

America, the Middle East, and the World: A Conversation with Tony Blair

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Tony Blair is the Executive Chairman of the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change and a former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.



Brief Analysis

The former Prime Minister discusses the challenges and opportunities facing the Biden administration twenty years after 9/11 and a decade after the Arab Spring.

On January 11, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Tony Blair. The former Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, he currently serves as Executive Chairman of the [Tony Blair Institute for Global Change \(https://institute.global/\)](https://institute.global/), an organization committed to reinvigorating the center ground in politics, supporting leaders around the globe in their fight against COVID-19, and providing solutions on issues ranging from extremism to the technological revolution. The following is a transcript of his conversation, lightly edited for grammar and syntax.

Robert Satloff: Hello and welcome to The Washington Institute. I am Rob Satloff, Executive Director of the Institute, and I am delighted to welcome you to a very special event.

Words like “unprecedented,” “seismic,” “historic”—we throw them around like confetti on a normal New Year’s Eve. But there is no doubt that the terms apply to the current situation as we continue with the worst public health crisis in a century and the worst economic crisis in nearly as long. We have just witnessed what many believe to be the most serious and deadly threat to our republic in 160 years. In ten days, we will

inaugurate a new president who inherits all this as well as a world beset by crises and challenges—and the Middle East, of course, being no exception. In moments like this it makes sense to seek the wisdom of experience.

It is therefore a great privilege to host this event with our special guest, former Prime Minister Tony Blair. Mr. Blair is the Executive Chairman of the London-based Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. He is the winner of three consecutive elections to serve as British Prime Minister, the only Labour leader to ever do so. He is one of the few true statesmen of our era. In fact, we confirmed that at The Washington Institute by [awarding him our Scholar Statesmen medal \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/2010-scholar-statesman-award-dinner\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/2010-scholar-statesman-award-dinner), our highest honor, in 2010. It is now ten years later, and we are delighted to host this event with Mr. Blair in this consequential hour in the history of our nation and for our world. Welcome, thank you very much for joining us today!

Tony Blair: Thank you, Rob. It's a great pleasure.

Satloff: I think it makes sense to begin with the events of last week. I will not ask you to comment on our domestic politics but rather on the impact of the recent events on America's global standing and the leadership that people around the world hope to see from Washington and from President Biden to address all the collective issues that we have to face.

Blair: Well, to state the obvious, it was shocking and dismaying for America's many friends around the world to see what happened. However, despite the outrage, your Constitution holds firm, your country holds firm. Joe Biden will be duly sworn in as president in a short period of time. And it is important that we condemn what has happened, but it is also important that we realize America stays strong and stays firm.

Secondly, Joe Biden as president-elect is pretty much the right man in the right place and at the right time because he is deeply experienced, and he is by instinct someone who tries to reach out to those who disagree as well as those who agree. Your politics has exploded on to the world stage by what happened last week. But many of the fissures in American politics and society are also occurring around the Western world right now. They have not taken as ugly and extraordinary a form as they did in Washington last week. But it is going to be important for American politics to heal itself because that will also give some solace to other countries with deeply divided politics.

Satloff: Mr. Blair, let's ask about the strategic implications of the pandemic. Beyond addressing the public health priorities of each of our countries, in what way do you think the pandemic has changed international politics and affected the national security agenda of the new administration?

Blair: One of the things my Institute has done in the past year is virtually repurpose itself to studying COVID-19, the right responses, the right policies in terms of things like testing and vaccination and so on. The bad and challenging news is that this virus is mutating. I think you have to look at this as a struggle of several years as we are going to be trying to chase the virus out at the same time as the virus is mutating and changing. We may well get to a point where we will have to adapt or change the vaccines that we are using.

