

Tony Blair calls for stepped up intervention in Middle East

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In a speech delivered in London last Wednesday, former Labour Party leader and British Prime Minister from 1997 to 2007 Tony Blair urged a renewed focus by the imperialist powers on the Middle East, including further military engagements.

Cautioning against a declining interest in the region given events in Ukraine, Blair opened his speech with the claim that the Middle East “still represents the biggest threat to global security of the early 21st century.”

Calling “for a strategic orientation to the entire region rather than ad hoc policies,” Blair argued, “We have to take sides. We have to stop treating each country on the basis of whatever seems to make for the easiest life for us at any one time. We have to have an approach to the region that is coherent and sees it as a whole. And above all, we have to commit. We have to engage.”

Blair’s demand to “take sides” is part of his claim that the source of major conflicts in the Middle East and internationally is to be found in religion and the Islamic religion in particular.

As with his article in the *Observer* earlier this year, this claim is intended to whitewash the role of the imperialist powers in the region. According to Blair, the Western powers, in a re-run of the “white man’s burden” of the 19th century, have altruistically intervened in the Middle East to encourage the development of democratic societies.

He declared that the Middle East was characterised by a “titanic struggle going on within the region between those who want the region to embrace the modern world—politically, socially and economically—and those who instead want to create a politics of religious difference and exclusivity.”

While his earlier article was chiefly concerned with justifying previous imperialist crimes conducted by the

United States in alliance with his government, his latest speech was motivated by concern that US-led provocations against Russia over Ukraine, and against China through Obama’s “pivot to Asia”, should not lead the imperialist powers to neglect protecting their strategic interests in the Middle East.

This call is finding broader support within Britain’s ruling elite. A week earlier, *Guardian* journalist Zoe Williams urged “the left” to defend Blair’s record and stop calling him a “war criminal”.

Former Blair adviser John McTernan continued the attempt to rehabilitate Blair in the *Guardian*. Blair’s speech should “prick consciences and spur action,” he advised.

Blair’s comments were “a scrupulous account of the costs of doing nothing,” while always “looking at the bigger picture”. McTernan concluded the article: “These are the reflections of a hugely experienced politician... They are as thoughtful, and thought-provoking, as those of the Blair of old, but there is a new strain: wisdom.”

What McTernan and the *Guardian* present as “thought provoking” words of wisdom are in reality a call for a stepping up of an aggressive foreign policy. Blair criticised what he saw as reluctance to engage in Libya following the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, and attacked the decision last September to abandon plans to intervene directly on the side of the rebels in Syria against the Assad government.

The fact that his claims to be advocating support for a moderate brand of Islam do not square with his full backing for the extremist elements in the Syrian opposition is of no concern to the former prime minister. He instead went out of his way to emphasise the role of the West in funding opposition groups which have well-documented links to Al Qaida, declaring at

one point, “We call for the regime to change, we encourage the opposition to rise up, but then when Iran activates Hezbollah on the side of the Assad government, we refrain even from air intervention to give the opposition a chance.”

Blair’s commitment to the use of the most ruthless methods to achieve the interests of British imperialism was illustrated most starkly in his open defence of Egypt’s military junta. For Blair: “The Muslim Brotherhood government was not simply a bad government. It was systematically taking over the traditions and institutions of the country. The revolt of 30 June 2013 was not an ordinary protest. It was the absolutely necessary rescue of a nation.”

Last year’s military coup was certainly no “ordinary protest.” It ushered in a brutal dictatorship that was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of civilians in the weeks that followed, including several notorious massacres of Muslim Brotherhood supporters on the streets of Cairo. On Monday 683 alleged members and supporters of the MB were handed death sentences in a trial that lasted just five minutes. It follows a similar judicial mockery last month in which 529 people were sentenced to die by the same judge, Saed Youssef.

Blair made not a word of criticism of these crimes of the Egyptian junta. Nor did he even mention the role of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in engendering conflict throughout the region. This follows his praise earlier this year for former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at a memorial meeting in the wake of the latter’s death.

Writing in Israeli daily *Haaretz*, Anshel Pfeffer remarked that “(t)he inescapable conclusion after reading the full text...is that it could have been delivered by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.”

Blair’s determination to defend Israel explains the attempt he made in his remarks to enroll Russia and China in support of military interventions in the Middle East. “Whatever our other differences, we should be prepared to reach out and cooperate with the East, and in particular Russia and China,” Blair declared.

This is in line with his criticism of the suspension of military action against Syria, and his opposition to any concessions with Iran over economic sanctions and its nuclear programme.

Blair calculates that these Western objectives can best be achieved with Russian and Chinese help. While his

comments seem at odds with the provocative stance taken by Washington and London against Russia, in utilising the putsch in Kiev, he is well aware that successful regime change in Damascus and Teheran would substantially weaken the position of Beijing and Moscow in the region.

Blair’s call also reflects discussions within British ruling circles on the need to maintain stable relations with Russia. Although some of the more extravagant estimates of the influence of Russian investment in London have been called into question, the capital has not earned the nickname Moscow on Thames for nothing. Large quantities of high-end properties have been purchased by Russian oligarchs, and the financial sector earns billions from the activities of Russian firms. A total of 53 Russian companies are listed on the London Stock Exchange.

In March, in the midst of the Western-instigated crisis in Crimea, a leaked government briefing was reported in the British media cautioning against the imposition of harsh sanctions against Moscow due to the impact they could have on business in the City. This has not stopped the Cameron government giving its full backing to the reckless campaign led by the US and Germany against Moscow over Ukraine.

Blair’s own personal connections to the super-rich layer are significant. He is close friends with the oligarch Oleg Deripaska, one of Russia’s richest men. His friendship with Ukrainian businessman Victor Pinchuk also emerged at the time of the Maidan protests. Pinchuk, a multi-billionaire and Ukraine’s second richest man, donated half a million dollars to Blair’s faith foundation, an organisation which promotes Blair’s vision of extremist religion as the source of conflicts in 22 countries. According to Forbes, Pinchuk has sought to find a middle ground in the current Ukraine crisis by balancing between the interests of opening up the Ukrainian economy to the European Union while maintaining business ties with Moscow.



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