

# Britain's New Labour Government and the Middle East

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**T**he victory of the Labour party in the British general elections on May 1 was expected although the huge majority-179 seats-that the new prime minister, Tony Blair, will enjoy did surprise most observers. His appointment of Robin Cook to the top foreign affairs slot had been predicted-Cook had been the Labour party spokesman for the portfolio in opposition and as a senior member of the party was going to be rewarded with high office. Another Labour member of parliament, Derek Fatchett, has been made minister of state at the Foreign Office with responsibility for the Middle East.

The Middle East is not a principal foreign policy issue for Blair-his main concern is for Britain to be a more friendly and active participant in EU forums than the Conservative government of John Major. But Britain has been an active supporter of U.S. policy in the Gulf, providing military forces which work alongside the United States and a backer of the Middle East peace process, using diplomatic influence and development funds. The new government has indicated that it wants to maintain an active international role but there are certainly going to be changes of style and perhaps also of substance in regard to the Middle East.

Cook comes from the left-wing of the Labour party and in the past at least has been suspicious of the United States and, on the Middle East, noticeably supportive of the Palestinians. But since Oslo, and with the growing prospect of gaining government in recent years, any stridency in his positions has eased.

Labour and the Gulf So far most concern in the Middle East about the policies of the new British government is thought to have come from the conservative Arab states of the Gulf. In a mission statement announced by Cook on May 12, he declared that he would emphasize arms control and human rights. Pundits immediately thought that the wide-ranging Al-Yamamah arms supply arrangement with Saudi Arabia would be at risk, but Cook told a news conference that the government would "honour agreements entered into by our predecessors." Fatchett has also privately assured British arms companies trading with the Middle East that their deals are safe.

At the same news conference Cook spoke of "working for peace in the world and supporting movements for peace keeping." He went on to say "we are committed to supporting, the [Middle East] peace process but . . . without progress, the peace process cannot continue. We want to work for an outcome in which there will be peace with security for Israel, but also peace with justice for the Palestinians."

Iraq and Iran have so far been mentioned only in passing references even though the immediacy of decisions to be taken about them is even more pressing than the peace process. (The question of whether Iraq can continue to export oil for a second six months under the terms of UNSCR 986 has to be resolved by early June. On Iran, Britain continues to hold back, along with most of the EU, from returning its head of mission to Tehran in the wake of the Mykonos verdict because of the mullahs refusal to allow the German envoy back in.) Cook told the May 12 news conference that Iraq and Iran "give us very grave and considerable concerns. He also referred to them when saying that stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is a "very high priority."

A very intelligent man, Cook does have a reputation for being acerbic. He has already ruffled feathers at the Foreign Office, where a very senior official commented this week about "the need to balance principles with interests." But Cook is determined to maintain Britain's international profile, changing the emphasis more towards trade while also making "Britain once again a force for good in the world." He has plans to set up a new foreign policy think-tank to provide expert input from commentators and academic specialists. When questioned whether or not Chatham House (the London-based Royal Institute of International Affairs) was not meant to provide this role, he replied: "With no disrespect to that most august institution, I am looking for something a little more questioning, more probing and more irreverent."

The Foreign Office confirmed this week that on the peace process "much of the UK's diplomatic activity is through the European Union," a formulation which leaves open the possibility of working closely with current U.S. efforts while also distancing London from them. U.S. officials will be interested to see precisely what Cook means.

Blair, Israel and the Peace Process Any difficulties which emerge in the Washington discussions can perhaps be addressed, and if necessary repaired, when President Clinton visits London briefly later this month to meet Tony Blair. Both men are Oxford-educated with legal training; both are married to lawyers. Blair likes America and has already developed a friendship with Clinton. On the Middle East, he has little experience but did visit Israel in 1994 for a series of briefings from the government. At the time, Israeli officials found Candidate Blair sympathetic and congenial.

More recently, in a pre-election interview with the London Jewish Chronicle, Blair struck this chord: "Under Labour, Britain will continue to work closely with our European partners and the Americans to support endeavors towards a comprehensive settlement that gives the people of the region peace with security and justice. We have also encouraged closer links between Britain and Israel. The peace process has been accompanied by a considerable improvement in relations between our two countries and peoples-and I want that to continue." On Jerusalem, he added: "It is a tragedy that Jerusalem has remained a divided city for so long. This is an issue which will require a substantial degree of delicate negotiation and one where the eventual solution on the permanent status of Jerusalem will have to be to the mutual satisfaction of the parties concerned."

Simon Henderson, a former visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, is a journalist in London. His latest work is [The Middle East in the Year 2000](#), from Financial Times Energy Publishing.

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