

# Nearing the End of the Bush-Blair Relationship: Middle East Policy after the British Elections

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## Brief Analysis

The May 5 British elections returned Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party to an unprecedented third term in office, but with a substantially smaller parliamentary majority and a much diminished reputation for the British leader. Blair's reversal of fortune is largely attributable to his support for the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Many Britons have come to regard the war as a mistake and blame the prime minister for allegedly misleading them into backing it. Accordingly, some Labour members have already called for Blair to be replaced soon instead of waiting for his promised retirement before the next election, which may not be held for another five years.

These developments may have profound implications for London's stance on a number of key U.S. policy concerns in the Middle East, including the future of Iraq, Iran's nuclear ambitions, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. They will also likely affect the level of cooperation London can offer regarding U.S. access to the Diego Garcia air base in the Indian Ocean and British-controlled bases on Cyprus.

## A Pyrrhic Victory?

Before the elections, Labour held 166 more seats in the House of Commons than all other parties combined. Blair reportedly hoped that this parliamentary majority would only slip to around 100 seats, a figure that would have enabled him to fight off a leadership challenge from longtime rival Gordon Brown (who holds the main economic portfolio, chancellor of the exchequer). Labour's majority was reduced to 66 seats, however, representing a significant weakness. After all, at least fifty members of Blair's own party can be expected to challenge his authority on almost every issue, particularly the Iraq war and any antiterrorism measures regarded as infringing on civil liberties. The prime minister will receive little or no support from either the main opposition Conservative Party, which gained 33 seats (though it has been thrown into confusion by party leader Michael Howard's decision to step down), or the third-ranking Liberal Democrat party, which gained 11 seats in part because of its history of actively campaigning against involvement in Iraq. Blair's weakness was highlighted within a day of his victory, when several colleagues obstinately blocked his attempts to reshuffle the cabinet to his liking.

In the political jargon, Blair represents "New Labour" while Brown is "Old Labour." Long-established Labour

members have been infuriated by Blair's compromises, despite the fact that he won huge victories for the party in both the 1997 and 2001 elections. Brown had supported Blair for leadership of the party in 1994, under a supposed—and much disputed—arrangement that Blair would later hand power to him. Blair campaigned with Brown in the weeks leading up to May 5 election after realizing that he needed the latter's popularity with party loyalists in order to secure victory. Brown's presence also helped minimize the loss of trust in Blair among "floating voters"; although the chancellor's support for public spending would horrify the average American, many Britons feel that he has handled the economy well. Accordingly, Brown probably sees the office of prime minister as his just reward, sooner rather than later.

#### What Would a Brown Premiership Mean for U.S. Policy?

While Blair made a nearly effortless transition in becoming a confidant of both Democratic president Bill Clinton and Republican president George W. Bush, Brown would likely have a much more difficult time with the latter relationship. Brown's American friends tend to the left, and Democratic activists traveled to Britain to help with Labour's campaign. Moreover, Brown reportedly clashed with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice over her opposition to his proposal for massive debt relief to developing countries. Little is known about his views on the Middle East, but they are no doubt shaped in part by Labour stalwarts who fell out with Blair over Iraq (e.g., former foreign secretary Robin Cook and former international development secretary Clare Short). Blair's own reappointed foreign secretary, Jack Straw, is widely believed to have shifted his loyalty to Brown, having been safely reelected in his partially Muslim constituency amid reports of electoral fraud.

In remarks made immediately after being asked by the Queen to form a new government, Blair offered vague pronouncements on a number of issues: "I know that Iraq has been a deeply divisive issue, but I also know and believe that . . . people want to move on; they want to focus on the future in Iraq and here. And I know too that there are many other issues that concern people in the international agenda, and we will focus on those: on poverty in Africa, on climate change, on making progress in Israel and Palestine." Brown probably shares these general formulations, although he may differ widely in detail and execution. For example, in a newspaper interview just six days before the election, Brown stated that Parliament should decide whether Britain goes to war in the future, an ambiguous remark that both supports and undermines Blair's position. Blair won parliamentary approval for the invasion of Iraq despite the fact that, as prime minister, he had a royal prerogative to send armed forces into action without it. He has long been willing to make controversial decisions and generate parliamentary support for them. Brown, however, would likely pay more attention to the traditional left-wing (and anti-U.S.) sympathies of Labour members. Under such leadership, British forces would likely withdraw from Iraq more rapidly, and U.S. access to such bases as Diego Garcia—part of Britain's Indian Ocean Territory and deemed essential for any military action against Iran—would become more problematical.

Regarding the peace process, Blair's current special envoy is Lord Michael Levy, a Labour fundraiser whom Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon once ejected from his office. Levy's son Daniel is chief aide to Israeli politician Yossi Beilin, an architect of the controversial 2003 Geneva Accord and current leader of the Yahad Party. Brown could well replace Levy with Sir Ronald Cohen, an Egyptian-born Labour contributor. Cohen heads the Portland Trust, which helps fund postgraduate scholarships in the United Kingdom for Israelis and Palestinians and which recently completed a study of the Palestinian economy commissioned by Brown's Treasury Department. Both Levy and Cohen are members of Britain's Jewish Leadership Council.

#### Conclusion

The foundations of U.S. strategic cooperation with Britain date back to World War II and have generally thrived despite occasional political differences in the past (e.g., over Vietnam). American gratitude for British signals intelligence and basing rights has been matched by support for Britain's independent nuclear deterrent capability.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Bush and Blair formed an extraordinarily close relationship that greatly facilitated action in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Whether Blair leaves office soon or later, that bond has been damaged by the election results. The Bush administration should review its ties with London and reconsider what it expects from them.

Simon Henderson is a London-based senior fellow of The Washington Institute. ❖

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