Britain: Mounting criticism of Blair over Lebanon

Chris Marsden, Julie Hyland
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The world is being reminded yet again why Britain earned the sobriquet "Perfidious Albion."

After more than two weeks of an unrelenting and escalating military assault on Lebanon that has left more than 420 people dead, it remains the only country other than the United States and Israel itself that has refused to call for a ceasefire.

At the meeting of foreign ministers in Rome on Wednesday, Britain's Margaret Beckett took her place alongside US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in rejecting every appeal for a cessation of hostilities on the cynical grounds that it could not provide the basis for a lasting peace.

Beckett was following Prime Minister Tony Blair, who earlier dismissed calls for a ceasefire by stating that it would only "make people feel good for a few hours." This is from the man who loudly proclaimed his humanitarian concerns to justify military intervention in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq.

For Blair, "peace" is a euphemism for the successful realisation of the war aims of Israel and Washington—the destruction of Hezbollah, the reduction of Lebanon into a US-Israeli protectorate and the instigation of hostilities against Syria and Iran to consolidate American hegemony over the Middle East.

If anything, the vast gulf separating official politics from the sentiments of the mass of the population, which is overwhelmingly opposed to Israel's actions, is even more pronounced in regard to the assault on Lebanon than in relation to the Iraq war. Yet, the government has faced minimal opposition in Parliament to its support for Israel. Only a handful of backbenchers from the Labour and Conservative parties joined the Liberal Democrats in calling for a ceasefire on Tuesday—after which they broke for the summer recess.

This situation is made all the more remarkable given that Blair has been severely undermined by the exposure of the lies and misinformation used to justify war against Iraq, and by the hemorrhaging of support for his government in recent elections.

Nonetheless, there are those within ruling circles who understand very well that this is a dangerous situation. Amongst these layers there are serious concerns over the political impasse into which the government has led Britain and the dangers posed by the deteriorating situation in the Middle East.

There is a growing recognition that Blair has achieved very little in return for his alliance with the Bush administration. Discredited in the Middle East and elsewhere as a result of its association with Washington, Britain is paying a heavy price through its military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq and now faces the possibility of a much more dangerous conflict with Iran.

Most newspapers, whether or not they support an immediate ceasefire, have been severely critical of the government's unquestioning support for Israel and its failure to advocate a diplomatic solution. Only the Murdoch press and the *Observer* have been resolutely supportive of the government's line.

There are also reports of widespread disaffection within the Foreign Office at the government's failure to consult Whitehall over its policy, which amounts to waiting to see which way Washington wants Britain to jump.

For many, these concerns were epitomised by the exchange between Bush and Blair during the G8 summit in St Petersburg that was accidentally picked up on a microphone. Like a court sycophant, Blair pleaded with his liege to be allowed to visit the Middle East, only for Bush to dismiss his request in between mouthfuls of food.

The embarrassment and humiliation within ruling circles at Blair's subservience to Bush was acute.

The *Telegraph* on July 25 editorialised, "Since the crisis broke, France has had its prime minister and foreign minister in the region, Germany its foreign minister. Britain, once seen as a major player in the Middle East, has been represented by a junior minister who has sown confusion, and even incited ridicule. His trip, and the evacuation, have been sorry evidence of incoherent policy-making and managerial incompetence. To echo Churchill, in the past week Mr. Blair has had a lot to be modest about."

Writing in the same newspaper, Simon Heffer entitled his own scathing attack on the government, "A Third World War Looms—but Britain Has No Foreign Policy."

Even the pro-Labour *Guardian* complained, "The perception that our government has set British and European interests aside in order to stay in the slipstream of the US administration is in certain respects a caricature.... But the caricature contains enough truth to further weaken British interests abroad and to further damage the government's already weakened standing at home."

The longer the conflict continues, the more worried the government's critics have become. Israel's military campaign has met with greater resistance from Hezbollah than either Israel or its backers anticipated. And the images broadcast around the world of the devastation and human suffering inflicted on the Lebanese have deepened the repugnance felt by millions.

Such is the scale of public anger in the Middle East that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, a US ally, has now warned, "If the option of peace fails as a result of Israeli arrogance, then the only option remaining will be war, and God alone knows what the region would witness in a conflict that would spare no one."

Syria is said to be at its highest state of alert and has said that it will react if Israel comes close to the Lebanese/Syrian border. In turn, the

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Iranian ambassador to Lebanon, Mohammad-Reza Sheybani, warned, "There should be no doubt on this issue: If Syria is harmed, even in the slightest way, we will respond with force."

This has lent renewed urgency to calls for a ceasefire and even demands for a rejection of Washington's refusal to seek a diplomatic solution.

