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Healing the wounds of Islam

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I OFTEN wonder how you put a price on the forcible relocation of a people. The price of the displacement of the Palestinians continues to be exacted on the Muslim world to this day in ways that reach deep into its sense of self.

If there were a realpolitik watchdog group called Dilemmas International to compile a list of countries with the largest number of rocks and hard places to get stuck between, Pakistan would be near the top.

There are the schisms left over from the mishandled Partition of 1947. Cannon and nuclear missiles bristle on one side and guerilla and warlord-borne Kalashnikovs crackle on the other. There are the extremists and moderates, the class war-fare of feudalism and ethnicity, the canyon between the tribal northeast and the sophistication of Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, the cracks and gulches across Sunni and Shia, the opposites of civilian and military.

The list goes on, but throw in poverty and illiteracy for good measure and you are left in some amazement that this nation hasn't yet failed, and a nuclear power at that.

Governing Pakistan requires brawn and brains in equal measure and lots of both. The task calls for a unifier of the order of Charlemagne. Knowing the country as well as I think I now do, I find it hard not to admire Musharraf and see hope that he might fit the bill.

Unlike his haughtier military and civilian predecessors, however, the President gives interviews readily, indicating that he has much to explain as well as the willingness, confidence and courage to do so. You may disagree with him, as the Americans sometimes do, but you must admit that he deserves more than a chance.

I came away from my interview with Musharraf last weekend, the second in as many years, once again impressed with the general's pragmatism. He is driven by a clarity of purpose unencumbered by dogma and sharpened by his country's interests.

In his doctrine of "enlightened moderation", he more than resembles Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. No wonder he wants the Prime Minister to keep speaking up after retirement at the end of the month. Without Dr Mahathir, his will be a very lonely voice of renewal and reform among an ummah reluctant to look deeply into itself.

Musharraf told me: "But let us look at ourselves, let us look inside, we tend to put the blame on others. What are we doing? What are we showing? We should have enlightened Islam, but what we are showing the world is the opposite."

Pakistan's role in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference is important, if only to take more of the focus towards the broader ummah and away from the unrelenting troubles of the Arab Middle East. In this respect, many Malaysians, young and old, for the right or wrong reasons, have a special affinity for it.

It is perhaps the only country to claim Islam as its founding principle - an idea passionately proposed by the poet Muhammad Iqbal in 1930 and supported by Indian Muslim students in England, who were the first to use the name Pakistan (in Urdu I think it means "land of the pure").

Not incidentally, it represents something more than a microcosm of the crisis inflicting the larger Muslim world. Pakistan's elites have a longer history of struggle to defend the national identity embodied by the Quaid-

e-Azam - the urbane, Bombay and London-educated Muhammad Ali Jinnah - from the invasion of the madrasah-educated plebeian. It is a struggle that is mirrored everywhere in Islam, including Malaysia.

Islamic student radicalism has a storied past in Pakistan, from the cabals in the English universities who muscled up the Muslim League in the 1930s to the madrasah of the present, whose talib (in Urdu, students) made up the cohorts of the Taliban. Many Malaysians apply to go there, not just for an Islamic education, but to get inspired to change the world.

Frequently, their zeal is heedless and wasted. Of the tragedies that afflict the Muslim world, Musharraf believes that this wastage of Muslim youth is the saddest of all. Along with Dr Mahathir, he is convinced that modern, comprehensive education holds the key to the revival of the ummah. Like Dr Mahathir, he is sensitive to but not obsessed by historic grievance, the pull of which keeps the OIC in a rut. Neither is stuck in the past. Both look like-mindedly to the future.

Unfortunately, Dilemmas International would still be in business for some time to come, and will probably find fresh grist for its mill at the OIC Summit in Kuala Lumpur this week.

To echo Dr Abdelouahed Belkeziz, secretary-general of the OIC, the last three years have seen a relentless on-slaught on the ummah. The second Palestinian intifada, Sept 11, the invasion of Afghanistan, the occupation of Iraq and the global war on terror are coalescing into a clash of civilisations that reaches into the soul of Islam itself.

Against this the ummah is divided, between contending nationalisms and self-interests, between competing degrees of reaction to Westernisation and globalisation. If the Muslim community can agree on anything, it is on the imperative to modernise.

But in meeting the impact and challenge of the West, do we try to beat them or join them? Do we circle the wagons or embrace the world? How do we deal with our collective helplessness, a sense of victimhood so deep that it gives sanction to the suicide bomb as a weapon wielded in the name of Allah?

To me, the fork in the road before the ummah is as clear as it has been since the turn of the last century. One route is signposted by liberalism, the other by conservatism. One is motivated by hope of progress, the other by comfort in nostalgia. Both Dr Mahathir and Musharraf agree that Islamic fundamentalism must point forward not backwards.

Apart from the two, forging common ground as the ummah confronts this dilemma will not be easy.

Nevertheless, the OIC must find a basis of agreement and, perhaps more importantly, to act on it. Muslim multilateralism will be merely symbolic if member countries feel they are better off acting on their own. Worse, a strident but static conclave of Islamic governments can lend credence to the likes of Osama bin Laden, whose bombs speak louder than words.

The OIC has been a lesson in organised anger and disorganised exertion. Its first secretary-general, Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra, left office in a state of despondency. Yet Malaysia, as a neutral in the sectarian and political differences of the Middle East, has another outstanding opportunity to provide leadership. This will be critical as the OIC tackles the issue of Iraq, a test to compare with the recovery of Jerusalem, which led to its founding in 1969. Here it will have to steer a course between the Muslim obligation to aid a brother country and surrendering it to the American hegemon. How the OIC resolves this will determine both its relevance in the near future and whether the ummah has once again stumbled at the crossroads.

Both Dr Mahathir and General Musharraf, I sense, are aggrieved (and rightly so) at the dismal spectacle of the ummah. However, I know neither

is downcast. Though terribly disappointed with existing international situations and the condition of Muslims, I can at least say they are not disenchanted or tedious. Indeed, they are engaging.