

A question of credibi

BY MUSHAHID HUSSAIN

Education Nation
July 15

Dr Mahathir's impassioned plea to the Muslims to catch up with the West makes sense. Muslim leaders need to revamp their priorities so that backwardness, illiteracy and ignorance are buried.



Perhaps an unintended consequence of the 'war on terror' has been the tendency in most parts of the West and its media to malign Muslims, as if followers of the Islamic faith hold some sort of monopoly over 'fundamentalism, extremism and bigotry.' The Palestinian Conflict had spawned another myth, namely, that anti-Semitism was a phenomenon confined to Muslims, with the West exempt from such charges.

Three recent developments have belied such notions. First, on July 11, *The Washington Post* published excerpts from the personal diary maintained by President Harry Truman during July 1947, almost a year before the establishment of Israel. Although the USA, under Truman, became the world's first country to recognise Israel despite stiff State Department opposition, the diary explains the dichotomy between the President's privately held position and his public policy.

Truman writes in his diary that 'the Jews, I find, are very, very selfish. They care not how many others get murdered or mistreated as long as the Jews get special treatment. Yet when they have power - physical, financial or political - neither Hitler nor Stalin has anything on them for cruelty or mistreatment to the underdog.'

On the question of Israel, he was advised by the State Department not to rush towards this move since the 'Arabs will be annoyed', to which Truman retorted: 'How many Arab voters do we have in the US?'

That basic premise, Jewish political clout in the US, remains a driving force for successive American Presidents' Middle East policy, particularly its overwhelmingly pro-Israel line.

Last year, another declassified conversation from 1972, this time between President Richard Nixon and the famous Christian preacher, Billy Graham, also was laced with anti-Jewish remarks that clearly had the odour of anti-Semitism. Two different Presidents, between 25 years, apparently had similar views on Israel, which were opposite to their public professions of loyalty to Israel.

Apart from the hypocrisy inherent in such attitudes, what is even more significant is that anti-Semitism is alive and kicking in the US, confirming that it has been an integral component of the intellectual and religious tradition of Western civilisation. Historically, European Christians were extremely suspicious of Jews, treating them as an inferior underclass.

In his book, *The Pity of It All - A History of Jews in Germany 1743-1933*, published in the USA, Amos Elon writes that in the 18th century, Jews and cattle were allowed to enter Berlin from the same gate.

English literature too is testimony to the rampant anti-Semitism in Europe, with the Jew invariably presented as the bad guy. Take William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, with Shylock the Jew. Or Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* where Fagin, another Jew, is cast in a negative light. (Jewish protests obliged Dickens to portray a Jew sympathetically; Mr Riah in *Our Mutual Friend*.)

During World War II, in the Holocaust, crimes against humanity were committed by the Christians of Europe

against the Jews of Europe, although the Palestinians ended up paying for those sins.

Till Israel's creation, there had largely been a tradition of coexistence in relative harmony between Jews and Muslims, while in Muslim Spain, Jews were the principal advisers to the rulers and prominent intellectuals in what is viewed as one of Islam's Golden Ages.

Second, the rather abhorrent statement of an extremist Israeli Cabinet Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, in which he opposed release of 6000 Palestinian political prisoners but said that 'it would be better to drown these prisoners, in the Dead Sea if possible, since that's the lowest point in the world.' An Arab League spokesman termed these remarks 'odious and racist.'

Lieberman's outburst is instructive, since it demonstrates how the oppressed of 20th century Europe have become the oppressors of 21st century Middle East. But their oppression is increasingly exacting a heavy price. The latest figures on the Intifada, which began in September 2000, show that as opposed to 2400 Palestinian deaths, Israeli fatalities were 800, a high ratio of one Israeli dead for three Palestinians.

When the Intifada began, the casualty ratio was one Israeli dead for 10 Palestinians. The current death toll is unacceptably high for a small state like Israel, whose six million people includes 1.2 million Arabs, whom the Israeli state treats with suspicion. It was an Arab member of the Knesset who last week created an uproar when he said that Israel had 'weapons of mass destruction and UN inspectors should come here and I will help them find these weapons.'

Third, this role reversal by Israel runs concurrently with growing introspection among Muslim leaders about the reasons for the Muslim World remaining weak and backward in the comity of nations. In a speech last week, Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Muhammed lamented that 'far from being a world power we, the one billion Muslims, are easily oppressed by non-Muslims, easily defeated in war and are forced to accept foreign rule and foreign hegemony.'

Criticising suicide bombers, Mahathir stated that 'our salvation will not be achieved by blindly killing innocent people. Rather, we should plan and execute a long term development plan to excel in all fields.'

Mahathir is also correct in his conclusions as the roots of the Muslim malaise: 'The only conclusion