

Blair: Beating Washington's war drum in the Middle East

Chris Marsden
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Media suggestions that Britain's Tony Blair went to the Middle East to avoid the damaging internal warfare over his premiership or to win back some credibility with the public by demonstrating his role as a world statesman misunderstand the man and his politics.

If he was motivated by how he appears in the eyes of the electorate, one might ask just what he was thinking when he decided to visit Lebanon?

Blair was met by protests because of his support for Israel's US-backed war against Lebanon that killed more than 1,100 people, mostly civilians, and his refusal to support calls for a ceasefire.

Both Hezbollah and a coalition of secular parties had warned that he was not welcome, a message repeated in the Lebanese press. *Al Balad* warned of riots, while *As-Safir* called Blair "the ugly Briton."

Senior Hezbollah politburo member Galeb Abu Zeinab said, "Blair was a true partner in the killing of children and the destruction of thousands of homes; if he hadn't fully supported the US-Israeli position the war would not have happened in the way it did. He is a full partner in the atrocities and I think he should be prosecuted as a war criminal alongside Bush and Olmert."

The Lebanese Communist party, the Peoples' Movement and various secular parties issued a statement that "Anyone who meets with Blair will be considered a partner in the Israeli aggression."

Lebanon's senior Shia cleric, Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, said that Blair should have been told to stay away so he would "know we are not so naive as to welcome him when he has contributed to killing us and slaughtering our children."

Nabih Berri, the speaker of the parliament and head of the Shia Amal party, left Lebanon for an unscheduled four-day trip to Switzerland to avoid meeting Blair.

To try to prevent demonstrations, the government created a buffer zone around parliament and other official

buildings. Blair's motorcade traveled at high speed from the airport, with hundreds of soldiers lining the route. Troops and armoured cars sealed off the main squares, forcing thousands of demonstrators to assemble half a mile from the parliament surrounded by a massive police presence. A banner carried by the protesters read, "In the name of the Lebanese people: Thank you for destroying our homes, neighborhoods and memories."

Blair's press conference with Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora was interrupted by Irish peace activist Caoimhe Butterly, who shouted, "This visit is an insult. Shame on you, Tony Blair."

Butterly held up a banner stating, "Boycott Israeli apartheid," before she was forcibly removed by security guards.

Blair was ready to court such a hostile response and the embarrassment it brings at home because his political audience is not the British electorate, but the Bush administration and the oligarchy in whose interests it governs. And in those quarters, he calculates that his readiness to face down mass opposition is what really counts. He was making absolutely clear that, however unpopular his policies, there will be no retreat from his support for Washington's predatory drive to establish its hegemony over the Middle East.

In talks with Siniora, Blair pledged a miserly \$93 million towards the estimated \$3.6 billion needed to rebuild infrastructure that he helped destroy. His real concern was to stress the need to disarm Hezbollah as laid down in United Nations Resolution 1701.

This is only a small part of his overall agenda.

Prior to his arrival in Beirut, Blair spent two days in Israel and the Occupied Territories. His meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas focused on securing agreement on the formation of a unity government between Abbas's Fateh and Hamas, based on Hamas

recognising Israel, renouncing violence and accepting past interim agreements. He appears so far to have had some success, with Abbas promising a government of national unity “within days” and Olmert agreeing to negotiations.

Blair’s pose as a peacemaker is, in fact, aimed at neutralising popular opposition to the creation of a truncated Palestinian entity, with Israel permanently annexing much of the West Bank and the whole of Jerusalem. At the same time, he wants to offer some respite to Olmert, who like Blair has been badly weakened by the failure to defeat Hezbollah in Lebanon.

More important still, he is seeking to create the best conditions for Israel, as the key regional ally of Washington, to be able to focus its political and military capabilities against Iran and Syria. His discussions with Olmert on Iran were guarded. The only public statement at a joint press conference by Olmert was a description of Blair as “one of the greatest world fighters against terror” and praise for his strong stand against Tehran’s alleged efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

For his part, Blair merely said, “We will hold firm on the Iranian issue.”

Blair was clearer in the importance he attaches to paving the way for US-led aggression against Iran in an interview with *Haaretz*, published to coincide with his arrival in Beirut.

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In it, the prime minister claimed that “the major strategic question that has changed in the whole of the international community” was the “global movement of extremism” with Iran “at the head of it.”

The terrible destruction heaped on Lebanon had meant that “while the conflict was going on, it was very difficult for people to think in terms of anything other than stopping the conflict.” However, “I think that there emerged from that a clearer notion of how this came about and how Iran and, to an extent, Syria are pulling the strings and ensuring that there is such conflict.”

This was certainly understood by “leaders in Europe,” but as yet the people just didn’t get it: “Amongst the people in Europe and Western opinion, there is a big battle to be won...there is a desire not to face the fact that we are fighting a global struggle. There are all sorts of issues to do with America and whether people want to be associated with America.”

Part of the problem, he complained, “is that Western opinion always wants to believe that it’s our fault and these people want to have a sort of, you know, grievance

culture that they visit upon us and say it’s our fault.”

When asked whether there was a comparison to be made between opposing action being taken against Iran and those who appeased Nazism in the 1930s, he replied in the affirmative:

“When you have the president of a country as powerful as Iran say those things, it may be very foolish of us to assume he doesn’t mean them. And when he’s also trying to acquire a nuclear weapon, then I think the warning signs are pretty clear.... I think for a president of a country to say they want to wipe another country off the face of the earth and at the same time he’s trying to acquire a nuclear weapons capability—if we don’t get worried about that, future historians will raise a few questions about us and about our judgment.”

Blair’s unapologetic stance is further proof that both he and the Bush administration, in response to the crisis in Iraq and mounting domestic political opposition, are preparing yet more barbaric acts of aggression.

A significant concern in Washington is whether Blair’s weakness and his eventual departure from office will lead to a shift in Britain’s foreign policy. Writing in Rupert Murdoch’s *Times*, Gerard Baker insisted, “If the next prime minister is a real leader, and not a mere implementer of the latest public opinion trends, he will take a firm stand against the seductive anti-Americanism that has Britain and much of Europe in its grip.... He should state, categorically, that whatever our reservations, whatever our irritations, Britain will stand with America.”

Blair’s main rival for leadership, Chancellor Gordon Brown, has responded with repeated reassurances that if he succeeds Blair, he will not alter course. He gave an exclusive interview to Murdoch’s tabloid, the *Sun*, in which he pledged to visit New York in order to “reaffirm to the American people that Britain—under the courageous leadership of Tony Blair—stands now as then, shoulder to shoulder with them.... Between justice and evil, humanity and barbarism, democracy and tyranny, no one can afford to be neutral or disengaged.”



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