

# The Gleneagles G8 Summit: Middle Eastern Issues on the Agenda

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## Brief Analysis

**B**eginning on July 6, British prime minister Tony Blair will host the G8 summit in Gleneagles, a hotel and golf course in Scotland. Africa and climate change are the two main topics on the agenda, but counterterrorism, proliferation, and political reform in the Middle East are scheduled to be discussed as well. The annual G8 summit has become the sole forum in which the leaders of the seven top industrialized countries (Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States) and Russia meet to discuss and decide on courses of action. Diplomatic grandstanding and expected antiglobalization demonstrations aside, the summit is an opportunity to set the international political and bureaucratic agenda for months ahead.

### Blair in Saudi Arabia: A Preview?

Following Blair's sudden July 2 stopover in Riyadh (en route to Singapore to lobby the international Olympic committee on behalf of London's bid for the 2012 games), many are expecting a new Middle East peace initiative, most likely a financial support package for the Palestinians to help raise their standard of living. (The main, unpublicized, purpose of Blair's trip was to save Britain's long-running, multibillion-dollar al-Yamamah defense supply contract with Saudi Arabia from encroachment by the French. See [PolicyWatch no. 986 \(templateC05.php?CID=2301\)](#).) Following talks with Crown Prince Abdullah, the kingdom's de facto ruler, Blair told reporters, "We discussed the Middle East situation and I explained we wanted to have an initiative to help the Palestinian Authority in the wake of [Israeli] disengagement. Obviously, the support of Saudi Arabia would be important to that." Blair also "praised" Saudi efforts to reduce oil prices (which had exceeded a record \$60 per barrel five days earlier) and discussed aid to Africa and the situation in Iraq.

### Key Issues

As with last year's summit (hosted by President George W. Bush at Sea Island, Georgia), Iraq is not expected to loom large in the deliberations, despite the fact that it remains the main schism between the leaders. Bush and Blair continue to stand by their decision to go to war. On July 3, two of the principal world leaders who opposed the intervention—French president Jacques Chirac and German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder—met with Russian

president Vladimir Putin, the third main opponent, in the Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad. They are presumably coordinating a united front for Gleneagles, where they will likely oppose Bush and Blair on issues where the two leaders are in accord while attempting to deepen the divide where the two have differences.

At the 2004 summit, debt relief for Iraq was just one part of an agenda that included debt relief for poor nations, HIV vaccines, the Quartet Roadmap to Middle East peace, global trade, nuclear technology, and airline security. Attaining unanimity across such a spectrum of issues will be more challenging this time around. Broad support for the Middle East peace process is expected to be almost automatic, although the European G8 attendees and Russia, representing two parts of the Quartet (the others being the United States and the UN), are likely to press hard for language that continues to give them an active role.

The principal proliferation concern is Iran, where the diplomatic efforts of the European Three (France, Germany, and Britain) to reach a compromise with Tehran were faltering even before the election of new hardline president Mahmoud Ahmedinezhad. Russia, meanwhile, continues to work on completing a nuclear power reactor in Iran and has declined to use its diplomatic leverage to slow Iran's development of missiles based on Russian designs, capable of threatening much of the Middle East.

Democratization and reform, along with the related issue of engagement with Islamists, form part of the agenda for what is described as "reform in the broader Middle East and North Africa," a formulation that serves as a synonym for the problems of the Arab world. Although progress is expected to continue on a number of relevant fronts (including human rights, civic participation, microfinance, education, and literacy initiatives), British chairmanship of the summit will probably mean a change in tone from 2004, when it was under U.S. leadership.

The recent surge in oil prices is not due for discussion—ironic considering that the origins of the G8 date to the 1973 oil crisis. The inaugural version of the meetings that would eventually become the G8 summit were convened by senior finance officials from the United States, Japan, and Europe. Subsequently, the gathering became a summit for heads of state, with Canada added in 1976 and Russia in 1998.

Russia is a major oil producer and exporter in its own right. Hence, despite its questionable democratic credentials, it is no doubt enjoying the current high oil prices, even while other industrialized countries feel pressured by a price spike that does not even benefit their own treasuries.

In fact, the United States will likely face more pressure at the meeting than Russia, particularly regarding climate change—a term that, as the Times of London noted in an interview last week, President Bush "conspicuously avoids using." Blair's views on this issue contrast sharply with Bush's: "Climate change is a global problem which needs addressing now for the sake of future generations. The science is well-established and the dangers clear." Bush has rejected the notion that he owes Blair for his support of the Iraq war. Instead, he has also put forward the view that the United States can offer the world technology to deal with any global warming problems, while continuing to rule out U.S. support for any Kyoto-style deal involving legally binding reductions on carbon emissions.

#### A European Affair?

To safeguard the U.S. position, Bush may hope to watch from the sidelines as Blair battles Chirac over which country becomes the dominant influence in Europe. (With Schroeder recently defeated in a vote of confidence, this contest has rapidly turned into a British/French affair.) Chirac is still smarting from the personal defeat represented by the recent French vote against the European constitution. At the same time, he likely remains hopeful that Paris will beat London on two key issues: the defense supply contract with Saudi Arabia and the bid to host the 2012 Olympics. (Regarding the latter, both Blair and Chirac are currently lobbying for their capitals in Singapore; the decision will be announced just before the Gleneagles meeting begins.) Coincidentally, Britain assumed rotating leadership of the European Union for the next six months on July 1.

## The Future of the G8

Under the circumstances, Bush may well decide, as some commentators already have, that the annual G8 summits have already served their core purpose. It is unlikely that Moscow, due to host next year's meeting, will continue the world vision promulgated by the leadership of the United States and Britain. The Middle East will remain on the agenda, but other forums may prove more useful places for discussion.

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