So here are the things I think are very clear. Number one, what the pandemic has exposed are profound flaws in the global health architecture. Surveillance—we did not spot this soon enough and get the right data objectively so that we could see what was happening. Vaccine development—we should be making preparations now for a whole series of families of potential pathogens that could result in a pandemic for the future, we don't have that research capability in place at the moment. Vaccine production and development is sensitive in many parts of the world, but we do not have a coherent and developed global policy to make sure we have optimal vaccine production. We have about 200 vaccine attempts going around the world when the most we are ever going to need is probably under ten vaccines. And then we have real anxieties on the part of governments as to what right advice to follow. One of the debates we have been having in the UK, in which I have been prominent, and which originally came from my suggestion, was that for the two doses of vaccine—provided that the first gives you an immunity of over 70 percent—it is sensible to not hold back the vaccine but to get it rolled out as swiftly as possible.

But you need expert guidance on a lot of these matters. Some of the approvals for vaccines and therapeutic drugs have taken a long time. The AstraZeneca vaccine, with which I have been most involved, has been there since March. But we need to find how to accelerate the trial and testing procedures before passing these vaccines because in the future we have to shorten the period between a pandemic beginning and getting on top of it with good vaccines.

So, there are massive issues the new administration can help globally coordinate. We would have been much better off if there was coordination on these issues and the world had come together and decided to incentivize rapid, on-the-spot antigen testing by putting together a fund and backing every solution to make these tests as accurate as possible. We would have gotten there months earlier rather than have these tests available now. There is one big thing for the new administration, which is the case for multilateral action, because cooperation is best in the light of self-interest.

Secondly, I think the American-European relationship is of vital importance not just because of the pandemic, but because of issues like climate and what we do about China policy. And thirdly, the single biggest thing people are looking for from the incoming administration is strategic predictability. In other words, when there is a problem, there is a strategy in place—and not a series of ad hoc reactions—that your allies can get behind.

Satloff: First of all, your observation that this is going to be a years-long, not months-long, challenge is very sobering. Secondly, even without the pandemic there would be a very long list of items in the new administration's national security and foreign policy agenda. What advice

would you give on separating the urgent from the important in terms of what the president himself focuses on early on?

Blair: It is always difficult. The problem in politics is that you get your freedom to decide what the response is to a situation, but you do not get to decide what the situation is. I would have thought that the president would focus first of all on the pandemic itself. But what I am really saying is that part of that focus is getting global cooperation going.

Secondly, of course, I believe the issues around China will be immensely important. Issues around the Middle East, Iran, but also reestablishing a really strong link with the other side of the Atlantic because all of these problems will be easier to deal with if we deal with them together.

Satloff: When you look at the globe, where does the Middle East fit in? The last time we had this conversation ten years ago, it was just weeks before the Arab Spring was triggered in Tunisia. Now it is a totally different environment, so where does the Middle East fit in the global agenda? Is it a setting of great power competition or much less important than before?

Blair: There is a big debate about this, but the Middle East still matters. It matters enormously. It matters because it is in the Middle East that the future of Islam will be decided. Do the modernizing forces within Islam predominate and come out on top? It is going to be important because it impacts not just the Middle East itself, but North Africa and increasingly Sub-Saharan Africa. The Europeans look at where the next wave of migration and extremism will come from. They are likely to come from the Sahel group of countries and North Africa. So, the Middle East and North Africa region remains important.

We published a very good essay today (<https://institute.global/policy/reframing-middle-east-future-20-years-911>) which tried to frame the question in the current Middle East. In my view, there are some signs for optimism if we correctly analyze what is going on. You should look at the region as one big struggle, which is the desire of the younger generation to get to rule-based economies and religiously tolerant societies. That is a growing group of people. They want to know that if they work hard and play by the rules, they can grow businesses and they can raise their families in stability. They understand why the rapprochement between the Arab states and Israel is so important. They understand that, in the end, the only future for the Middle East is to get connected to the world, and part of that connectivity is to be religiously tolerant and open-minded toward those of different faiths and cultures.

