

What Matters about Mahathir

By

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It's difficult to find an appropriate response to the Malaysian Prime Minister's remarkable restatement of classic antisemitism last week, and its enthusiastic reception by leaders of the Muslim world. It's especially difficult to do this if one is oneself a Jew, and if one believes in encouraging Jewish-Muslim dialogue, and Israeli-Palestinian peace, rather than further hatred on both sides.

Here are four possible responses, with their limitations:

1) It is tempting to turn Mahathir's accusations exactly around. Those who accuse others of conspiracy and power lust are often themselves conspiratorial and power-hungry, and Mahathir's speech illustrated this with almost comical perfection. Mahathir, after all, was addressing a meeting of the "Organization of Islamic Countries" and talking about how Muslims can win greater power in the world. As he himself said, Muslims constitute about a quarter of the world's population, run about a third of the world's countries, which in turn control some of the world's largest oil reserves. If the Jews really control the world, how come they have so few people, only one country to their name, and that country situated in an area with virtually no precious resources? Moreover, Islamic theology has long held out a vision of the entire world being united under a Muslim umma, and Mahathir's speech was in good part addressed to those who would like to bring such a vision about. No such political vision has ever been a goal for Jews; Judaism does not even in principle call for the world to be all Jewish. So if we are looking for a religious group out to control the world, surely Muslims are a far better candidate for that role than Jews.

But this response is of course not the one a person should give who seeks peace and dialogue between Jews and Muslims. Instead it presupposes, and encourages, the same monolithic view of Muslims that Mahathir and his listeners have of Jews. It is a view that denies what most needs to be remembered: that "Jews" and "Muslims", like other religious groups, are diverse collections of people, with very different personal attitudes, political views, and indeed religious beliefs, among them. There are many Muslims who would find Mahathir's speech embarrassing and outrageous, as there are many who are horrified by the violence that has recently been practiced in the

name of Islam, and many who do not harbor an ambition of using politics to bring about a world in which everyone is Muslim. I have personally had my needs as an observant Jew treated with great respect and kindness by Muslims in many places. An Afghani family in Pakistan once prepared a vegetarian meal just for me, so that I could join their celebrations on Id al-Fitr. The organizers of a conference in Iran, earlier this year, made special efforts to ensure both that I got vegetarian food and that I did not need to give my talk on the Jewish sabbath.

2) We might therefore be inclined towards a second, very different response to the Mahathir speech, according to which we should write it off, regard him as a marginal figure and the hatred he represents as unimportant either to the way most Muslims think or to the politics of Muslim nations. Many Jews have already done this, assuring us, as Paul Krugman did in Tuesday's NEW YORK TIMES, that the antisemitism of Mahathir's speech had little to do with his fundamental message, and that a drop in US support for Sharon would diminish Muslim antisemitism worldwide.

But this response is also unsatisfactory, even, perhaps especially, to people who support Middle East peace and Jewish-Muslim dialogue. For hatred of Jews is not a marginal feature of the contemporary Muslim world; it is now, and has been for about half a century, central to both the politics and the everyday life of a great many Muslim communities. As Krugman himself notes, in 1997 Mahathir blamed the Jews for the Asian financial crisis. In the 1980s, the Malaysian leadership cancelled a visit by the New York Philharmonic when it learned that the orchestra planned to perform a piece written by a Jew. And the most distressing aspect of the Mahathir affair is less that a Malaysian prime minister gave an antisemitic speech than that the leaders of the world's Muslim countries, including the pro-American Hamid Karzai, applauded that speech and explicitly endorsed it afterwards. But in this respect the Muslim leaders are merely reflecting widespread beliefs in their populations. Over a third of the population in Pakistan still insisted that Jews or Israelis were behind the 9/11 attacks as recently as a year ago. The "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" is a bestseller in a number of Arab countries; in Egypt just last year the book was, notoriously, central to a TV serial. Holocaust revisionism is also rampant in Muslim and Arab countries, a fact that was repeatedly noted and deplored by, among others, Edward Said. The Defense Minister in Syria has revived the old canard that Jews use Gentile blood for their matzoth, and the current President notoriously evoked the notion of the Jews as Christ-killing enemies of all religion in front of the Pope. When I traveled in Morocco in

1988, a friendly, kind young man I met told me in perfect innocence, upon learning that I was Jewish, that he had understood that the Jews are responsible for "all the fire" in the world, including the Iran/Iraq war. An English-language Shi'ite website coming out of Stanford, California two years ago offered, as a children's story, a tale about a good Muslim who was asked by a cruel Jewish moneylender for a pound of his flesh.

To move from word to action: terrorists supporting Palestinian causes have over the past three decades attacked synagogues, Jewish restaurants, and Jewish community centers - not Israeli targets at all - in Italy, France, Argentina, and Turkey. In France there have been over 450 attacks on Jewish targets in the past three years, almost all by Arabs or Muslims. Over the past century, indigenous Jewish populations, some of which have been in place for over 2000 years, have been persecuted and driven out from Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Iran, and Libya. Some of these persecutions predate the establishment of the state of Israel - hundreds of Jews were murdered in Baghdad on the holiday of Shavuot in 1941 - while others postdate it, but none can be explained by opposition to Israel. Muslim antisemitism has here been, not a result of the existence of Israel, but a cause of Israel's growth, and a reason for a Jewish state to exist.

