

Bush and Blair:

Friends Indeed

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Brief Analysis

Tomorrow's meeting in Washington, D.C., between President George W. Bush and visiting British prime minister Tony Blair was scheduled before the recent outbreaks of violence in Iraq and before Wednesday's announcement of U.S. support for Israel's plan to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza. But both subjects will top the agenda of talks between the two leaders, and decisions emerging from the meeting could shape international affairs for years to come. Despite the fact that both men need each other's support at the moment, significant political and policy differences between the two persist.

Blair's Isolation at Home

Blair must enjoy coming to Washington. Much more than at home, he appears to be universally popular among Americans, admired for his steadfast support, particularly since the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. But being a friend of Bush comes at a rising domestic cost, even among Blair's closest allies in the Labour government. On Sunday, the Observer's political columnist suggested that "virtually all of the Government is quietly desperate for Senator Kerry to unseat George Bush [in the November presidential elections]."

The British cabinet contains several members -- perhaps even a majority -- that are unhappy about the war in Iraq. The Observer continued, "One of the most pro-war members [says] that he finds the Bush Administration 'very, very difficult to deal with.' And why? 'Because they are simply so right-wing.'" Blair has imposed public discipline, the columnist reported, by banning his colleagues from voicing any preferences about the outcome of November's polling and has forbidden them from crossing the Atlantic to provide any campaign support to their "Democrat[ic] cousins." Blair is personally thought to view Senator John Kerry's attitude toward the war as problematic. And Kerry's attacks on Bush over manipulating intelligence have also hit Blair's weak spot.

Nevertheless, the British leader appears to be pushing the agenda forward rather than reexamining the past. A far more eloquent speaker than Bush, Blair can turn a useful phrase with a pen as well. A column he wrote, also published last weekend in the Observer, may have been ghosted in the detail, but was otherwise pure Blair in outline: "We are locked in an historic struggle in Iraq. Were we to fail, which we shall not, it is more than 'the power

of America' that would be defeated. The hope of freedom and religious tolerance in Iraq would be snuffed out. Dictators would rejoice, fanatics and terrorists would be triumphant." The column well represented Blair's Middle East perspectives. Answering his own question, "Have we the stomach to see it through?" Blair wrote, "I believe we do. And the rest of the world must hope we do." But he continued, "None of this is to say we do not have to learn and listen. There is an agenda that could unite the majority of the world. It would be pursuing terrorism and rogue states on the one hand and actively remedying the causes around which they flourish on the other." These remedies, he listed in order, include solving the Palestinian issue, addressing poverty and development, encouraging democracy in the Middle East, and pursuing interreligious dialogue.

The Bush-Sharon Meeting

It is not clear whether London had advance knowledge of the details of the understanding worked out this week between Bush and Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon. In a brief comment, Downing Street announced that Blair (at the end of a family vacation in Bermuda) welcomed Israel's intent to dismantle all settlements in the Gaza Strip as well as some in the West Bank. Appearing to have missed the significance of the Washington agreement, the statement called for the international community, led by the Quartet (the United States, Russia, European Union and United Nations), to inject new life into the peace process in accordance with the Quartet's Roadmap.

The British view has always been that Israel should withdraw to the 1967 lines in the absence of an agreement with the Palestinians to the contrary. Despite the financial and political corruption exhibited by the Palestinian Authority (PA), Britain continues to offer advice and support to the Palestinian Security Services, including technical assistance and training. Asked to comment on an Israeli report this week that British diplomats and intelligence officers of MI6 have formulated a post-withdrawal security plan for Gaza based on co-opting the Fatah Tanzim, al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a British official admitted that working with the PA differed from working with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (which believe in the destruction of the State of Israel). However, the official was not prepared to comment on MI6's involvement with the reported plan.

Other Differences

In talks with Bush tomorrow, Blair will presumably discuss his meeting in Tripoli last month with Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi. The British leader is believed to have found the mercurial but apparently reformed Libyan dictator as "interesting, not mad." It is scarcely a formulation that will persuade Bush of the need to offer an early presidential handshake. On Iran, Washington's concerns about Tehran's nuclear ambitions seem far more acute than London's. The subject did not figure into Blair's newspaper column, apart from -- perhaps obliquely -- a line about terrorism and unstable, weapons-of-mass-destruction-possessing states being two sides of the same coin. Indeed, Iran appears to be at the heart of U.S.-British policy differences over Iraq; Washington is determined to avoid giving Tehran a role there, while London is more acquiescent.

Apart from the disagreements with U.S. policy among senior British politicians, there is scarcely an official -- civilian or military -- to be found in London who is not privately critical of U.S. decisionmaking in Iraq. British officials consider their own approach to be "cautious" while they view the Americans as "heavy-handed." For their part, U.S. officials view "the Brits" as being soft on dissent with little interest in pursuing the White House vision of a democratic Iraq. Blair will probably be asked to send more troops to Iraq to match the additional commitment of the United States, but British forces are already stretched.

The question of reinforcements for Iraq could be a key indicator in Friday's talks. This issue will be unpopular in Britain just as Blair faces important local and European elections in June. Given the competence and loyalty of the White House and Downing Street staffs, Friday's talks are unlikely to yield any official public disagreement. But unless measures are taken, other lingering sores across the Middle East policy agenda could fester into significant --

and public -- problems in the future.

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

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