The *Financial Times* on July 26 attacked US foreign policy as "reckless." It complained: "Ms. Rice blithely asserts that we are witnessing 'the birth pangs of a new Middle East'—an unfortunate metaphor set against the background noise of the death-rattle of a recently resurgent, pro-western Lebanon."

The *Financial Times* continued: "[T]he point is that fighting could now easily spread, and not just by sucking in Hizbollah's patrons in Syria and Iran. Israel's assault on Shia Lebanon has inflamed the Shia majority in Iraq—the community preventing the total meltdown of the US occupation.... The US and its friends need to engage with all parties in the region. That includes Syria and Iran."

The following day's edition of the *Guardian* editorialised, "What Ms. Rice needs to do is cancel her trip to Malaysia and return to the Middle East sharpish, and not just to Israel. The US has to end its policy of blocking diplomacy in order to allow Israel time to deal with Hizbullah militarily—an option that Israel may be finding less attractive anyway in the face of stiff Hizbullah resistance. Ms. Rice needs to push for an immediate ceasefire and that can only be achieved by persuading not just Israel but Hizbullah and its two backers in the region, Iran and Syria."

Yesterday, Sir Stephen Wall, a former leading adviser to the Labour government, decried Blair and Bush for having "weasel-worded" their way through Israel's onslaught on Lebanon. Britain had lost "moral authority" across much of the world, Wall said, because of Blair's conviction that "he has to hitch the UK to the chariot of the US president." The government has "too readily lost sight of the fact that Britain's interests, and those of the US, are not identical," he continued.

The problem for those issuing such advice is twofold: first, the government is deaf to all entreaties that it "stand up" to Washington, and second, they themselves offer no substantive alternative to Britain's alliance with the Bush administration. Indeed, on the fundamental question of maintaining the "special relationship" with the US, there is unanimity with Blair.

But to maintain an alliance with Washington means doing exactly what Blair is doing.

Blair is being compared unfavourably with other prime ministers who were equally concerned with preserving the "special relationship." Some have noted that even Margaret Thatcher had at least objected in 1983 when the US invaded Grenada, part of the British Commonwealth, without even a by your leave.

All this proves is that even then, the British bourgeoisie did not ask much.

But this is not the 1980s. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, US foreign policy has undergone a fundamental shift. Faced with the absence of a significant military rival, America is intent on securing its global hegemony against its economic competitors by utilising the one factor in which it still retains an overwhelming advantage. The naked pursuit of imperialist interest by force of arms has become the order of the day.

The only "alliances" Washington is willing to contemplate are those that accept this reality. Anything else is wishful thinking.

All of the dangers inherent in British foreign policy, and the subservience it entails, are not the product of Blair's personal failings. They express the historical decline in the fortunes of British imperialism. We have come a long way since the Suez crisis in 1956, the last occasion that the British bourgeoisie attempted to act independently of the US, and was made to pay the price.

If the US fears being eclipsed economically by its rivals in Europe and China, then this is even more the case for British capital. Britain lost its place as the world's fourth largest economy to China last year. In addition, its armed forces would struggle to function independently of the materiel, technical and logistical support of the US.

On what basis, therefore, could London contemplate alienating Washington?

That is why the essential foundation of the government's foreign policy is the hope that riding Bush's coat-tails will provide Britain with a share in the spoils of an imperialist re-division of the world. And it is also why Blair, despite the lack of popular support for his government, is still able to dismiss his critics. Their greatest fear, like his own, is that the US will go it alone, cutting Britain out of the carve-up of the world's markets and resources.

Moreover, such is the development of global economy and the dominance of finance capital that there is a real sense in which it is difficult to speak of a British bourgeoisie capable of articulating some peculiarly "national" interest. If Blair has taken on the characteristics of an American politician, or at least someone who takes his orders from the White House, it is because he is the representative of an international financial oligarchy that also dominates Britain's economic and political affairs.

Blair used to claim that in orientating to Washington he was also acting as a good European. It was, he argued, the only way of preventing the growth of American unilateralism and influencing its policy to the good. Many of those who are unhappy with his performance over Lebanon now complain that he should orient more towards Europe in order to better curb Washington's excesses.

They do so at the very point where Blair's position has become dominant throughout the continent. Whereas at the time of the Iraq war France and Germany refused to join Bush's "coalition of the willing," today they are clamouring to be let on board. Paris and Berlin may be formally in support of a ceasefire, but they will not allow this to affect their relations with the US. Blair may have assumed the role of the most craven apologist for Washington, but appeasement is the order of the day throughout Europe's capitals.

No section of the ruling class, in Britain or the rest of Europe, can be entrusted with opposing the US-inspired assault on Lebanon, or averting the growing danger of a wider war in the Middle East. That task falls to the working class. What is required is an international political movement of workers and young people against a worldwide resurgence of imperialist militarism that only finds its most advanced expression in the criminal actions of the Bush and Blair.

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