I said above that supporters of peace and dialogue especially need to be careful not to underestimate the extent, and importance, of Muslim antisemitism. Why might that be? Well, first because supporters of idealistic causes need to be particularly careful to acknowledge the full truth on the issues that concern them. I have been an active supporter of the Israeli peace movement for over twenty years, and one thing I have found throughout that time is that it severely hurts the credibility of critics of Israel, in the Jewish community, if they ignore or deny facts that do not fit their perspective. But the deeper issue is that one major barrier to a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians, albeit not the only one, is the antisemitism that the Muslim world has now taken over from European Christianity. As long as large numbers of Muslims believe that Jews are a people with power and a capacity for evil of mythic proportions - that Jews are essentially the earthly manifestation of the devil, as mainstream Christianity taught for most of the past two millenia - it will be difficult for them to see why Jews could possibly need or deserve any state of their own, or for them to regard the killing of any Jew, even a Jewish baby, as particularly evil.

Antisemitism thus stands in the way of agreement on the basic

normative claims that need to be made on Israel's behalf, even by those of us who criticize Israeli policy: the claim that a Jewish state is as legitimate as any other nationalist state and the claim that deliberately killing innocent civilians is morally unacceptable on behalf of any goal. Antisemitism stands in the way, indeed, of coming to agreement even about the facts involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If Jews are inveterate liars, as the Jews-as-devil picture suggests, then why should anyone believe anything they say? Jewish spokespeople may deny that hundreds of people were killed in Jenin last year, that Israel brought down the World Trade Center, that Jews caused the Iran/Iraq war, but if Jews always lie, those denials can be brushed off as so much hot air. And if Jews are as powerful as the devil - if they control the media and the governments of most of the world's countries - then any non-Jew who defends the Jews can similarly be brushed off: he or she is just doing the Jewish bidding S

3) So a third response to the Mahathir affair, and one that I think people in the peace movement especially need to engage in, is to address antisemitism in the Muslim world as a social pathology on the same order and of the same importance as racism and sexism are generally taken to be. One point to be stressed in this regard is that pathologies cannot be refuted by mere recitals of facts. They are not rational beliefs, open to ordinary correction by evidence. They are better seen as entrenched myths in a culture, serving a number of psychological or political purposes, but occupying a largely non-rational place in the psyche of those who endorse them, and figuring more as an all-purpose source of explanation than as a view that ever itself gets rationally examined. Thus the racist often has a remarkable ability to interpret everything a black person does in a demeaning light, even if he or she would admire exactly the same thing when performed by a white person. Antisemites tend to have a parallel skill for interpreting all bad things that happen, especially to themselves, as somehow the fault of Jews, even if no Jews were in any way connected to those happenings.

If such a pathological hatred of Jews is indeed sweeping the Muslim world, then, it may be important for non-Muslims to recognize that fact but there may also be very little that they can effectively do about it. Racist and sexist attitudes are most effectively changed by political, social and intellectual reforms within the very populations infected by these attitudes, and Muslim antisemitism would be best addressed by the rise of a reform movement among Muslims themselves. It would be a tremendous relief if there came to be groups of Muslims regularly protesting attacks on Jews in the way that Jewish groups like Peace Now or Gush Shalom in Israel protest

brutality against Arabs, or if Muslim educators instituted the sort of concerted effort to change attitudes towards Jews that the Catholic world has carried out with regard to its antisemitism over the last 40 years.

4) Finally, I think a part of any effective response to the Mahathir affair is for Jews and others to begin to offer Muslims explanations of some of the things about Jews that Mahathir seemed to find baffling or infuriating, like the success of Jews in American society, or the involvement of many Jews in secular, cosmopolitan movements like socialism or the promotion of universal human rights, or the importance to most Jews of the existence of a Jewish state in Israel. I say "explanations" since I do not believe these are matters on which Jews need to apologize or criticize themselves, and since, even where criticism of Jewish communities is merited, such criticism must remain firmly separate from a response to a pathology like antisemitism. No critic of antisemitism should yield an inch to the suggestion that that pathology is somehow an understandable response to Jewish success, or to things Jews have done. Only someone who is himself a racist would say that racism arises because of the high crime rates in black communities, and only someone himself in the grip of antisemitism says that antisemitism arises in response to the bad behavior of Jews, whether in Israel or anywhere else. That doesn't mean of course that Jews, in Israel or elsewhere, are above criticism - I personally believe that the entire settlement movement in Israel has been both a pragmatic and a moral disaster - any more than a refusal to link racism to problems in black communities means that there are no such problems. But criticism of Israel should be firmly de-coupled from a response to antisemitism: the antisemite should not be dignified with any indication that one accepts the premise that pathological hatred of Jews might be reasonable.

It's worth adding that hatred of Muslims is also a social pathology, and that it is similarly a grave error to dignify that pathology by so much as suggesting that it might be a reasonable response to the bad behavior of some Muslims. Criticism of aspects of Muslim communities, including criticism of the antisemitism I have been discussing, must be kept firmly separate from an irrational aversion to Islam itself. Nor does such criticism remain justifiable if it shades over into a suggestion that Islam should not exist, or a refusal to recognize the rights of Muslims and Muslim communities, and the real grievances they have where (as, often, in Israel) they have been injured. But exactly the same goes for criticism of Jews and Israel: anyone engaging in it has an obligation to beware of indulging simply in an irrational aversion to Judaism itself, or of

using it as an excuse to deny the right of Jews to such things as a state of their own, or to ignore the real grievances of Jews where they have been injured - as, again, often in Israel.



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