," he wrote in *Al-Hayat*.

Admirers see Dr Mahathir, who retired last week, as a shining example of that third way. – Reuters