

London Peace Talks Will Boost Blair and May Shift Europe's Role

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Brief Analysis

On Monday, May 4, the U.S.-brokered peace talks involving Israel and the Palestinian Authority will be held in London. Few expect progress in those talks. But the occasion might serve to enhance the role of the European Union (EU), and particularly Britain, in the peace process, making it a more effective partner of the United States and lessening the degree to which differences between the United States and the EU are manipulated by the Israelis and Palestinians.

The main meetings will be between Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and, separately, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. However, the probable key to any success of the talks is British prime minister Tony Blair, who today celebrates one year in office. It was during Blair's talks with Netanyahu in Jerusalem, in the course of his Middle East trip two weeks ago, that the idea for talks in London emerged and was announced. The following day, Blair met Arafat in Gaza and won his participation as well.

> Blair appears to enjoy the respect of both Netanyahu and Arafat, who are conscious of his political skills and his goodwill. Moreover they are deeply aware of the strength of his political base—the 179-seat majority that his Labour party won in the British parliament means that he will almost certainly win a second five year term in 2002 or before, and perhaps another one after that as well. Only 44 years old (he is 45 next Wednesday), Blair has a political career that seems certain to outlast those of President Clinton, President Yeltsin of Russia, President Chirac of France and Chancellor Kohl of Germany.

Blair's involvement in the summit is currently limited to meetings on the morning of May 4 with both Netanyahu and Arafat. Blair will be accompanied at these meetings both by the European Union's special envoy to the Middle East, Miguel Moratinos, and by the British foreign secretary, Robin Cook—who will have had a working dinner with Albright the night before. The talks themselves will be held either in the American embassy or in London hotels—details have not yet been released.

> The British Foreign Office defines the key issues at the summit as being redeployment of Israeli forces, the expansion of settlements and progress on final status talks, saying "there are some big gaps. It is going to be very difficult to get a breakthrough." But Blair himself has been careful to avoid using words which could limit progress.

Asked in parliament on April 22 about his hopes for the summit, Blair replied, almost certainly adhering to a scripted text: "The present stalemate in the Middle East peace process is obviously dangerous for those that are immediately concerned for the region and for wider stability in the world. . . . We will play any role we can that is helpful for us to play, though I stress again that we should not cut across anything being done by the United States. But I believe that if there is goodwill on both sides then progress can be made. If progress is not made then this dispute will carry on threatening, not just the stability of the Middle East, but the stability of the entire world."

Thursday night, Blair, Cook (who has made his peace with the British Jewish community after a controversial visit to Israel a month ago), and several other members of the British cabinet attended the celebration in London hosted by the Israeli ambassador to mark Israel's 50th anniversary. In a clearly heartfelt address, Blair "pledged [his] dedication to assist the search for peace" and "hoped and prayed for a fruitful outcome" of the next round of talks. Although Blair's support for Israel is clear and strong—"the establishment of the State of Israel is one of the most remarkable and miraculous events of our time"—it is also hard to imagine that he does not genuinely sympathize with Palestinian Arabs as well.

> Blair is likely to urge both Netanyahu and Arafat to make progress on practical, short-term measures—such as the Karni duty-free industrial zone and Gaza airport—and to stop concentrating on idealistic end positions. Promoting goodwill and seeking compromise was crucial also in Blair's recent success in shaping a possible Northern Ireland settlement. Still, the differences between that historical running sore and the Middle East remain great and Blair is unlikely to want to make parallels—especially because the IRA, while allowing its political arm Sinn Fein to endorse that agreement, this week ruled out giving up its stocks of weapons and explosives.

Blair's higher profile in the Middle East peace process comes during the six months (January–June) when Britain holds the presidency of the EU. He wants to craft a more constructive European role, although the nature of the European Union will always mean that policy leadership will be uneven. The last president was Luxembourg, the next will be Austria; the contrasts in national knowledge and interests in the Middle East could not be greater. The different tiers of EU leadership—the bureaucracy based in Brussels (the European Commission and the Council of Ministers to which special envoy Moratinos reports) and the parliament which divides its time between the Belgium capital and Strasbourg in France—also leads to different speeds on policy, a feature which perplexes and can infuriate other foreigners, particularly Americans. For this summit, the British Foreign Office says Blair will certainly not be raising such potentially controversial European ideas as economic pressure on Israel, including imposing trade restrictions on goods grown or manufactured in the post-1967 occupied territories. While other EU leaders have suggested that Europe's role in the peace process should reflect Europe's financial contribution to the Palestinians—\$1.8 billion since 1993—Blair seems pleased that he has been invited to have a role. With Netanyahu's comment this week that he [Netanyahu] "will be branded an obstacle to peace" but he is "ready for this," Blair's position appears almost risk-free.

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