

Britain: Iraq debacle deepens crisis of Blair government

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The deteriorating situation in Iraq has deepened public opposition to Prime Minister Tony Blair's alliance with Washington during the war and towards Britain's continued participation in the occupation.

This has in turn exacerbated differences within ruling circles over Blair's handling of the Iraq war—and in some cases even the wisdom of staying in Iraq.

Recent opinion polls show that public support for military action is now down to just 38 percent, its lowest level since the start of the Iraq war. One recent poll found that 54 percent want British troops withdrawn from Iraq, and only 38 percent think they should remain.

An ICM poll conducted for the *Guardian* newspaper made for worse reading for Blair. It found that seven out of ten respondents wanted the government to set a deadline for a pullout of British soldiers from Iraq, which the newspaper compared with a poll in May that found 45 percent of voters wanted troops to remain in Iraq “for as long as necessary”.

The bulk of the media and dominant sections of the British ruling class still stand behind Blair on Iraq. But the rising death toll—over 300 in just one week—did prompt one of the most authoritative voices of big business, the *Financial Times*, to editorialise on September 10 that it was “Time to consider Iraq withdrawal”.

Noting that a thousand American soldiers have now been killed since the US-led invasion of Iraq 18 months ago and the deaths of a possible 30,000 Iraqis, the FT commented, “After an invasion and occupation that promised them freedom, Iraqis have seen their security evaporate, their state smashed and their country fragment into a lawless archipelago ruled by militias, bandits and kidnappers... Whatever Iraqis thought about the Americans on their way in—and it was never what these emigré politicians told Washington they would be thinking—an overwhelming majority now views US forces as occupiers rather than liberators and wants them out.”

The newspaper described the aftermath of the war as having been “bungled”. The US was down to the “last vestiges of its always exiguous allied support” and had lost control of “big swathes of the country” to an “insurgency US forces have yet to identify accurately, let alone get to grips with.”

It concluded: “The time has therefore come to consider whether a structured withdrawal of US and remaining allied troops, in tandem with a workable handover of security to Iraqi forces and a legitimate and inclusive political process, can chart a path out of the current chaos.”

The Blair government has also been plagued by damaging leaks emanating either from within the Labour Party or the very tops of the civil service.

The traditionally pro-Conservative—and still decidedly

pro-war—*Daily Telegraph* has leaked highly damaging internal memos centring on Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's mounting concern over the situation in Iraq.

On September 9, it reported a policy meeting at 10 Downing Street between Straw and Blair at which “confidential advice” drawn up for Straw indicated that “Participants at yesterday's meeting were invited to think the hitherto unthinkable: ‘We are at risk of strategic failure in Iraq.’”

Straw was said to have recommended sending an additional brigade of 5,000 troops to Iraq and to attempt to persuade America to send more troops. This would be a more than 50 percent increase in Britain's existing military presence.

The paper asserted that the Foreign Office was anxious about three things.

“First, diplomatic isolation: ‘If there is another spectacular [bomb] (e.g. against a British barracks) we and the US could... find ourselves entirely alone.’

“Second, money: a cash injection of \$127 million (£80 million) to meet ‘short-term costs’ is required, but far more will be needed in the medium term.

“Third, time: Mr Straw wants ‘a major coalition effort to provide visible improvements by the start of Ramadan (Oct 27)’.”

The *Telegraph* commented: “Solidarity, money and time are all in short supply. The implications of the increasingly fraught private debate on Iraq now being conducted within Government are grave...”

“Mr Blair and Mr Bush may have underestimated the task of transforming Iraq into a model of freedom for the Muslim world to follow. That does not render their enterprise less noble or less necessary. The fate of the West hangs on its outcome.”

Straw apparently endorsed the policy advice document, which warned that a “lack of political progress in solving the linked problems of security, infrastructure and the political process are undermining the consent of the Iraqi people to the coalition presence and providing fertile ground for extremists and terrorists.”

On September 18, the *Telegraph* published further damaging documents that were marked secret and personal and were drawn up a year before the Iraq invasion took place.

Not only was Blair warned by Straw and others that there could be post-war problems in Iraq, but the documents make clear that the government was set on supporting a US policy of regime change and was only seeking a pretext for war on such questions as weapons of mass destruction.

The *Telegraph* said British officials believed that President Bush instigated war because he wanted to complete his father's “unfinished business” and reported a Foreign Office policy director stating, “Even

the best survey of Iraq's WMD program will not show much advance in recent years."

Blair was also reportedly warned that he would have to "wrong foot" Saddam Hussein into giving the allies "an excuse for war."

