Tony Blair and the “2010 question”

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“Sometimes,” said Tony Blair, “what’s important is not to ask the March 2003 question, but to ask the 2010 question.”

His remarks were made in testimony to the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq war, during which the former British prime minister used the occasion as a platform to advocate a similar pre-emptive war against Iran.

Blair named Iran no less than 58 times in the course of his evidence, turning his appearance into a piece of blatant warmongering. The inquiry panel accepted all this without demur. Any conception that this would be “judgement day for Blair” was dispelled by the belligerent performance of someone confident that the privy councillors in front of him would offer no challenge—either on Iraq or regarding the new military adventure he was proposing.

No one queried his determination that Britain should participate in another illegal war of aggression—the principal charge against the leaders of the Nazi regime in their trial at Nuremberg. Robert H. Jackson, the chief American prosecutor at the tribunal, declared, “To initiate a war of aggression, therefore, is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

The Nuremberg Principles defined the “Planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression,” or participating in such plan, as a crime against peace. Blair defended just such a crime against peace in Iraq and essentially argued that this had established the necessary pretext for aggression against Iran. That was why he went as far as he legally felt able in openly associating himself with the doctrine of pre-emptive war.

Always close to the US political establishment, Blair now works as Middle East envoy for the US, the European Union, the UN and Russia. But his brief is determined by the US and he operates in close collaboration with the Israeli government. He told the Chilcot Inquiry that his position gave him an insight into the role of Iran. “I would say that a large part of the destabilisation in the Middle East at the present time comes from Iran,” Blair claimed.

Had Saddam Hussein not been removed from power, Blair said, he would have begun a nuclear and chemical weapons programme in the future. Then “with an oil price not $25 but $100 a barrel, he would have had the intent, he would have had the financial means and we would have lost our nerve.”

“We face the same problem about Iran today,” he concluded.

Blair insisted that it did not matter if Iraq had weapons of mass destruction in 2003 and it does not matter if Iran has them today. Based on the conceptions of pre-emptive war, it is enough that they have the “potential” to develop them. That alone, according to Blair, is sufficient justification for the US and UK to have launched the invasion of Iraq and would justify similar measures against Iran in 2010.

Blair’s testimony confirms how completely the bourgeoisie has broken from the political and legal arrangements established in the aftermath of World War II. In 1945 the political elite in both Britain and the US believed it essential that they draw a line under the conflicts that had twice plunged Europe into war and had led to the Russian Revolution of 1917, or face possible ruin. Their response was to put on trial those who had initiated the war and carried out the crimes against humanity associated with it and to create the United Nations. They were attempting to establish a stronger framework of international law that would regulate global conflicts and provide a semblance of political legitimacy for a capitalist system that had just caused the deaths of some 78 million people. The

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Nuremberg Principles were incorporated into the United Nations Charter and have been a recognised part of international law for over half a century.

Neither international law nor the United Nations have freed humanity from the scourge of war, the objective proclaimed in the preamble to the United Nations Charter, because it is inherent to the capitalist system and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states. But today the ruling elite in Washington openly proclaim that these principles can no longer hold sway.

President George W. Bush first unveiled the doctrine of pre-emptive war in September 2002, when the invasion of Iraq was being planned. The National Security Strategy document of 2006 reaffirmed it, insisting that the US does not "rule out the use of force before attacks occur, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack."

In a 2008 speech to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates advocated the extension of the doctrine to the use of nuclear weapons. "As long as other states have or seek nuclear weapons," he said, "and can potentially threaten us, our allies and friends—then we must have a deterrent capacity that makes it clear that challenging the US in the nuclear arena—or with other weapons of mass destruction—could result in an overwhelming, catastrophic response."

Earlier that year Hillary Clinton, now secretary of state in the Obama administration, threatened that if Iran attacked Israel, the US would respond by "obliterating" Iran. Delivering his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, President Obama expressed his intention to pursue an ever-widening series of pre-emptive wars of aggression in a bid to maintain US hegemony.

Blair could speak without significant challenge in defence of pre-emptive war because he represents an elite in Britain that, without formulating a new official doctrine like Washington, has moved very far in repudiating previously established legal norms, in pursuit of its own share of strategic resources and continued global influence in alliance with the US.

Only weeks before Blair was due to speak, the Labour government gave an undertaking to remove from British law the conception of "universal jurisdiction," also embodied in the UN Charter, and both allowing for and insisting upon the responsibility of all states to prosecute those accused of war crimes regardless of nationality. The European Journal of International Law has also drawn attention to the fact that the "crime of aggression" was "not included as a domestic crime in the UK's International Criminal Court Act 2001." And in response to an appeal by a group of anti-war protesters, in 2006 the House of Lords ruled that the crime of aggression was not a part of the domestic law of England and could not be incorporated into English law without an Act of Parliament.

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