

Tony Blair's Challenges as Middle East Envoy

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Tony Blair is joining the ranks of those who not only are committed to Arab-Israeli peace but will act as an envoy to try to do something about settling the conflict. As a former envoy, I can only welcome him to the club. It helps that he brings passion, energy, intelligence, and an instinct to stick with it. It also helps that he knows something about mediation.

That is the good news. The bad news is that he will face a daunting array of challenges, not the least is that his task involves far more than mediation. He has to find a way to get Fatah to reform itself so that it stands a chance of competing effectively with Hamas. And his prospect of succeeding in that and everything else will depend heavily on his mandate.

Pressing Mahmoud Abbas to take on the old guard in Fatah is essential but goes against Abbas's very nature. He has been even more reluctant to take steps against the old guard than against Hamas. Maybe it is because these are his long-time colleagues. Maybe it is because he fears they will challenge him in the leading institutional bodies of Fatah and the PLO. Or maybe he fears confrontation in Fatah given the threat of Hamas.

But there should be no illusions: If he will not take on the old guard, if he will not side with those who truly want to remake Fatah and reform it, it won't matter how much money is going to Fatah to help it operate in the West Bank. Corruption will continue to be the hallmark of the movement, and Hamas will exploit the ongoing alienation within the Palestinian public.

If Blair is to have any success, he must be able to deal directly with the younger members of Fatah who are prepared to operate at the grassroots level, who are willing to submit to full transparency measures (for their reasons as much as ours), and who demonstrate their ability to deliver services if provided the means. Blair will have to be able to tie assistance to performance; he will need the support of the donors to offer incentives and disincentives for responsiveness -- even if this is opposed by the old guard. Already this suggests a very different mindset for operating with the Palestinians. But, if Fatah is to succeed, if the West Bank is to become a model of success in the competition with Hamas, this is a necessary starting point.

Blair must, of course, also have a strategy for how to deal with Gaza. Hamas runs it now and Fatah will not be able to alter that reality any time soon. But no Palestinian leader will admit to a division of Palestinian identity. Hamas will

even claim that any effort to develop the West Bank at the expense of Gaza is part of an American-Israeli plot to divide the Palestinians.

It matters little that it was a Hamas coup that has produced the practical division for the time-being. Blair must show he is not disregarding Gaza; he will need to ensure ongoing humanitarian assistance even while shaping an international consensus that developmental aid or investment will not flow to Gaza unless Hamas is willing to play by the rules of the game. There is leverage to affect Hamas' behavior, particularly at a time when Hamas needs to show that it can govern and will need real help from the outside to do so. It should not get it for nothing.

Is Blair prepared for such tasks? Let's hope he is. Let's also hope that security is part of his mandate. If it is not, Blair is in for bitter disappointment. As important as it is for him to be able to apply leverage on the old guard of Fatah and Hamas, this will matter little if he cannot produce an easing of the travel restrictions for Palestinians throughout the West Bank. This, as much as anything, will signal that life and commerce may be normalized. Can Israel be expected to make a real, not a symbolic, difference on checkpoints if it fails to see any likelihood of Palestinian performance on security? Not likely; even now Israeli security and intelligence officials tell me that they are getting an average of 63 threat alerts a day in the West Bank. The Israeli presence, freedom of action, the security barrier, and the checkpoints all contribute to Israeli security forces preventing these threats from materializing.

Notwithstanding Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's declared readiness to ease freedom of movement in the West Bank to show his support for Abbas and Fatah, Israeli security forces will resist any meaningful change without some demonstration of Fatah's capability and performance. Blair must have the mandate to coordinate an approach to security with Israeli security forces and relevant Fatah security officials -- perhaps, developing a rolling approach in which Fatah builds its capability and performs in some areas and gains increasing freedom of movement as a result.

Nothing Blair does on the political or the economic front will mean much or be sustainable if there is not a credible security dimension; this won't be measured in words or meetings. It will be measured by a readiness of Fatah forces to act in ways that prove something is new -- that there is a command presence, that there is the will to do difficult things on the ground, and that there is full backing for such steps. None of this has been in evidence during the Abbas era, and the answer is not to be found with the U.S. security coordinator, General Keith Dayton. Despite his genuine efforts, he has been able to produce very little, and he is not seen by Israelis or Palestinians as having much authority or clout.

If anything, he should work for Blair, get his instructions from Blair, and be answerable to him. That will indicate that Blair calls the shots and does not need to negotiate with the United States or the other members of the Quartet on what he must do. Is the Bush administration prepared to put Blair in such a position? From my own standpoint, I must admit some hesitancy in establishing such a precedent. Successors to the Bush administration are likely to reverse its aversion to mediation and restore it as an important tool of our statecraft. That this administration continues to try to get by on the cheap and have others responsible for mediation is one thing; that it creates precedents for its successors is quite another.

In the end, I come down on the side of giving Blair what he needs to be effective. If I thought the administration was up to the challenge of doing what is necessary to see that Hamas does not win the competition with Fatah, I would have a different position. But I see no evidence that the Bush administration has the instinct or the capability to manage this competition. It prefers to invest its efforts in having an international conference to launch permanent status negotiations and then to take the easy road of simply putting out a plan for a permanent status deal. Such steps will unfortunately be seen as little more than abstractions, and abstractions won't determine the outcome of the Fatah-Hamas competition. Perhaps Tony Blair will roll up his sleeves and do the hard work of statecraft, recognizing the tasks at hand and understanding that conferences without meaningful follow-through will only set the stage for more empty slogans.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](#)

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