

# One Angry Man

*Malaysian leaders hosted the recent summit of Muslim nations and pushed a message of peace and economic cooperation. But outgoing Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad overshadowed the effort by describing the challenge for the Muslim world as a battle with the Jewish people*

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By Michael Vatikiotis/PUTRAJAYA

**WITH THE WORLD** desperately looking for a way to curb Islamic extremism and push for peace in the Middle East, hopes were pinned on the first formal summit of Muslim leaders since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Optimists had looked to Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the summit's host and chairman, because he has steered Malaysia along a path towards moderate Islam, drawing strength from economic development—a prescription many Muslims see as a cure for their ills.

"This is the opportunity," former Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan, himself a Muslim, told the REVIEW ahead of the mid-October Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) summit. "Mahathir has the prestige, the clout and the legitimacy because he has come up with a successful model for the Muslim world. The leaders will be bound to listen."

But what the leaders of 57 Muslim nations who had gathered in Malaysia's new administrative capital of Putrajaya listened to were the words of an angry and frustrated man intent on stirring Muslims to action: "1.3 billion Muslims cannot be defeated by a few million Jews," he thundered. In Mahathir's view, the Jews have managed to turn the world against Muslims. "The Europeans killed 6 million Jews out of 12 million, but today the Jews rule the world by proxy. They get together to fight and die for them."

The inflammatory comments obscured a more useful message—at the core of Mahathir's speech was a strong call for an end to violence. "The world is looking at us," he began, "it is we who must act." He decried the senseless violence that terrorists have launched, which he said Muslim governments can do nothing to stop. "The attacks solve nothing. The Muslims simply get more oppressed." Mahathir called on Muslims to pause and make a "strategic retreat to calmly assess our situation."

Yet far from assuring a world already nervous about Mus-

lim anger, Mahathir sounded a distinctly menacing note. European leaders were quick to condemn the comments. Several days later, United States President George W. Bush, in Bangkok for a summit of Asia-Pacific leaders including Mahathir, called the remarks "reprehensible" and "hateful."

Adding to the concern, according to a senior Western diplomat in Kuala Lumpur, were statements in Mahathir's speech that were seen to advocate conflict using the Muslim world's vast oil resources. "Even today, we have sufficient assets to deploy against our detractors," Mahathir said.

"That suggests he supports the use of oil as a weapon against us," says the diplomat. Thirty years ago, Middle East oil producers raised the price of oil and cut production, greatly affecting oil-dependent Western economies.

Perhaps it was unrealistic to expect the world's only pan-Muslim body to sound benevolent, given the anger over the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the worsening conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. But the summit also featured strong voices calling for a new direction, one leading away from violence and conflict. "We have to decide whether militancy, extremism and confrontation will lead us to our emancipation, or a focus on our socio-economic well-being will benefit us," Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf said. Musharraf pointed out that all 57 nations represented at the summit could only muster a combined GDP of \$1.4 trillion, compared to Japan's GDP of about three times that sum.

Indeed, the summit's final communique reiterated a commitment to combat terrorism. But rather than focusing on the terrorist threat from within, the leaders angled their communique on perceived double standards—arguing for a distinction between terrorism and the legitimate struggle for self-determination.

Malaysia will chair the OIC over the next three years, under

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is to take Mahathir's place as prime minister at the end of this month. Behind the scenes, Malaysian officials struggled to turn the OIC into a more active forum to promote tolerance and economic cooperation. That includes getting the business community more involved in the process of framing initiatives.

"If we want to avoid being marginalized, it is important that we focus, other than politics, on economics and trade," said Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar.

Mirroring a process that has already taken place in the context of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Abdullah proposed a second-track mechanism to reflect the concerns of the business community.

This idea struck a chord. "We are being marginalized under the World Trade Organization regime, and there should be dialogue and more meetings between Islamic ministers of finance," says a Pakistani businessman attending a business forum on the sidelines of the leaders' summit.

Malaysia has suggested various mechanisms to make this happen, which also mimic Apec and Asean. These include inviting nonmember countries with sizeable Muslim populations, like Russia and India, into the OIC as dialogue partners as a measure to build confidence with the non-Muslim world, and proceeding with economic initiatives without seeking agreement from all member countries. "As far as Asia is concerned, we are more familiar with how to deal with diversity," says Malaysian Youth and Sports Minister Hishamuddin Hussein. "We should not be looking for full endorsement, but if a proposal is realistic, let's not wait, and go do it."

Rhetoric aside, small steps were taken at the summit by leaders towards shifting the centre of gravity in the Muslim world away from political issues centred on the Middle East. Of course, it remains to be seen just how much dialogue and economic cooperation Malaysia can promote in a community facing divisive and emotional political issues like Iraq and Palestine. Despite Mahathir's offensive rhetoric, there are those who argue that a Muslim world guided by Asian Muslims known for their tolerance and hard-nosed pragmatism, as well as for generally avoiding conflict, is at least a start. "Southeast Asia is a workable model," argues Surin, the former Thai foreign minister. "The main body of Muslims in this region are very moderate, rational and tolerant." ■

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Islamic summit  
in Putrajaya