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Land rights the nub of conflict with Palestinians, Dr M tells Israeli TV

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not about religion but territory, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (picture) said in his first-ever interview on Israeli television recently.

The former Prime Minister reiterated that this was a conflict over land more than religion or ideology.

"You created the state of Israel, you expelled the Palestinians, you took their land, their farms, their houses. Now, what they want is to get back what they once owned," he told interviewer Guy Sharett of Israel's Channel 10 television.

Dr Mahathir said he was prepared to travel to Israel and Palestine to advocate peace. "If it is going to yield positive results, yes. But if it is merely propoganda to show my interest, no."

Dr Mahathir also used the interview, conducted here in early April, to set the record straight on his views on Jews, Israelis, Zionists and the state of Israel.

When he criticised Jews, he said, he was referring to those who supported Israel's uncompromising stand on the Palestinian issue and the atrocities committed by the regime. Not all Jews, naturally, fell into this category.

Dr Mahathir said there were Jews who were ultra-nationalistic and thought only of Israel's interest, but there were also many, in England for instance, who were rational.

This was why, he said, the Jewish reaction to his speech at last year's Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit, including from members of Britain's House of Commons and House of Lords, was mild compared to the reaction of Jewish communities elsewhere.

Dr Mahathir said he had many Jewish friends who agreed with his views on the Palestinian issue and knew that he was not anti-Semitic.

At the 10th OIC Summit here last year, Dr Mahathir said Jews ruled the world by proxy after having gained control of the most powerful countries.

His remarks drew outrage from the Australian Government, the European Union and the United States.

But Dr Mahathir said he did not have any reason to apologise for his remarks.

"I said the same thing about Muslims in my speech, but the Jews preferred not to notice at all that I condemned terrorism, that I told the Muslims to stop it. That was totally ignored. They only focused on what I said about the Jews indirectly controlling the world."

Dr Mahathir also described former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated in 1995, as sincere about ending the conflict.

"When Rabin was in power, we brought Jewish children to Malaysia to show them that Muslims were not bad people.

"Of course, their encounters with Palestinians gave them the impression that these were people who kill children, but they came here and mixed with our children (and) they found us normal."

He did not rule out the possibility of Malaysia and Israel establishing diplomatic ties, if and when the Palestinian issue is ever resolved.

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