

# Blair's Visit to Washington:

## British Politics and the Peace Process

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### Brief Analysis

**B**ritish prime minister Tony Blair arrives in Washington on November 11 -- the first foreign leader to visit following President George W. Bush's reelection. The visit confirms Britain's status as America's most supportive ally and Blair's status as the president's closest foreign confidant. But the British leader is likely to use the two days of talks to place distance between himself and Bush. Unless obscured by diplomatic platitudes, the public differences will be most acute over the pace and direction of the Middle East peace process.

#### Laying the Groundwork for Reengagement

Meeting with Bush is a risky strategy for Blair, who is likely to call a general election in May or June 2005. If the British electorate had had a say in the U.S. presidential election, they would have voted overwhelmingly for John Kerry. Newspaper polls show the average Briton is against the war in Iraq, against the deeper involvement of British troops, and fearful of what four more years of a Bush presidency means for the world. These views are held across the British political spectrum and are particularly strong among leading members of Blair's ruling Labour Party, who appear resentful of the fact that Blair, despite leading the party to two general election victories, is deaf to their criticism, even hatred, of Bush.

The British public's antipathy toward Bush is matched only by their loathing of Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon. Both factors have led to frequent criticism of the lack of progress in the Middle East peace process. Last week, a two-day meeting of Labour's national executive committee -- a body made up of powerful union and party representatives but having no direct say in government policy -- ended with a demand to renew efforts toward peace in the Middle East. A day later, before Kerry had conceded the election, Blair was questioned twice in Parliament by members of his own party regarding the need to push President Bush on this same issue. Clearly anticipating the questions, Blair had an answer ready: "I believe that progress in the Middle East, the democracy that now exists in Afghanistan, and the democracy that is to come, I hope, in Iraq -- those three things together -- would be the single most significant contribution we could make to the reduction of terrorism and of the power of terrorists to recruit to their cause in the world. . . . I will do everything I can to work with the president of the United States to secure that progress in the Middle East."

Such remarks echo comments Blair made at Labour's annual conference in September, when he publicly promised to turn his attention to the Middle East peace process in November. Preparatory work is already well underway -- briefings to journalists have referred to the fact that senior British officials visited Washington in July, and to regular video conferences between the two leaders in which Blair has brought up the need to advance the peace process. London believes that the demise of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, far from serving as a reason to delay and reconsider, makes the timing of this initiative even more opportune.

#### Next Steps: The British View

British concerns regarding the direction of peace efforts center on rolling back understandings that Bush and Sharon reached in recent months on two fronts: the notion that Israeli settlers evacuated from Gaza could be resettled in the West Bank, and the principle that there would be no right of return for Palestinian refugees other than to Palestinian-administered areas. As one senior government minister told the Jewish Chronicle newspaper recently, "It is a major priority for the new U.S. administration to do whatever it can to reach a peace agreement in the Middle East based on the Roadmap (the scheme agreed by the U.S., Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations)."

According to the Guardian (which, while typically sympathetic to the British government, is often critical of Blair), the British leader has two priorities: to help ensure that the Palestinians do not use Gaza to launch attacks on Israel, and to make sure that Israel allows Gaza to function as a home for the Palestinians. Regarding the first task, Blair sees Britain's role as helping to improve the Palestinian Authority's security services. (The British Foreign Office now admits that its MI6 intelligence service has helped set up "security centers" to advise the Palestinian security services in both the West Bank and Gaza.) According to the Guardian, Washington will be responsible for the second task, that of "persuading the Israelis to allow Palestinians access to their own ports and airports and free movement across the Egyptian border, rather than keep Gaza as a huge prison."

Another British proposal has been to hold a peace conference in the United Kingdom. Initially, this meeting was envisioned as a Palestinian-only affair, but the idea has now been expanded to include Israel. Such a meeting remains on the cards, although it might not be the sort of grand conference suggested by some commentators. Britain will have powerful leverage in 2005 to convene whatever forum it would like; the United Kingdom becomes chair of the G8 group beginning in January and assumes the presidency of the European Union for six months in July.

#### U.S. and Israeli Reaction

Israel's attitude toward Britain's growing energy and determination on the peace issue is both cautious and sensitive. Blair's close friend and personal envoy to the Middle East, Lord Michael Levy, was reportedly once shown the door by Sharon. Yet, the Israeli leader quickly moved to establish a different, and still direct, line of communication with Blair.

Similarly, Bush may find some parts of Blair's agenda over-demanding and difficult to sugarcoat. According to briefings given to British political journalists, Blair will try to persuade Bush to reconsider his decision not to sign the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. The most immediate issue will be Britain's determination to solve the problem of Iran's suspected nuclear ambitions using only diplomatic means. Although Bush has stated that the United States will not accept a nuclear-armed Iran, British foreign secretary Jack Straw said last week, "I don't see any circumstances in which military action would be justified against Iran full stop."

Perhaps Bush will not need to be reminded that, given the forthcoming British election year, politicians have to take certain steps in order to appease their constituencies. Washington will most likely accommodate Blair if his goal is active and visible U.S.-British partnership in promoting a successful Gaza disengagement and the emergence of a

peaceful, moderate Palestinian leadership that is prepared to implement Roadmap obligations and, eventually, resume peace negotiations. His entreaties will likely fall on deaf ears, however, if he is bent on urging the Bush administration to adopt a "diplomacy now!" approach that would sidestep disengagement and move quickly to the later steps of the Roadmap.

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

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