

Blair's Middle East tour: "Jaw, Jaw" in furtherance of "War, War"

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Prime Minister Tony Blair's tour of the Middle East has been used to back a constitutional putsch by President Mahmoud Abbas that threatens a Palestinian civil war, to trial plans for a massive increase in troop numbers in Iraq and to pave the way for hostile action against Iran.

It is proof that Blair has lined up with the neo-conservatives aligned with the Bush administration in rejecting the Iraq Study Group's proposals for reducing the US military presence in Iraq and securing the cooperation of Iran and Syria.

Blair's spokesmen and apologists made great play of the ISG's embrace of the prime minister's oft-repeated assertion that securing a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was essential to the stabilisation of the Middle East. They could also draw attention to statements indicating Blair's differences with the Bush administration over the possibility of a dialogue with Syria, and possibly even Iran.

Once again, however, when it comes to the crunch, Blair's foreign policy is dictated by the most right-wing sections of America's ruling elite. And far from the striving for "peace" in Palestine determining policy in the Middle East, it is the policy of imperialist conquest and subjugation throughout the region that dictates what happens in the Occupied Territories.

Even before Blair departed for the Turkish capital of Ankara, he made clear that he was acting as Bush's de facto envoy. During a press conference in Downing Street, Blair explicitly rejected any possibility of talks with Iran and any suggestion that his attitude towards Tehran differed from that of the Bush administration.

"Iran is deliberately causing maximum problems for moderate governments and for ourselves in the region—in Palestine, in Lebanon and in Iraq," Blair said. In addition, there was "little point" in trying to engage with Iran or Syria "unless they are prepared to be constructive."

"I don't think there is any point in hiding the fact that Iran is a major strategic threat to the cohesion of the entire region," he said.

Later at a press conference in the Egyptian capital Cairo, he said, "I think that people have overstated this issue [dialogue with Iran and Syria]." There was, he said, a "common view" that "whether it is in Iraq with militias or in respect of Lebanon undermining the Siniora government, or it is in respect of the more extreme elements of Hamas in Palestine, then Iran seems to see its purpose as to derail the prospects for stability and peace and democracy."

Though Blair reiterated his position that "I don't think you can treat Iran and Syria as exactly the same," that is what he did in

practice. His tour pointedly excluded a visit to Damascus.

Blair endorsed the call made by Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan for what he called "an alliance of civilisations, in other words, a sort of alliance of moderation against the extremists." Once again, Blair has only invented a new piece of sophistry to describe what Bush has more crudely termed a struggle between "good and evil."

The alliance he speaks of is one between US and British imperialism and whoever is prepared to act as their proxy in the region. Blair knows that the US can rely on Israel and hopes that Turkey and Egypt can be brought firmly on board. However, his discussions in Ankara, Cairo and Israel were for the most part conducted behind closed doors.

His most public embrace of a partner in the supposed "alliance of moderation" was of Abbas. Blair appeared alongside the president to endorse his call for early elections to the Palestinian Authority aimed at overturning the Hamas-led government that swept to power on a substantial popular mandate in January.

Blair called for the "international community" to line up in support of Abbas. "Nobody should have a veto on progress," he declared, referring to Hamas. Turning to Abbas he added, "Your people are suffering. We don't want anything to stand in the way of helping the Palestinian people."

It is difficult to imagine a more cynical statement. For months, Britain has backed US-led efforts, also supported by the European Union, to starve the Palestinians into submission by all-embracing sanctions and to foment civil war, in particular through Israel's withholding of taxes owed to the PA that are essential to pay the wages of public employees.

Now, Blair seeks to utilise the situation he has helped to create to justify an abrogation of democracy by presidential fiat. He is backing a man who is correctly regarded, like himself, as little more than a puppet of Washington and a move that is opposed not only by Hamas but by most other Palestinian factions and a significant constituency within Fatah itself.

Farouk al-Qaddoumi, who heads the political department of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, stated that "holding early elections in Palestine is an impossible matter because it would increase tension among the Palestinians and serves Israel's interests."