Western policy in the region stretches back over a long period of time, with 9/11, the wars in Iraq, the Arab Spring, and all the difficulties that come with these events. There has been turmoil in the Middle East. But even among the turmoil, there have been attempts to reach for something better. And it is important to not lose sight of that. There is a struggle in the Middle East, but it is not a struggle of great power competition, nor is it a struggle between Shia and Sunni, nor is it a struggle for power. It is a struggle for values, and those values echo our own. It is essential to recognize that the Middle East still matters and that it is of fundamental importance. There are people we should be backing within the region and there are people we should be pushing back against.

Satloff: Can you tell us a few optimistic aspects in the Middle East that embolden you and give you hope?

Blair: First of all, the rapprochement between the Arab states and Israel is a great cause for hope. My Institute and I were very involved in the Israeli-UAE rapprochement. But what would have been the odds of that sometime before? And it still has a long way to go and it can go a lot further. I have no doubt at all that in the end this will become a significant part of the new architecture in the Middle East. It will be a warm peace, not a cold peace.

Secondly, the attitudes of many of the youths in the region are increasingly open-minded. Of course, some young people are being pulled into extremism and terrorism. But there are many others who are on the other side of that, including in Iran. It is a young population. The Arab Spring presented the danger of many people coming together due to diverse reasons in order to get rid of the status quo. However, once the status quo is removed, there is no agreement for what plays out afterward. So, there was a huge battle in the wake of the Arab Spring between the modernist, extremist, and Islamist elements and so on. But I believe that increasingly, as time goes on, there is emerging a new and post-Arab Spring generation that is looking at the situation in a new and much more positive way.

Satloff: President Biden and his team have said they would like to reinject democracy and human rights as more important elements in U.S. foreign policy, that correcting the flaws of our allies is as important as correcting or condemning the flaws of our adversaries. From your experience as a leader who made values an important part of your foreign policy, and given the experience of the last ten years when we had mixed results, what is the most effective way of doing this?

Blair: The issues of human rights and democracy are still major issues for Western governments because they are part of our value systems and what we believe in. Over time, I have learned it is important to assess whether a country is moving toward the right direction or not. If that is the case, it is important to engage even if you have criticism over human rights—and these criticisms may be absolutely right and necessary—but nonetheless you can perceive that there is ultimately a move toward a better society. Therefore, looking at individual countries in the Middle East today, you might correctly raise human rights questions. But in that big struggle that I described—modernization, rule-based economies, and religious tolerance—if governments are on the right side of that divide, it is still important to engage and support them even if there are criticisms.

This is going to become a very difficult question. For example, people have strongly supported the modernization programs in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. And that is not because we think in a transactional way, meaning that they are our allies and therefore we need to line up with

them. It is because we do see genuine and significant changes happening that are important to support even if there are areas of criticism.

That is why I believe there is no good policy on the Middle East today that does not start from a comprehensive analysis of what has been right and wrong since the turn of the century, or that stems from the wrong framing argument about the main struggle in the region. Because otherwise you end up in a situation where you perceive the region as a struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia or Shia versus Sunni. But it is not. It is a struggle between those people who say that religion—maybe one view in Islam—should dominate and turn into political ideology, and those who do not. That is a profound and fundamental divide. It is important to take cognizance of that because otherwise you might misunderstand the process of change that is going on in the Middle East, and you end up thinking it could be better if we washed our hands of the whole thing, which I think would be a big mistake.

Satloff: How should we deal with leaders who themselves pose very difficult issues on human rights, such as in Saudi Arabia? Are there things you would urge the Biden administration to do in order to move in a more constructive direction?

Blair: It is important to assert your actual assessment of a situation. My assessment with respect to Saudi Arabia is that people rightly and strongly criticize it. However, there is no doubt there are important modernizing elements and developments of social and religious change. For example, take the relationship Saudi Arabia has had to the peace process with the Palestinians, the Arab Peace Initiative in the earlier part of the century, now its support for the rapprochement with Israel—even though Saudi Arabia is not itself part of that, it has yet given a fair wind to the UAE's rapprochement with Israel—and contrast that with the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is supporting those elements that want to destroy any hope and peace as well as Israel itself.

