

03/05/2004

Dr M: Palestinian issue about land, not faith

EXCERPTS of interview with former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad with Guy Sharett of channel 10 TV Israel, April 6, 2004.

Q: UNTIL now, you have never really spoken to the Israeli media, so why did you say yes this time?

A: I have met Israeli journalists at Press conferences, but this time I feel I must explain myself to the world and to the Israelis because I have been misinterpreted, labelled as anti-Jew, anti-Israel, etc. So I saw this interview as an opportunity to make some corrections.

Q: You are the leader of a Southeast Asian country where there are hardly any Jews. There used to be a Jewish community in Penang but not anymore. Why are you so interested in Jewish people?

A: We are not really interested in Jewish people. We are interested in the fate of the Palestinians, and the loss of their country. They have been expelled from their own country and to us, this is not a religious issue between Jews and Muslims; it is a territorial issue.

You have taken somebody else's land and they want to have it back. In the process, they have lost (more land) each time because Israel has the backing of Europe and America.

Q: Who was the first Jew you met?

A: A fellow student who was with me in Singapore, Yahya Cohen. I have met many others: Lord (Arnold) Weinstock, the English Jew, the former head (managing director) of a big company there (GEC). I know quite a lot of Jews and am friends with many of them.

Q: Did some of them tell you off after your remarks about the Jews? What was their reaction?

A: On the contrary, they defended my stand and said I was not anti-Jew. That is why the reaction of the Jewish community, including members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, was mild compared to the reaction of the Jewish community elsewhere.

Q: For Islamic countries, is the negation of Jews a unifying factor? It seems the OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference) deals more with Israel and Jews than with human rights in Syria, in Egypt, freedom of the Press, etc. Does the Jewish conspiracy provide instant answers for anything that goes wrong in the Muslim world?

A: No, it does not provide instant answers. Of course, we are concerned about human rights everywhere but by comparison, the fate of the Palestinians at the hands of Israel is something we consider so severe and serious that we have to look into this. We are not as serious about Syria, about so-called Press freedom, because we don't believe there is any Press freedom at all. But we are concerned about the fate of the Palestinians, the Chechens and other Muslim communities.

Q: Do you understand why Israel arrests militants of Hamas before they launch terror attacks?

A: Yes, if you know something is about to happen and you have to take action, you have the right to do so, to detain them. We do the same thing here as it is provided for by the law.

Q: You condemned before the Palestinian suicide bombers and you were condemned after that.

A: I do not think it solves any problem. It is a question of revenge, because you kill my people I will kill your people and because your people are killed, you kill my people. And it keeps on like that and I told them

at the OIC conference that it does not solve any problem or achieve any objective. It is far better for them to sit down and think. And there I made the comparison with 2,000 years of Jewish history in Europe, where you were massacred but you did not react in kind. Instead you worked out a way of overcoming that. It has taken you time but apparently you have succeeded.

Q: You acknowledge what happened in the holocaust during the Second World War but still the (movie) Schindler's List was not allowed to be shown here in Malaysia.

A: Because it is biased. It shows only one side of the story. I don't believe that what Hitler did was right at all. We condemn it. I used to feel very strongly about what happened to the Jews in the past but you cannot use that as an excuse to attack other people or to kill other people, or that people should not criticise Israel simply because of the Holocaust.

Q: What is your definition of Jews?

A: When we talk about the Jews, principally we mean those who are very supportive of Israeli intransigence. We know there are Jews living in Muslim countries. Even in Iran they still have Jews and these people do not, outwardly at least, support the activities, the atrocities mounted by the Israelis. There used to be a division between Zionists and Jews and we still believe the division is pertinent. There are Jews who are ultra-nationalistic and think only of the interest of Israel, but there are other Jews in England and in other countries who are very rational.

Q: Why are you actually talking about Jews and not condemning Israel as a State?

A: We have condemned Israel as a State but the fact remains that there are many Jews living in America who are supportive of Israel irrespective of what it does.

Q: Is there such a thing as a Jewish conspiracy?

A: Well, we would not blame everything that goes wrong with the Muslim world on the Jews, but there are some, not very many of them, who apparently have a way of directing the very small number of Jewish people in a way that has given them tremendous influence over the world.

Q: In Malaysia, race issues are considered very sensitive. You have the Malays, Chinese and Indians and you need to maintain the social harmony you talk about often. Don't you think that by singling out one group like the Jews and speaking about them, saying, for example, that they are "so arrogant they defy the whole world", you hurt the social harmony of the world?

A: They were not like that before. Jews used to live in Muslim countries. Historically, whenever there were pogroms in Europe, the Jews preferred to migrate to Muslim countries. That is why in Morocco there were a million Jews at one time and (also) in many other parts which were ruled by the Turkish Ottomans, for example. So I am not condemning all Jews all the time, but at present what you are doing is something we cannot just not link with being Jewish. That is why we single out (the Jews) at this moment, but it does not apply to every Jew.

Q: To those Jews offended by your remarks, would you like to apologise or to clarify or to say anything to them directly?

