

# US Faces Crossroads in Ties with Islamic World: Asian Scholar

7 March 2005

Agence France Presse

English

WASHINGTON, March 7 (AFP) -

US policy towards the Middle East has unwittingly made Osama bin Laden nearly the most popular figure in the region, according to a respected Asian scholar whose new book has triggered debate on why Muslims hate America.

Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's former two-term chief diplomat to the United Nations, warns that the level of anger in the Islamic world will become even stronger if the United States does not act swiftly to enhance its image among Muslims.

"I think the moment to rectify the situation is now," he told a forum in Washington last week about his new book, "Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust between America and the World."

In the thought-provoking book, Mahbubani, now a Singapore university dean, describes positive US contributions to global society and how the superpower abruptly walked away from the world when the Cold War ended.

He also conveys his own anguish over deepening distrust and resentment of the United States.

Even in East Asia, whose rise as an economic power would not have been possible without US political, military and financial support, "the tone of conversation about America, sadly speaking, has turned negative," he said.

"In my conversations, when I travel around the world, I discover there are two sets of conversations -- there is one set of conversation when you have Americans in the room and everybody will say the right, nice things and how wonderful America is.

"And then the Americans will leave the room and the real conversation begins. And inevitably, the comment comes up: 'Who do these people think they are?'"

Mahbubani recounted that when he asked his Muslim friends in private who was the single most revered figure in the Islamic world, "the answer almost inevitably is Osama bin Laden."

They cited the Palestinian plight as "the number one issue" for resenting the Americans, he said.

"My fear -- and this by the way is a very real fear -- is that 10 years from now, 20 years from now, if we get things wrong, then the level of anger in the Islamic world may be much heavier, much stronger than it is now," warned Mahbubani.

"The purpose of my book is to tell Americans that these are the voices I hear when they speak about you in private."

Thomas Friedman, a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner, agreed at the forum that US policy turned controversial after bin Laden masterminded the deadly terror attack on the United States on September 11, 2001.

"After September 11, things fundamentally changed," said the American, who has written various books on the Middle East and terrorism.

After the terror attack, America was like "a fire-breathing dragon with an arrow in its shoulder swinging its tail wildly around the world," he said.

But he disputed Mahubani's theory that when the Cold War ended, America did a U-turn and displayed indifference to the plight of the Muslims.

"Since the mid-90's, all American foreign policy has been about saving Muslims -- beginning in Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Iraq and sponsoring Palestinian elections.

"I can make an argument that all we do these days is save Muslims around the world, certainly more than the keeper of the two most (Islamic) holy sites -- Saudi Arabia."

The United States did not have any strategic interest in Somalia or Bosnia or even Iraq, he said.

"People keep telling me that Iraq is all about oil. My response was: No, no, no, it's so much crazier than that.

"We are doing this out of the belief that we really can and should bring democracy to this part of the world. We never have been less ordinary than we are today," he said.

Even on the Palestinian issue, Friedman questioned the idea that bin Laden was protesting unfair US policy.

The independent commission that investigated the September 11 attacks pointed out that bin Laden's plan to attack the United States was hatched at the height of former president Bill Clinton's efforts to bring peace between Israel and Palestinians, he said.

Friedman felt that not all Muslims hated America, adding that many young Arab Muslims had quietly told him they backed American support for democracy in the Middle East.

"I think it is just too easy to simply deal with certain elites and say that all those people hate us, because this has not been my experience," he said.

Mahubani agreed with Friedman that Americans had saved more Muslim lives than any great power had, "but despite that, if you go to most Islamic societies and take a poll and ask their attitude towards America, they are becoming frighteningly negative."