So, you need to be judicious. That does not imply you should turn a blind eye to human rights abuses—you should raise concerns. But you should also praise when such praise is due for the genuine modernizing measures that are being taken. Otherwise, you can end up with the erratic equivalence between the position of the Iranian regime on one side and what is happening in Saudi Arabia today.

Satloff: There is a big debate on how to approach Iran, either through the nuclear lens or its broader regional behavior, as well as how to address these issues, be it through pressure or inducement. What is your advice to the new administration?

Blair: Iran is a negative, destabilizing force in the Middle East. If there was a reasonable regime in Iran, I would double my optimism overnight. The truth is that in virtually all areas in the Middle East, they play a role that is harmful, supports the most extreme elements, and prevents countries from making progress toward rule-based economies and religiously tolerant societies.

The problem is that on one hand, the Iranian regime internally has been hit hard from the policies of the last few years. On the other hand, the abrogation of the JCPOA has enabled them to accelerate their nuclear program. So I understand the dilemma the Biden administration will have. But whichever way the new administration chooses to approach Iran, they have to keep the basic bottom line intact—that Iran will not be allowed to acquire nuclear capabilities.

Secondly, they have to address the behavior of Iran across the region because that is as much a problem for the countries of the region as the nuclear issue. In fact, sometimes people from the region say it is an even bigger problem for them.

Thirdly, we should keep supporting those modernizing elements—including elements inside Iran—that want to push for greater freedom there. And we should stand by them when they do. The Biden administration should also expose the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the region and put pressure on them.

Satloff: What should we do in case the people of Iran stand up and demand more freedom?

Blair: We should support them. I am not suggesting that we push for a regime change from the outside. The protests in Iran, in which quite a few people died last year, are reaching larger numbers of people, they are moving beyond the liberal middle classes in Iran, and people are suffering economically, especially from the increasing IRGC control over the economy. So, yes, we should support those people. How we do that is a difficult question that needs to be determined as the events unfold. But there should not be any doubt or hesitation on our part.

We should also keep in mind that these revolutions come to an end. This revolution in Iran will finish at some point. I don't know when. But it will because it is unsustainable. The tragedy with Iran is that it is an ancient and proud civilization with enormous strength, a country with potential to become a major source of good in the world. Yet the people are deprived of economic opportunity and face repression.

Satloff: The Arab-Israel rapprochements that you have referred to are in no small part a reflection of the common fear of the Iranian challenge. How should the Biden administration use these to advance its policy vis-a-vis Iran?

Blair: The Biden administration will be in a very good place to further push those types of accords within the Middle East. They are finding a fairly united front now between the Arabs and the Israelis in the region. It is important to point out that the common strategic threat of Iran has brought the Israelis and the Arabs closer together. That is absolutely true.

But from my own conversations with Arab leaders across the region I have found that they have a genuine respect for Israel, above and beyond Israel's capabilities for standing up to Iran. They admire its technology, its innovation, how they built the country, and that is why a lot of what is going on at the moment is due to reason gripping politics in the Middle East. If you position yourself within the Arab world and you look at your threats, how would you possibly conclude that one group of people you should alienate in the Middle East are the Israelis? Under the

leadership of people like Muhammad bin Zayed, who are farsighted thinkers, governments are concluding that they do need to have an alliance with the Israelis.

This does not signify a lack of commitment to the Palestinian cause. I myself remain completely committed to a fair deal with the Palestinians, and I still believe the two-state solution is the right one. But Arab-Israeli cooperation improves the prospects of making progress on that issue. One of the tragedies of Palestinian politics is that they have been negative toward this development, whereas I believe they should see it as a vast opportunity.

Satloff: As much as anyone else, you have the scars to show for your efforts to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking process. How should the Biden administration use regional progress to practically advance the Israeli-Palestinian dynamic?

