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Malay's criticism of Jews stirs Arab debate

Some say it's time to look inwardly

By Lee Keath
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mahathir Mohamad has been denounced in the West and applauded by many Muslims for voicing the old anti-Semitic belief that "Jews rule the world." But the outgoing Malaysian leader's remarks have also widened the debate among Arabs about whether they should look to themselves, not the Jews and Israel, to explain their predicament.

"Isn't it time that Muslims look at the reasons for the state we're in, or do we really live in the Dark Ages?" says columnist Bakr Oweida.

"Those who cheer or jeer (Mahathir) have paid little attention to most of what Mahathir said," Oweida wrote last week in the Arab daily *Asharq Al-Awsat*. "Mahathir put his finger on some points of extreme importance. . . . Why have Muslims lagged behind in all aspects of life for five centuries?"

The questions reflect a growing introspection among Arab thinkers over issues such as lack of democracy, lagging economies, crumbling relations with the United States, Islamic fundamentalism and the spread of extremist violence.

Proponents of reform and critics of Arab governments are sometimes branded as promoting the agenda of Israel or its greatest ally, the United States.

But that stigma is beginning to lift, at a time when Arabs feel they're at a crisis point. The invasion of Iraq was seen by some as a humiliation, but fueled others' demands for political change in their own nations. Many resent the U.S. war against terror — seen as a war on Muslims — but at the same time fear violence by Islamic militants at home.



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"The issue of democracy in Arab nations must not remain a prisoner of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," wrote Hassan Muneima in a commentary on Mahathir in the *Al-Hayat* daily, which like *Asharq al-Awsat* is published in London but distributed across the Arab world.

Calls for reform have increased since the Sept. 11 attacks. A U.N.-sponsored report by a group of Arab experts, issued last month, pointed to the lack of freedom of expression, access to knowledge and empowerment of women as key impediments to Arab development.

Some of what Mahathir said in his speech to an Islamic summit echoed that sentiment. But when he advised Muslims to learn from the Jews, who "rule the world by proxy" and "get others to fight and die for them," he raised a storm in the West. European leaders condemned Mahathir for anti-Semitism. President Bush took him aside at a Pacific Rim summit and — according to the White House — upbraided him.

But for many Arabs, Mahathir had tapped into a deep, resentful feeling that U.S. policy is dictated by Israel.

"Thank you to Mahathir for his courage and manhood. He put his finger on the wound of every Arab and Muslim," wrote Abdul Bari Atwan, editor-in-chief of the London-based *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*.

The U.S.-led war on terror is "first and foremost an Israeli war fought for the interests of the Jewish state" and the war on Iraq aims only "to consecrate Israeli hegemony in the region," he said.

There were also denunciations. Hazem Saghyeh, an *Al-Hayat* columnist, called anti-Semitism "one of the worst expressions of racism" and Mahathir's comments "extremist."

Others, like Ahmed Abd el-Qadir, a Yemeni human rights activist writing in Yemen's *Al-Tagamu* newspaper, said Mahathir's comments "come at the wrong time" and would only hurt Muslims' image.