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Cutting Off Military Assistance to Malaysia Is Counterproductive

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Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad recently delivered an anti-Jewish, anti-Western speech to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) meeting in Malaysia. Afterward, President George W. Bush correctly described the speech as reprehensible, and many world leaders joined in the chorus condemning Mahathir's remarks.

The U.S. Congress, however, went too far in its efforts to punish Mahathir by passing an amendment to cut off military aid to Malaysia. Congress could have protested Mahathir's remarks, without harming U.S.–Malaysian relations, by passing a congressional resolution condemning Mahathir's speech. To contain the long-term damage to U.S.–Malaysian relations, the U.S. Department of State should inform Members of Congress of Malaysia's tolerance of religious freedom and its importance to American national security interests as soon as possible.

A Disgraceful Speech. Without question, Mahathir's October 16 speech in front of the OIC contained some of the most outrageous arguments yet from a man infamous for his inflammatory remarks. The allegation that the Jews control the world and that Israel and the Jews are the enemy of 1.3 billion downtrodden Muslims is inexcusable. Furthermore, Mahathir cast the West and Jews as the enemy of Muslims and said that Muslims need "guns

and rockets, bombs and warplanes, tanks and warships for our defense."

This speech can easily be interpreted as a call to arms against the West and Jews. As Senator Mitch McConnell (R–KY) rightly points out, Mahathir's speech will play into the hands of terrorists and extremists in the region. Afterward, Mahathir not only did not apologize for his words, but instead declared that the international protests of his speech were "proof" that the Jews control the world.

Mahathir's speech was a disgraceful exhibition for the leader of a country that, despite Mahathir's oratory excesses, has been a model friend to the U.S. on security matters in Southeast Asia.

The McConnell amendment in the 2004 Foreign Operations Appropriations bill cuts off military assistance for Malaysia, although it does allow aid to continue if the Secretary of State reports to Congress that Malaysia "supports and promotes religious freedoms, including tolerance for people of the Jewish faith."

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Malaysia and Religious Tolerance. The amendment is a curious requirement for a country proud of its diversity. The Malaysian constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and Malaysians of all faiths practice their religions almost without restriction. Islam is the official state religion, encompassing approximately 60 percent of the population, but other faiths in Malaysia include Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, among others. According to the State Department's report on religious freedom, religious minorities practice their religions freely. In many ways, Malaysia is a moderate, progressive, and secular Muslim state.

Judging Malaysian tolerance for people of the Jewish faith is more difficult because Malaysia has no discernible Jewish community. The only significant Jewish community in the British colonial Federation of Malaya was in Singapore. When Singapore became independent in 1965, the small Jewish group remained in Singapore. Since the colonial era, most Jews residing in Malaysia are expatriate business people and educators. Nevertheless, Malaysians have demonstrated tolerance for different faiths and beliefs. Furthermore, a review of independent Malaysian Web sites shows that many Malaysians recognize the hypocrisy of Mahathir's words and the inaccuracy of his accusations about the Jews.

Undermining the War on Terrorism. The McConnell amendment is also counterproductive to the war on terrorism. Malaysia has been a valuable U.S. ally in Southeast Asia. Each year, it hosts 15–20 visits by U.S. Navy ships and permits more than 1,000 U.S. military overflights, and since September 11, the Malaysian police have arrested 70 members of Jemaah Islamiyah, a terrorist group

linked to al-Qaeda. Kuala Lumpur plays a key role in regional efforts to combat terrorism including joint operations with Thailand, the Philippines, and Australia. Malaysia also has strong law enforcement and intelligence cooperation against terrorism and is host to a regional counterterrorism training center.

Moreover, Prime Minister Mahathir has already retired, and the McConnell amendment will thus punish Malaysia's new leader. On October 31, Mahathir resigned and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi assumed the office of prime minister, inheriting a crisis in U.S.–Malaysian military cooperation that may consume his first few weeks in office and sour the U.S.–Malaysian post-Mahathir relationship.

Conclusion. It is Congress's prerogative to address international injustices, but restricting military assistance to Malaysia based on the racist remarks of a retiring prime minister is both counterintuitive and counterproductive to the U.S.–Malaysian relationship and the war on terrorism. To some degree, the U.S.–Malaysian relationship has already been injured by former Prime Minister Mahathir's outrageous remarks and the congressional reaction.

Before the congressional sanctions are sent to the President, and to prevent any further damage to the U.S.–Malaysian relationship, the State Department should assure Members of Congress that Malaysia does support and promote religious freedom and that Malaysia is important to American national security interests in the region.

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