

Mahathir on Jews: What he said

By Richard S Ehrlich and Asia Times Online Staff

Oct 23, 2003.

BANGKOK - A week after Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad made controversial remarks about Jews in a speech to the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), the debate still rages over whether his comments were anti-Semitic or were taken out of context and unfairly sensationalized by the media.

Asia Times Online invites readers to go to the OIC website and judge for themselves by reading Mahathir's speech; a link is provided at the bottom of this article.

In the main, Mahathir's speech to his fellow Muslim leaders was a scathing criticism of their failure to modernize, improve the living conditions of their own people, and resist attacks by the non-Muslim world - including Jews - on Muslim states and the Islamic religion, in word and in deed.

"We fail to notice that our detractors and enemies do not care whether we are true Muslims or not. To them we are all Muslims, followers of a religion and a Prophet [who] they declare promotes terrorism, and we are all their sworn enemies," declared Mahathir. "They will attack and kill us, invade our lands, bring down our governments whether we are Sunnis or [Shi'ites], Alawait or Druze or whatever. And we aid and abet them by attacking and weakening each other, and sometimes by doing their bidding, acting as their proxies to attack fellow Muslims. We try to bring down our governments through violence, succeeding to weaken and impoverish our countries."

Mahathir, a medical doctor and scientist as well as one of the Islamic world's most successful and prominent statesmen, with 22 years as premier of his country, noted that Islam teaches its followers to acquire knowledge, and that at one time Muslims led the world in scientific pursuits. "But halfway through the building of the great Islamic civilization came new interpreters of Islam who taught that acquisition of knowledge by Muslims meant only the study of Islamic theology. The study of science, medicine etc was discouraged. Intellectually the Muslims began to regress. With intellectual regression the great Muslim civilization began to falter and wither."

Citing the the Muslim holy book, the Koran, Mahathir ridiculed the belief that the backwardness and poverty suffered by millions of Muslims is the "Will of Allah ... The early Muslims were as oppressed as we are presently. But after their sincere and determined efforts to help themselves in accordance with the teachings of Islam, Allah had helped them to defeat their enemies and to create a great and powerful Muslim civilization. But what effort have we made, especially with the resources that He has endowed us with?"

Remarks in the speech about how Jews "have become a world power", though laced with harsh words difficult to misinterpret, backed up his plea to fellow Muslims to think and plan their own revival as a great civilization: "We cannot fight them through brawn alone.

We must use our brains also. Of late because of their power and their apparent success they have become arrogant. And arrogant people, like angry people, will make mistakes, will forget to think. They are already beginning to make mistakes. And they will make more mistakes. There may be windows of opportunity for us now and in the future. We must seize these opportunities. But to do so we must get our acts right."

Mahathir has refused to back away from any of his comments. In an interview this week with the English-language Bangkok Post, he declared that Jews are anti-Muslim and therefore must be taken to task.

"Many newspapers are owned by the Jews ... only their side of the picture is given now," he said. "The Muslims, we are pictured as terrorists, unreasonable people, unable to administer our countries, unable to develop our countries. That is the picture that is being given," he told the paper.

"In dealing with terrorists, you have to find out why they want to crash a plane into a huge building," he said, referring to the September 11, 2001, attack on New York. "Yes, you can apply military pressure, but you must also find the root cause, the political cause."

The Israeli embassy in Bangkok, meanwhile, has demanded that "the Muslim world" and others condemn Mahathir for invoking ideas of the kind that enabled Nazis to kill more than 6 million Jews.

"We call on right-thinking people and countries, both the Muslim world and outside of it, to utterly condemn the invocation of the same anti-Semitic ideas which led to the worst case of mass murder in human history," the embassy's deputy chief of mission, Shalomi Kofman, said in a statement.

"It is a shame that in the course of a speech ostensibly dedicated to solving the problems in the Muslim world in the 21st century, Dr Mahathir Mohamad could not restrain himself from resurrecting vile invectives, innuendo and outright lies taken straight from classic anti-Semitic propaganda," the Israeli diplomat wrote in a statement published in Thailand's media on Tuesday.

"I have friends who are Jews," Mahathir said in the Bangkok Post interview, also published on Tuesday. "We don't want to kill them."

The Malaysian leader is due to step down as prime minister at the end of this month. The biggest opposition party in his Muslim-majority Southeast Asian nation, however, is even more hardline in its pro-Islamic stance and has demanded that Malaysia be ruled by 1,300-year-old Sharia laws drawn from the Koran. The Islamic Party, or Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), demands that males and females be segregated in supermarket lines and other public places, while thieves' limbs be amputated and anyone convicted of adultery, rape or murder be stoned to death, in keeping with Islamic forms of justice.

"We support Hamas, because they are Palestinians who are being oppressed," the new president of PAS, Abdul Hadi Awang, told a party conference in September. "All Israeli civilians are soldiers and all of Israeli territory is a battlefield," Abdul later told a news conference.

Abdul is to lead PAS in next year's general elections, which will be Malaysia's first national poll in 22 years without Mahathir heading the government's side.

In the past, while competing against PAS for votes, Mahathir has frequently whipped up anti-Jewish sentiment. His speech to the 57-nation OIC last Thursday in Putrajaya, Malaysia's new administrative capital, drew strong applause.

"The Europeans killed 6 million Jews out of 12 million, but today the Jews rule the world by proxy," Mahathir told the Islamic meeting. "They get others to fight and die for them," he added.

"They invented socialism, communism, human rights and democracy so that persecuting them would appear to be wrong, so that they can enjoy equal rights with others. With these they have now gained control of the most powerful countries and they, this tiny community, have become a world power."

Mahathir cheered the OIC by predicting that "1.3 billion Muslims cannot be defeated by a few million Jews".

"Everyone thinks the comments were hateful, they are outrageous," US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice told reporters on Monday during an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Bangkok. She said US President George W Bush perceived the Malaysian leader's statements as "reprehensible".

Mahathir responded to the international outcry by telling the Bangkok Post, "They pick up one sentence in which I said 'the Jews control the world'. Well, the reaction of the world shows that they control the world."

Bush and Mahathir, along with 19 other world leaders, attended the APEC summit, which ended on Tuesday.

(Copyright 2003 Richard S Ehrlich.)