Fatah leader Mustafa Barghouti called the proposed early elections a "mistake," adding "you can't have an election without people agreeing to that election." He said of Blair, "He is taking

one side already. He is on the side of Abu Mazen [Abbas].” Barghouti was a prime mover in political efforts to secure a negotiated agreement between Fatah and Hamas that was sabotaged by Israel through the simple expediency of launching a series of military attacks, culminating in Operation Summer Rains.

Blair does not need to be told that Abbas’s proposals have nothing to do with a democratic resolution of the crisis in the PA. He is deliberately preparing for civil war.

To this end, Blair suggested a series of measures to funnel cash into Abbas’s coffers in order to fund militias under his control. The *Guardian* cited a figure of US\$26 million as being required to develop Abbas’s own security guard. Blair is asking the EU for assistance, but also raised the issue during his subsequent talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. He urged Olmert’s government to free up the US\$65 million per month of taxes that it has been withholding for 10 months in a way that would bypass the Hamas-led government.

The *Economist* reported November 4 that the US is financing a “training camp” near the West Bank city of Jericho for new recruits for Abbas’s presidential guard, in order to expand it into a force possibly numbering tens of thousands that would be able to take on Hamas.

Blair is also helping to prepare a bloodbath in Iraq. During a visit to Baghdad, which included a stop-off in Basra, Blair met with Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki. At yet another press conference, Blair publicly reassured Maliki that Britain, which has some 8,000 troops in the country, stood “four square” behind his government and was not contemplating “a change of our policy.”

“Don’t be under any doubt at all. British troops will remain until the job is done,” he said.

Previously, the government had indicated that it intended to gradually withdraw troops from Iraq next spring. Blair’s claim that British policy “remains unchanged” goes further than simply reversing this commitment. Rather, the government is considering sending more troops to Iraq.

Media reports in Britain have noted that the Bush administration may embrace proposals by General Jack Keane, a former army vice-chief of staff, and Frederick Kagan, of the American Enterprise Institute, to dispatch an additional 50,000 troops to Iraq. The plan begins with the declaration, “Victory is still an option.”

Commenting on Blair’s discussions with Maliki, the December 18 edition of Britain’s *Daily Mirror* quoted a “No 10 insider”: “If the US goes big and deploys many more troops then we could well have to follow. It is not what everybody was expecting or wants but the situation is not improving as we had hoped.”

Blair’s trip to Turkey and his efforts to secure Ankara as an ally in the struggle against “extremism” must be seen as a warning of the scale of the conflagration that is being prepared.

Turkey is being courted by both of the factions fighting it out in Washington to determine US foreign policy and by various European powers. Blair was attempting to win Ankara behind the Bush administration’s plans for a renewal of the military offensive in Iraq.

But Turkey is primarily concerned at the possible break-up of Iraq and any moves towards granting Iraq’s Kurds greater autonomy that could lead to the establishment of a state. Of

particular concern is the future of the oil-rich region around Kirkuk, which could provide the funds for a Kurdish insurgency that would inevitably spill over across the Turkish border. Turkey recently amassed a quarter of a million troops on its border with Iraq and has made repeated warnings against any measure that strengthens Iraqi Kurds, and threatens to embroil its own 15-to-20-million Kurdish population. If such hostilities broke out, they could dwarf the bloodshed already witnessed in Iraq.

Blair is also stirring up major difficulties for his government at home. As his Middle East tour ended, the influential think tank Chatham House issued a report stating that the “disaster” of Iraq and the postwar “debacle” have damaged Britain’s global influence. It states that Blair’s successor will be faced with rethinking Britain’s role within the EU in order to distance itself from the US.

There is a well of dissatisfaction focusing on Blair’s foreign policy and his alliance with the US. Under these conditions, to consider committing more British troops to Iraq, aligning himself with Abbas and making bellicose threats against Iran is dangerous in the extreme.

The *Independent* described Blair’s comments on the existence of democracy in Iraq as a “staggering disregard for the truth.... What has been created in Iraq is a state of murderous anarchy.”

There was in fact no real government in Iraq for Britain to stand “four-square” behind, and the situation was “hardly better in the rest of the region.”

“Mr. Blair’s hubristic mission to reorder the world, piggy-backing on American military might, has heaped even more misery on the people of the Middle East, tarnished Britain’s international reputation and increased the threat to all of us from Islamist terrorism,” it warned.



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