

# A Few Questions For Mahathir Mohamed (Part Two)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



As to Israel, Mahathir Mohamed blames its existence for all the subsequent trouble in the Middle East. He says that before Israel was founded, there were no problems in the Middle East. Let's just begin to examine that remark by looking at the Middle East today. The Sunni-Shia enmity, which dates back to the first century of Islam, is now on violent display in Yemen, in Iraq, in Syria, and in Lebanon. In Yemen, the Shi'a Houthis, supported by Iran, are fighting the Yemeni government, which is Sunni and supported by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. That conflict has been going on for several years. It has nothing to do with Israel.

In Iraq, the Sunnis who had been favored under the rule of Saddam Hussein, have been forced to acquiesce, most unwillingly, in the loss of their political and economic power to the Shi'a Arabs, who outnumber the Sunni Arabs by 60% to 20%, with the rest of the population being Kurds and a few Christians. The continued political maneuverings in Iraq, between Sunni and Shi'a Arabs, and between Arabs and Kurds, have nothing to do with Israel.

It is the same in Syria, where the civil war that began in 2011 as a revolt against the cruel despotism of Bashar Al-Assad, and the corruption epitomized by his uncle Rami Makhlof, inevitably took on a sectarian cast, for the Assads and Makhlofs are Alawites, a sect considered to be a branch of Shi'a Islam. The opposition to the regime was Sunni, and both Iran and the terrorists of Hezbollah aided Assad militarily, which made the war into one of Alawites and more

orthodox Shia against Sunnis. Again, this war had nothing to do with Israel.

In Lebanon, it was the same: the Hezbollah militia in recent years has become stronger than the Lebanese army, and now lords it over the other two groups that make up the Lebanese polity, the Maronites and the Sunni Arabs. In Bahrain, a Sunni ruler keeps submissive, through force, his overwhelmingly Shi'a population that has been protesting his rule; his crackdown has been enforced by thousands of Sunni troops from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia itself, there has occasionally been unrest among the minority Shi'a who live in the oil-producing Eastern Province; these protests are quickly squashed. In Egypt, the main running conflict is between the ruling despot, General Abdelfattah El-Sisi, and the diehard Muslim Brotherhood supporters of Mohamed Morsi, whom El-Sisi deposed in a coup, but Muslim fanatics don't forget to attack Coptic churches, their priests, and their worshippers. Israel does not come into the picture except to share its intelligence with Egypt about Hamas, an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, at bases in the Sinai.

In Libya, the rival governments, one in the east and one in the west, fight on for control of the country, which was dismembered by local militias after the death of Qaddafi, who held Libya together the only way he knew how, by his murderous suppression of the slightest sign of dissent. Again, Israel has had no part either in Qaddafi's rise or rule or fall, or in any of the subsequent turmoil.

In Tunisia, where the Arab Spring began, the successors to Ben Ali, a greedy despot with an even greedier wife and in-laws (the extended family has a net worth of more than \$10 billion), were little better than he was. However, the current government appears determined to bring real democracy and end corruption, while keeping the country relatively secular. So far, under Beji Caid Essebsi, the government has stabilized, and the country has calmed down. Again, Israel played no role.

In Algeria, there is conflict, but now no violence, over the status of the Berbers, who feel that their culture is not sufficiently recognized. Only recently was the Berber language, Tamazight, recognized in Algeria as a national language, though it is still not taught widely in the schools. The Berbers continue to protest their economic condition as being inferior to that of the dominant Arabs, and there is a Berber movement, centered in the Kabyle region, that combines cultural nationalism with economic grievances and demands. And once more, this source of disquiet and potential conflict has nothing to do with Israel.

First published in