Blair: Since leaving office, I have tried to argue with every secretary of state that the Palestinian issue is a real priority, and it can be resolved. I have worked with Condoleezza Rice, Hillary Clinton, and John Kerry—all of them are great, talented people. This time around, the Biden administration is likely to take a step back to wait and see. That is probably the right thing to do.

But in the end, Palestinian politics has to change, has to see the prospect of Israeli-Arab rapprochement under a positive light in order to attain a Palestinian state. The Israelis consider these rapprochements as a big strategic prize, but they are much more likely to pursue that prize in the light of the Palestinian interest and bring the Palestinians around the table with them if Palestinian politics adopts a positive attitude with regard to the rapprochements. This requires big changes in Israeli political attitudes toward the Palestinian question. However, that would happen much more easily if Palestinian politics unified in favor of peace, and if Arab rapprochement were not preconditioned on the Israeli-Palestinian question, but rather seen as part of the modernization of the Middle East.

There are limits to what the Biden administration can do at the very outset. However, if Palestinian politics unifies in favor of peace and the Arab-Israeli rapprochement continues, there will come an opportunity in the not-so-distant future to make progress and move ahead. What is clear is that there is no way the state of Israel is ever going to be threatened into establishing a Palestinian state. The starting point is in understanding that no amount of pressure or threat is going to give statehood to the Palestinians. It is only if the government of Israel and the people of Israel believe the Palestinian state that will be created will be securely, safely, and properly governed. That is the challenge.

Satloff: Fascinating. You are urging the Biden administration to practice strategic patience and strengthen the regional Arab-Israeli rapprochement in order to have a positive impact on the potential for the internal Palestinian dynamic, which is an essential element of moving forward.

Blair: That is what I think and hope. None of that means the administration should not support the Palestinian cause, but the Palestinians need a strategy for a state. The hard reality is that there are three parties that can help the Palestinians achieve an independent government: the Americans, the Israelis, and the Arabs. The Europeans and other countries cannot help deliver statehood. The Palestinians cannot adopt a strategy that disengages the Americans, alienates the Israelis, and irritates the Arabs. I believe the Palestinians can and want to engage the Biden administration, but it is of primary importance to them to seize and unify their politics on a basis for peace.

Satloff: If you had a couple of minutes with President Biden, what advice would you give him from your experience of dealing with leadership in times of crisis?

Blair: Joe Biden does not need any advice from me. I have known him for a long period of time. You have one of the most experienced teams working for the new administration. I am quite hopeful because the team members are close to him and to one another, so they might produce a coherent policy response. I would not give him any advice, but I would tell him that from the outside there is an immense yearning from America's allies for the U.S. to provide strategic leadership on the global stage. The Europeans and the UK will want to work with the U.S. despite potential points of friction. Therefore, one should not underestimate the intense desire to see America recognize that strong alliances serve its own self-interest.

Satloff: Thank you, Mr. Blair, for offering your unique insight in these moments of change and turbulence in America. It gives great consolation to know that we have great and intimate friends abroad who yearn for U.S. leadership and who remain our allies through thick and thin. I urge everyone to go to the website of the Institute for Global Change to check [the new essay published today \(https://institute.global/policy/reframing-middle-east-future-20-years-911\)](https://institute.global/policy/reframing-middle-east-future-20-years-911) about understanding the context in the Middle East a decade after the Arab Spring.

I also want to urge everyone to go to the website of The Washington Institute, where we are beginning to publish a series of transition papers for the new administration. The first, [Dennis Ross' advice on Iran nuclear diplomacy \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/coming-iran-nuclear-talks-openings-and-obstacles\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/coming-iran-nuclear-talks-openings-and-obstacles), went up a few days ago, and there will be more launched over the course of the next few weeks.

I want to thank again former Prime Minister Tony Blair. I wish you, your family, and all the people of Britain all health as we collectively challenge the pandemic. ❖

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