A: I say what I feel should be said, and I have said the same thing about Muslims. But in my speech at the OIC, the Jews preferred not to notice at all that I condemned terrorism, that I told the Muslims to stop it. That is totally ignored. The only focus was on what I said about the Jews indirectly controlling the world.

Q: Did you meet the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and could you tell us about the letters he wrote you?

A : Yes I met Rabin when I was in Paris. We wrote to each other. I have written to other Jewish Prime Ministers as well. I thought Rabin was sincere in his desire to put an end to the Israeli-Palestine conflict. But unfortunately he was assassinated.

You know when Rabin was in power we actually brought Jewish children to Malaysia to show them that Muslims were not bad people. Of course their encounters with Palestinians had given them the wrong impression but they came here and mixed with our children (and) they found us normal. I also allowed the Israeli cricket team to play here at the risk of being condemned, but I thought it was a move to show that when you do something positive, we should show our appreciation in a very tangible way.

Q: Why are there Israeli embassies in Amman and Cairo, two countries that were at war with Israel and now have a peace treaty, but there is no Israeli representative in KL?

A: Well there is no Israeli diplomatic representation in many Muslim countries. At the moment, Muslims generally feel that they cannot have diplomatic relations with Israel because what is happening there is affecting us.

Q: Malaysia does not have diplomatic relations (with Israel) but according to the Ministry of Trade and Commerce of Israel, in 2003, trade between the two countries amounted to US\$300 million. Isn't this a contradiction?

A: No, we do not trade directly with Israel. We export a lot of our products to Singapore, then Singapore sells those products to other countries. This also happened when we banned Malaysian exports to South Africa during the apartheid period, but when we export to Singapore or Rotterdam they then re-export to other countries. That is beyond our control. But in our figures on trade, there is not a single dollar that we trade with Israel.

Q: Isn't that turning a blind eye?

A: We have no means of knowing where the final destination is.

Q: If a Malaysian businessman would like to export things to Israel can he do that directly?

A: At the moment, no.

Q: What is the regulation?

A: The regulation is that we have no diplomatic relations. We consider Israel an unfriendly country and we do not do business with Israel.

Q: Do you have any recommendations for Israel and Palestine to end the conflict?

A: I think it is time Israel and Palestine recognise that this is not a religious conflict. It is not a conflict between Muslims and Jews or followers of Judaism. It is a territorial problem. Palestine had lots of Arabs living there together with Jews when the Europeans decided together with the Zionists to create the state of Israel.

You created the state of Israel, you expelled the Palestinians, you took their land, their farms, their houses. Now, what they want to do is to get back what they owned before.

It is like any other country. If you say Texas should be excised from America and given to the American Indians as settlement, I am quite sure America is going to fight and it is the same in Malaysia.

You try to take any of our land we will fight, and the same with the Palestinians. They want back their land.

Q: What do you think of the fence being built by Israel?

A: Well, it is fine if you want to build a fence but build it in your territory. We have a fence built between Malaysia and Thailand to stop smuggling. It is built in Malaysia. You can walk outside the fence and still be in Malaysia because we purposely built it within our country to

protect us from smugglers.

So your fence should be in bona fide Israeli territory.

Q: What do you think of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin's assassination?

A: I think it is an act of terror because you are killing a man who was sick and incapable of defending himself. Now if we go around fighting a war and killing sick people I think we would have descended to a very low level indeed.

Q: Israel says that this sick man actually sent suicide bombers to attack civilians in Israel.

A: Yes, true. But one can (also) say that when President Bush allows rockets to be fired at Baghdad killing innocent people, then, Iraqis can kill Bush because they are killing somebody who sent rockets at them.

Q: Are you in touch with Arafat these days?

A: I can contact him if I want to. I telephone him sometimes but we don't talk to each other that often. He has visited Malaysia. I have discussed the problem with him and I think he is in a very desperate situation now.

Q: Will you travel to Israel and to the Palestinian Authority to advocate peace and to see the conflict with your own eyes?

A: If it is going to yield positive results, yes. But if it is merely propaganda to show my interest, no.

Q: Do you think Malaysia has a role to play in propagating peace in the Middle East?

A: Yes, we have a role, that is why we held a conference here on terrorism, on defining terrorism. I am afraid our definition was not acceptable to the Palestinians and to a lot of other people.

But we want to be very clear about this: When we fight against terrorism we want to know who the terrorists are. We show a great interest in this because it affects us now. There are now Malaysians who have been motivated to overthrow the Government by force of arms.

Q: What is your message to Israelis?

A: We wish the Israeli people and the Jewish people peace, hopefully in their lifetime. But to have peace they should also look at other people's problems, not just their own. And I hope there will be charity in the hearts of the Israeli people to resolve this without resorting to out-terrorising the terrorists.

Q: Do you see Malaysia and Israel having diplomatic relations in the future? If so, what could be potential fields of co-operation?

A: It is not impossible. I think if you resolve your problem with the Palestinians and people's emotions cool down, it is possible for diplomatic relations to be established. Malaysia is a trading nation, our trade is twice our Gross Domestic Product.

We are always looking for markets and Israel has lots of technology we hope to be able to share.

(END)