

## Words that kill

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The anti-Jewish remarks by Malaysia's leader are a disservice to truth and to Islam itself



THERE is much to be admired in politicians who are brave, or foolish, enough to say things that are true, even when they are unpopular. That is the sort of image that Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's prime minister for the past 22 years, has sought to cultivate—as a man not afraid to speak his mind, to call a spade a spade, to stand up against foreign pomposity and bullying. Although he does not allow free speech within Malaysia, his right to say what he thinks should nevertheless be defended outside it. But what if he says things that are untrue, but popular? That is what he did on October 16th, at the summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, when he said that “The Europeans killed 6m Jews out of 12m, but today the Jews rule the world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them.”

The response was predictable: outrage from governments and Jewish groups around the world, but a standing ovation at the conference. Both Dr Mahathir and his government officials were quick to defend his speech against its critics by saying that his point about Jewish control had been taken out of context. He was urging his fellow Muslims to eschew violence, and to emulate Jews by using their brains, not brawn. So it was a compliment, you see. It was just like the old Jewish joke about an Israeli who is puzzled when he sees his friend reading an anti-Semitic newspaper. “Our papers are full of bad news,” comes the reply. “But this one has good news; it says we control the whole world.”

Yet Dr Mahathir's remarks were not funny, and they were not a compliment, whether to Jewish people, to those he

claims they control, or to the soldiers who died in Iraq and Afghanistan, not fighting for Israel but, as they thought, to bring down tyrannies in both countries and punish terrorists. Nor is he backing down from his words: he even had the *chutzpah* this week to claim that the reaction to his comments proved his point, for it showed that the western media are controlled by Jews. More important, though, is the fact that whatever the context, his remarks are likely to encourage violence, not reduce it. The reaction at the conference, and among delegates interviewed by the media afterwards, confirmed that the claim is widely believed. And to many it is a powerful *casus belli* to which a head of government has now lent credence.

That head of government is due to retire on October 31st, bringing to an end a remarkable success story both in helping Malaysia develop economically and in keeping that multi-racial and multi-religious country stable. But neither the imminent retirement nor the past success excuses this speech. It is not even excusable on Dr Mahathir's own terms, namely that he was trying to persuade Muslims that they must solve their own problems more intelligently than before.

This sentiment is an admirable one, but it is utterly subverted by reinforcing the notion that Israel, or rather the conflict between Arabs and Jews, epitomises Muslims' problem. It doesn't. Bad government, and dysfunctional social and religious institutions, are what does. That pattern has been epitomised in their different ways by Saddam Hussein in Iraq, by the failed theocracy in Iran and by the corrupt Suharto dictatorship whose collapse left Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, in a terrible mess in 1998. To that dismal pattern, Dr Mahathir's Malaysia has been an exception. Muslims would do far better to look at that example than to pay heed to Dr Mahathir's paranoid words. ■