

The Blair Government and the Middle East

Dec 3, 1997



Brief Analysis

British policy toward the Middle East has assumed greater relevance in the international arena due to the growing relationship between Washington and the new Blair administration as well as the British accession to the European Union (EU) presidency in January 1998.

Stagnation in the Peace Process. Politicians, diplomats, and all interested parties must not allow the Middle East to slip back into a condition of hopelessness and alienation. Although the Middle East possesses abundant natural resources and a highly skilled entrepreneurial population, the region has failed to perform anywhere near its full potential. The social problems created by poverty feed the political extremism and violence making a settlement to the peace process that much more difficult. Additionally, Arab attitudes on issues including proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), containment of threats, and countering terrorism are affected by the stagnation of the peace process.

From its own experiences in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom knows that the real difficulty is having the courage to take the risks necessary to turn today's failures into tomorrow's successes. Israel's security demands a short-term solution to the problem of terrorism. Additionally, a long-term guarantee of security is essential to achieve peace, but only peace can guarantee lasting security. Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) must establish trust through interim steps, and refrain from unilateral actions that destroy this trust. At the same time, a favorable regional environment must be created by moving forward on all tracks simultaneously. Oslo was working; it will not work, however, while either party is trying to rewrite the deal.

Britain's Role in the Peace Process. Britain is a friend of both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and a candid friend is a helpful friend. Therefore, Britain has told the Israelis to implement the interim agreement, redeploy in accordance with the Hebron agreement, freeze settlements and stop trying to squeeze Palestinians out of Jerusalem, and then move onto final status negotiations. Meanwhile, Britain has told the Palestinians to make an even greater effort on security. The EU has proposed a permanent security committee with U.S. and EU participation to monitor compliance.

Since the new British government assumed power, many parties have urged the United Kingdom to take some major Middle East initiative due to frustration with the current state of the peace process as well as a desire to introduce "competitive bidding" between the United States and Europe. Although Britain has responded with caution, the government has nevertheless reconsidered its role in the Middle East peace process. Britain wishes to establish a closer working partnership with the United States, and play a complementary-not competitive-role. The EU already provides 69 percent of international aid to Palestinians, and purchases one-third of Israeli exports. Additionally, EU Special Envoy Ambassador Miguel Moratinos has won the trust of both sides while working closely with U.S. Special Envoy Dennis Ross. Moratinos' role can and should be strengthened because Europe's "constructive engagement" assists the peace process.

The Syrian and Lebanese Tracks. The current stagnation has caused a continuing loss of Israeli life in southern Lebanon, the suffering of the local Lebanese population, and the growing risk of a frustrated Syria collaborating with

Iraq and Iran. Without Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, Hizbollah would lose its main raison d'etre, and Iran its proxy. In the larger framework of Israel-Syria talks, Israel should work urgently on the Syrian track along the lines of the previous Rabin-Peres government.

Relations with Iran. Since the election of Iranian President Mohammed Khatami, the international community has been watching for changes in Iranian policy especially as Iran is an important regional player and a developing nation. However, Britain remains concerned about Iran's support for terrorism and groups opposed to the Middle East peace process, its acquisition of WMDs, its death sentence against British citizen Salman Rushdie, and its violations of human rights. In response to the Mykonos verdict, the EU sent a strong signal to Tehran that the EU will not tolerate Iran's sponsorship of terrorism. The EU ambassadors have now returned to Iran to keep a close eye on Iranian behavior on all fronts.

The EU has cooperated actively with the United States in an attempt to modify Iranian behavior. For example, Tony Blair and other European leaders have, like President Bill Clinton, raised their concerns about Russian technical assistance to Iran's ballistic missile program directly with Russian President Boris Yeltsin. However, it is better to maintain relations with Iran in order to convince the nation to cease unacceptable behavior and assume normal relations with the West. The Iran-Libya Sanctions Act is an impediment to closer political cooperation between the EU and the United States. As the EU is opposed in principle to extra-territorial legislation, sanctions against an EU company for legitimate investments in Iran's hydrocarbon sector will lead to a transatlantic row.

The Threat of Saddam Hussein. Due to the extreme threat posed by Saddam Hussein, the United Kingdom did not rule out any option in pursuing the return of the UNSCOM officials. Hussein's strategy is clearly to escape from sanctions while keeping his WMDs intact. However, the lifting of sanctions will only begin when UNSCOM has reported full compliance with the demands of UNSC Resolution 687. Judging from Hussein's track record, that is unlikely to occur while he remains in power. Meanwhile, the Iraqi people continue to suffer. Therefore, the United States and the United Kingdom sponsored the original "oil-for-food" resolution, and have subsequently suggested ways to improve efficiency and expand the resolutions to include a wider range of humanitarian goods.

Of course, the Iraqi people must decide how their country should be governed. A government which respects human rights and humanitarian law, implements all its international obligations, and pursues policies in the interests of all the peoples of Iraq regardless of ethnic or religious origin could take its rightful place as a respected member in the family of nations. The international community remains ready to help should this occur. Until then, the United Nations Security Council resolutions are not negotiable. Hussein's recent defiance has simply reinforced the solidarity of the UN in its determination to destroy his WMDs, because when one appeases in the short term, one pays an even greater price in the long term.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rachel Ingber.

Policy #286

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

U.S. Policy ([/policy-analysis/us-policy](#))