

Bush and Blair: Tensions in the Relationship

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

This week, speaking at the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell, after mentioning the war in Iraq, declared, "no challenge, no opportunity, is more important, more pressing, than the quest to put an end to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians." Such wording is similar to sentiments expressed in recent weeks by British prime minister Tony Blair. However, there are indications that Washington's view about Israeli-Palestinian issues sharply differs from that of London.

Labour Party Views

Last week, on the day Blair flew to Washington for a summit with President George W. Bush at Camp David, the London Financial Times, the U.S. edition of which is widely read in the Bush administration, carried an op-ed by Lord Christopher Haskins, a former British food company chairman whom Blair appointed to the House of Lords after he made financial contributions to the Labour Party. In the article, Lord Haskins, not previously known for his views on the Middle East, argued that "a settlement of the Palestinian question is the only way of reducing the threat of international terrorism and abating tensions between the Muslim world and the West." Accusing Americans of being "unlikely to abandon their partisan approach," Lord Haskins argued that Blair should stand up to [the Americans], tabling "a motion at the [United Nations] requiring Israel to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders, while insisting all its neighbors recognise its right to exist." Lord Haskins argued that this tactic would enable Blair to rebuild Britain's relations with the rest of the world and Blair's own credibility with the European Union, as well as help "rebuild unity in a deeply divided Labour Party."

The article was seen as accurately expressing the strength of feeling in the governing Labour Party against military action in Iraq; also revealing was the article's exposure of party members' unhappiness with the closeness of Blair's relationship to Bush and, in Lord Haskins' words, "the wild and dangerous policies of the Republican extremists." One newspaper suggested that the article had been encouraged by Blair's office as a way of illustrating for Washington the domestic political predicament that the British prime minister is facing, while at the same time airing his personal views of the way forward on peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Given the record of officials close to Blair trying to influence or "spin" news, this latter explanation is far from implausible.

Blair's Political Capital with Washington

The Middle East peace process was indeed one of the topics of conversation at Camp David, along with progress in the Iraq war and the future reconstruction of that country. On the latter, Blair is anxious to involve the United Nations (UN). Some indication of the differences between the two administrations on the so-called "road map" for peace between Israel and the Palestinians was discernible in the careful way that the issue was addressed at the end-of-summit news conference. The political editor of the BBC, who was in the front row at that conference, later wrote, "One of the few genuinely tense moments . . . was when the Prime Minister went out of his way to praise the President's support for the Middle East 'road map' and a two-state settlement. [President Bush] didn't look wildly happy."

On his return to London, a Blair official anonymously briefed a political correspondent from the London Times who reported on March 29 that "Tony Blair is ready to spend all of the political capital he has earned in Washington on a desperate attempt to revive the Middle East peace process." The journalist said the two leaders "devoted more time to the peace process than they did to the United Nations' role in post-war Iraq." He also noted that "Blair is aware that Labour [members of parliament] will see his attempts to 'move forward' on the peace process as the real test of his special relationship with the U.S. President, which many believe has been preserved at a very high price." The "Whitehall source" (a description that, in context, means someone speaking for Blair), told the London Times that the Iraq war threatens to fuel Arab extremism and undermine Abu Mazen, the new Palestinian prime minister: "This could be the last chance we have for a secular, modern, Palestinian leadership."

There is little doubt that the Israeli government has already become worried by Blair's vision for the Middle East. British foreign secretary Jack Straw has said that he believes Israel should basically withdraw to the 1967 borders, with some small adjustments. On March 27, the British ambassador to Israel was summoned to Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem and told to convey to London "the severity with which Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom view the latest British statements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." The Israeli government had been particularly outraged at Straw's comments regarding "double standards" on UN Security Council resolutions dealing with Israel versus those dealing with Iraq. Today Straw took issue with U.S. views on Syria and Iran -- articulated in the last few days by both Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Powell -- by declaring that Britain would have "nothing whatsoever to do" with any move against either country.

Where British Policy Is Headed

Political analysts in London are of two minds as to whether Blair's views on the Middle East peace process represent heartfelt conviction or domestic political expediency. Despite presenting himself as a "conviction" politician, he has developed a reputation for opting for the short-term political fix. Blair did not sack his cabinet colleague, Claire Short, last month even when she called his Iraq policy "reckless." A critic of both the Bush administration and Israeli policy, and a strong advocate for a major UN role in Iraq, she is now a member of the British "war cabinet." Today Short announced that Pentagon proposals for postwar Iraq would be "completely illegal and politically unfeasible."

On the Middle East peace process, there are indications that Blair has been exerting pressure on Israel for the last several months. His close associate, Lord Michael Levy, in charge of fundraising for the Labour Party, has reportedly visited both Washington and at least one conservative Arab state in the Persian Gulf during that period; in Washington he had talks with Elliott Abrams, senior director for Near East affairs at the National Security Council. Lord Levy avoids public comments other than to say that he is accountable to Blair. He has no official position -- a wealthy man, he reportedly funds his own trips. He was close to Ehud Barak when the latter was prime minister, but his relations with Ariel Sharon are said to be cool if not frigid. (Lord Levy also maintains a second home in Israel where his son works for former Israeli Labor Party minister Yossi Beilin.)

Despite the public display of warmth and unity, the early indications of tension between Washington and London on whether the Iraq and Israeli-Palestinian challenges are parallel or sequential seem likely to persist.

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

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