Britain: Blair advises policy shift in Middle East

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair's speech to the City of London Lord Mayor's annual Mansion House banquet on November 13 was an attempt to reformulate British foreign policy in the aftermath of the popular repudiation of the Iraq war and the defeat suffered by the Bush administration in the US elections.

Already deeply compromised and bereft of popular support, Blair's political standing and authority have been further undermined. He evidently felt compelled to respond to a widespread view in British ruling circles that his support for the Iraq war and his uncritical alliance with the Bush administration have embroiled Britain in a debacle that has destabilized the entire Middle East, with potentially disastrous consequences.

His speech was made just one day before he was to be interviewed via closed circuit television by the Iraq Study Group, led by James Baker, the former secretary of state to George Bush senior. It was intended to reassure his critics that he would take the opportunity to influence the foreign policy debate that has opened up in the US so that British concerns are taken into account.

The Iraq Study Group encompasses leading Republicans and Democrats—many of whom were involved in the late 1980s and early 1990s in setting into motion the abortive Israeli-Palestinian "peace process"—who are critical of the neo-conservatives and believe that their policies have severely damaged US interests throughout the Middle East.

While stressing his support for the US, defending the invasion of Iraq and insisting that a rupture with Washington would be "insane," Blair signalled that a change in course was necessary. "Just as the situation is evolving, so our strategy should evolve to meet it," he said.

Without referring to any withdrawal of British or US troops, Blair emphasized that the task was to "empower the Iraqi leadership" to take responsibility for leading and winning "the fight against terrorism." Ultimately, he said, any solution depended upon a strategy towards "forces outside Iraq that are trying to create mayhem inside Iraq." Blair's "whole Middle East strategy" began with efforts to bring Syria and Iran onboard.

Though not directly contradicting the stated position of the White House, Blair made certain statements aimed at placating critics of Bush administration policies. For example, he described fears that the US was seeking a military solution in Iran as "genuine, if entirely misplaced." He held out the prospect of a "new partnership" if Tehran suspended its nuclear enrichment programme, helped the Middle East Peace Process and stopped "supporting terrorism in Lebanon or Iraq."

Retaining the ultimatistic tone that has characterized American and British declarations on Iran, he threatened the country with "isolation" should it fail to agree to the conditions he had laid down.

Britain is actively working towards this end. In his speech, Blair stressed that Iran and Syria "do not at all share identical interests." Earlier this month, his personal advisor on foreign affairs, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, was in Syria, where it is reported he told President Bashar al-Assad that he could either continue his alliance with Iran or break with Iran and normalize relations with the West.

At any rate, Blair continued, the starting point for any Middle East settlement began not with these countries, or with Lebanon, but with "Israel/Palestine... That is the core."

Blair has long urged Washington to use its influence over Israel to pressure it to accept a Palestinian state on parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This time, however, his cautious remarks were addressed not only to the Bush administration, but also to its critics, in the hope that, given the weakened position of Bush and the sacking of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, his advice might stand a better chance of having an impact.

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But Blair, more than any other European leader, is constrained as to how far he can risk antagonizing the Bush administration, and even his tentative remarks were rebuked by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Speaking in Germany, she explicitly rejected any connection between Iraq and the Israel-Palestinian conflict and ruled out talks with Syria and Iran.

This renders Blair incapable of articulating the deep disaffection within Britain's ruling elite. It is instructive to contrast his speech with the editorial published on November 14 by the *Financial Times* prior to his interview with the Iraq Study Group.

In what amounted to a root and branch critique of the policies of the neo-conservatives in Washington, focusing on US relations with Israel, it demanded a "reappraisal of policy towards the Middle East as a whole."

In a remarkably grim appraisal of the state of affairs throughout the Middle East, the newspaper declared that the "Iraq fiasco" had led to the country sinking "into a cesspool of ethnic cleansing and rule by militia." The US-backed Israeli war on Lebanon this past summer had strengthened Hezbollah, and as a result "an essentially pro-western government is imploding." The Israeli offensive in the West Bank and Gaza Strip had created a situation in which the Palestinian territories were "facing societal collapse."

The editorial denounced Israel's "illegal" settlements in the West Bank, criticized its walling off of Palestinian territories and its erection of "500 Israeli checkpoints," and rebuked Blair for playing "third fiddle" to the Americans and Israelis.

It offered a blunt and sweeping indictment of US-British-Israeli policy: "Their combination of diplomatic fecklessness and faith in the use of force has been lethal. It has given organizations such as Hamas and Hizbollah power and prestige well beyond their natural constituency. At the heart of this mayhem is the failure to get a comprehensive settlement based on land for peace.

"The last five years have seen Israel extend and consolidate its hold on the West Bank and Arab east Jerusalem despite western rhetoric. That, every bit as much as the unprovoked invasion of Iraq, is what constantly threatens to set the region alight."

The *Financial Times* urged a "comprehensive settlement" between Israel and the Palestinians based on land for peace as the centrepiece of a new Middle East strategy that would "require engagement with Iran and Syria."

Neither Blair nor any other British politician is in a position to make such sweeping demands on the White House. In a separate piece, *Financial Times* columnist Philips Stephens acknowledged that in Washington's attempts to reformulate its Middle East strategy, "domestic politics will weigh much more than sober strategic calculation—or any sense of obligation to America's closest ally." All that remained was an appeal to Blair that "sometimes truth must be spoken publicly to power."

The *Financial Times* and many others within the British foreign policy establishment are pinning a great deal of their hopes on the ability of the Iraq Study Group to deliver the goods. But as *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, a Republican, noted, "The idea that the commission is going to come up with some magic plan that we haven't heard about is not true... These plans are all out there, and none of them are particularly pleasant."

More fundamentally, Blair's support for the Iraq war was almost universally endorsed by the British ruling elite. This reflected the recognition that Britain as a declining imperialist power could assert its interests against its more powerful rivals only by aligning itself with the US. This situation has not changed.

Blair reminded his critics of these geopolitical realities by devoting a major portion of his Mansion House speech to reiterating the fundamental importance of maintaining this alliance. He insisted that none of Britain's vital concerns "can be addressed, let alone solved, without America." Alluding to the growing assertiveness of Russia and the rising economic power of China and India, he said, "New powers are emerging," in the face of which it is necessary to forge "alliances with nations that share our values."

This reliance on the US is a source of profound instability, not just for the Blair government but for the entire British bourgeoisie. More than any other, its fortunes are linked to the outcome of the factional struggle that has erupted in Washington and the worsening situation in the Middle East that has prompted it.

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