Regarding the impact of a war, in one letter Straw told Blair that should Saddam Hussein be removed, "No-one has satisfactorily answered how there can be any certainty that the replacement regime will be any better. Iraq has no history of democracy so no-one has this habit or experience."

Foreign policy adviser Sir David Manning warned of a "real risk" that the Bush administration had underestimated these difficulties. The president, he wrote, still had to answer big questions such as "what happens on the morning after".

Senior ministerial advisers in the Cabinet Office Overseas and Defence Secretariat warned in a "Secret UK Eyes Only" paper that success would only be achieved if the US and others committed to "nation building for many years" and would require "a substantial international security force."

The leaks prompted an official government reply by the Foreign Office, which blithely declared, "It should be no surprise that two and a half years ago the Government was thinking in great detail about Iraq." It added: "The security situation in Iraq is serious, but the country is on the path to a democratically elected government on a timescale agreed by the whole of the international community."

Scarcely had this furore died down than a leading Italian newspaper, the *Corriere della Sera*, reported the British ambassador in Rome, Sir Ivor Roberts, calling President Bush "al-Qaeda's best recruiting sergeant."

Roberts was speaking to an annual meeting of British and Italian political and business leaders on September 19 when he said, "If anyone's ready to celebrate the eventual re-election of Bush, it is none other than al-Qaeda."

That Roberts spoke in such a way is indicative of the extent of disaffection within the establishment over Iraq. In some ways even more damaging politically were the remarks made by Lt. Col. Tim Collins. Now retired from the army, as then commander of the Royal Irish battle group, he was hailed by the pro-war media for his speech made prior to the British assault on Basra. In it he mixed dire threats ("The enemy should be in no doubt that we are his Nemesis and that we are bringing about his rightful destruction", "Show them no pity", etc.), with moral hyperbole as to the war's aims and Britain's intentions towards the Iraqi people ("We go to liberate, not to conquer. We will not fly our flags in their country. We are entering Iraq to free a people, and the only flag that will be flown in that ancient land is their own. Don't treat them as refugees, for they are in their own country.")

His comments on the war to BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme last week were not such stirring stuff. Collins said that in hindsight he had questioned the coalition's motivation for attacking Iraq.

"There was very little preparation or thought for what would follow on after the invasion itself," he said. "Nature abhors a vacuum and so do politics. If you knock something down you must be prepared to put something in its place or live with the consequences."

The evidence pointed towards the invasion being a "cynical war" to vent anger on Saddam Hussein's regime, with no regard to the consequences for Iraqis: "In which case it's a form of common assault."

Blair's response to the growing chorus of criticism—and in the face of demands that he intervene to prevent the killing of British hostage

Ken Bigley—was to again take the hard line.

In the middle of discussions with the head of the US stooge Iraqi government, Interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, Blair held a press conference where he insisted that the UK must "stand firm" in what was now recast as the front line of a "global war on terror".

Clearly thrown on the defensive, he insisted, "Whatever the differences over the Iraq conflict, there is a clear right and wrong on these issues, and that is to be with the democrats and against the terrorists."

The response by the media to Blair's declaration indicates just how dangerously exposed ruling layers now feel—even amongst those who maintain their support for the occupation of Iraq.

The *Independent* agreed that now was not the time for anyone "to wobble" over the timetable for elections," but complained of those who "launched such a misguided war" and who had "so comprehensively bungled the peace".

The *Scotsman* called Blair's pledge to stick with it a correct and "bold commitment", but one that "may prove politically expensive and, in military terms, worryingly open-ended".

The *Daily Mail* complained that Iraq was a "nightmare" of Blair's own making and that he had been "so intent on preserving the 'special relationship' with America ... that he simply went along with George Bush's war plans instead of acting as a candid friend and spelling out the dangers".

It was left to Blair's unofficial advisers at the *Guardian* to raise the possible ramifications of Blair's mounting crisis in Iraq. On September 21, Martin Kettle warned that labour's re-election was threatened by public opposition to his stand on Iraq:

"Tony Blair has never appeared more adrift from public opinion on Iraq than he does at this moment... It bears repeating that Iraq is not, for most people, the determining issue of British politics. But Labour strategists are now genuinely concerned at the scale of the Iraq-derived disaffection in particular groups—among women, the elderly and parts of the core Labour vote, including readers of this newspaper.

"... For the first time, and somewhat in defiance of the polls, there appears to be a shared fear at the top of the Labour party that the government's Iraq policy and its re-election chances could after all be on a collision course."



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