

Mahathir vs Jews: Another step back

By Phar Kim Beng

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HONG KONG - In his address on Thursday to the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Putrajaya, an administrative center of the Malaysian government built on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, the country's prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, was again at his acerbic best, or worst.

To thunderous applause from the gallery, which included 57 Muslim heads of state plus Russian President Vladimir Putin and Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Mahathir let fly with a stinging statement: Jews are ruling the world, and they are doing so indirectly. Read: they are abetted by the United States.

How did one of Asia's greatest statesmen come to such a conclusion? There is no significant Jewish presence in Malaysia. Nor has Mahathir lived in the US or Europe for any extended period of time. Malaysia has never had any relations with Israel.

To be sure, Mahathir has been accused of anti-Semitism before. When the Asian financial crisis was buffeting the region, he accused currency speculators of being behind the mischief. Although not all currency speculators were Jewish, their institutional presence was based in New York, a city whose financial sector was traditionally known to be controlled by the Jews; hence the pejorative term "Jew York".

Indeed, Mahathir singled out George Soros, owner of the Soros hedge fund, for blame. It was during an acrimonious exchange with Soros, a non-practicing Jew, that Mahathir's reputation as an anti-Semite was sealed in the Western press.

At the height of the Asian financial crisis in 1998, when the Malaysian currency had depreciated by some 40 percent, Mahathir's criticism of currency traders was considered inept and in bad form. When then-US president Bill Clinton's treasury secretary, Robert Rubin, formerly the head of Goldman and Sachs and himself a prominent Jewish banker, wrote a hard-hitting opinion piece in the International Herald Tribune stating that there was "no one to call at the end of the line", Mahathir knew his interpretation of events had been challenged.

Rubin argued that the massive dislocation witnessed in Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia and Thailand was not the result of currency speculation. Rather, he said, it was due to the inevitable process of "globalization". The thrust of Rubin's argument, as opposed to Mahathir's belief, was that neither Washington nor Wall Street could do anything about it.

Nevertheless, events later evolved in favor of Mahathir. By forcing Malaysia to go on a fixed-exchange-rate system, which he himself admitted was his "loneliest moment at the top", as no one agreed with him, the chaos plaguing the Malaysian financial system was stopped. Within months, Malaysia's economic health was restored. To this day, the

international community has continued to praise Mahathir for his bold decision and foresight.

Yet Mahathir's run-ins with the prominent Jewish presence in the US did not stop there. When he was engaged in an intense political tug-of-war with his deputy Anwar Ibrahim in late 1998, prominent Jewish leaders attached to the Clinton administration came to Anwar's defense. William Cohen, who was then the US defense secretary, tried to rally international opinion against Mahathir. When vice president Al Gore lent his weight to Cohen's campaign to free Anwar, Mahathir was visibly piqued, despite Gore's background as a Methodist, not a Jew.

More recently, Mahathir again accused Jewish interests in the US and Israel of conspiracy to instigate another war. By flying deep into Syria to bomb training sites thought to belong to Islamic Jihad and Hamas, the Israeli Defense Force, according to Mahathir, was trying to force the hand of the US to intervene even more aggressively in Syria and the Middle East. To Mahathir, this was another strategy planned and deployed by Israel to compel the US to act in its interest, just as it had done when the US invaded Iraq.

To be sure, the impression of Jews as manipulative and devious people runs deep in Europe. In medieval literature and elsewhere, including Shakespearean works, Jews were type-cast as a selfish lot. The character of Shylock, a Jewish merchant depicted by William Shakespeare, for instance, had subsequent Jews in Europe and beyond identified as people with aquiline features who stopped at nothing to get back what they owed.

Although oppressed everywhere, even subject to pogroms in Russia, Jews eventually found protection, first under the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century, before establishing themselves in the major cities of the US. It was not until 1948 that Israel was formed.

During the Russo-Japan war of 1904-05, it was further believed that part of the Japanese victory was due to Jewish help. According to John Perry, a professor in Asian Studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Jewish bankers lent the Japanese government a substantial amount of money to allow it to "buy sufficient arms" to counter the Russian naval campaigns. The Jewish financiers, who had by then established themselves in New York, did so out of spite, it was argued, as Czar Nicholas II had subjected Jews in Russia to repeated discrimination and oppression. True or not, after that "Jewish money" was mythologized as crucial to a country's war effort.

To be sure, the missives of Mahathir should be seen in personal terms, as the Malaysian government had never tried to block or act unfairly against Jewish economic interests in the country, preferring to see them as foreign direct investments from the West.

Nevertheless, what made Mahathir's statement highly inappropriate was the fact that it was made in a setting where the OIC had convened to understand ways to "improve the knowledge and morality" of the Muslim world.

The sort of generalizations indulged in by Mahathir, backed as they were by anecdotes rather than empirical facts, simply underlines the perception that the Muslim world has failed to move into the age of science, reason and rationality. For one of the greatest Muslim leaders in the contemporary world, himself a scientist, doctor and trained pilot, to lend credence to this view by wantonly attacking Jews is unfortunate in the extreme.

In attacking the Jews so callously, Mahathir not only failed himself, but also the wider Muslim world that he represents. As for those who applauded when Mahathir made the statement, the same verdict applies.

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