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Present and Post-Blair British Middle East Policy

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I wish you pleasant reading.

Prof. Efraim Inbar
BESA Center

PRESENT AND POST-BLAIR BRITISH MIDDLE EAST POLICY

Neill Lochery

INTRODUCTION

On November 13th, 2006, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair came the closest to articulating his current vision of a British Middle Eastern policy.¹ This policy contained worrying news for Israelis, who for years had viewed Mr. Blair as a strong supporter of Israel and defender of its interests.² It is interesting to note the timing of Mr. Blair's speech, given his intentions to leave office in 2007.³ In other words, the Prime Minister clearly attempted to introduce a long-term foreign policy framework for his successor.

The wider theme of Mr. Blair's speech was the importance of Britain's partnership with both America and Europe. Mr. Blair's Middle Eastern policies cannot be divorced from his perception of the two key relationships for the UK: namely the United States and Europe. He told guests at the Lord Mayor of London's annual Banquet that the surest route to the destruction of Britain's true national interest would be to give up either relationship, both of whom are suited to the country.⁴

The majority of the speech, however, focused on the Middle East. This was especially significant because the day after the speech Blair testified via a video link to the James Baker's Iraq Group in the USA.⁵ He reportedly repeated the themes of his speech in the evidence he gave to the Iraq Study Group.⁶

To quote from the text of the speech that covered the Middle East:

... A major part of the answer to Iraq lies not in Iraq itself but outside it, in the whole of the region where the same forces are at work, where the roots of this global terrorism are to be found, where the extremism flourishes, with a propaganda that may be, indeed is, totally false; but is, nonetheless, attractive

to much of the Arab street. That is what I call a "whole Middle East" strategy.

There is a fundamental misunderstanding that this is about changing policy on Syria and Iran. First, those two countries do not at all share identical interests. But in any event that is not where we start. On the contrary, we should start with Israel/Palestine. That is the core. We should then make progress on Lebanon. We should unite all moderate Arab and Moslem voices behind a push for peace in those countries but also in Iraq. We should be standing up for, empowering, respecting those with a moderate and modern view of the faith of Islam everywhere.⁷

In reality, Blair, in declaring Israel-Palestine as the core problem of the Middle East, appeared to be siding with elements of the British elite who view Israel and its relationship with the Palestinians as the root cause of the trouble in the Middle East.⁸ This group is comprised primarily of Mr. Blair's Cabinet colleagues, the Labour Party he leads, many officials and diplomats at the Foreign Office (both present and past) as well as the so-called intellectual and artistic elites in the UK.⁹

Mr. Blair's remarks were also a coded confirmation of his belief in the creation of a viable Palestinian state, and as a result an Israeli withdrawal to approximately 1967 lines in the West Bank.¹⁰ From this speech we can also deduce the obvious: Iraq remains the British priority in the Middle East and that all policy revolves around managing the violence at levels that would allow the British to withdraw from the southern parts of the country.¹¹ In other words, Mr. Blair appeared willing to pay for ending the war in Iraq with Israeli currency (political code for pressuring Israel into making territorial concessions).¹²

In some regards, Mr. Blair's speech was reminiscent of Anthony Eden's Guildhall speech in 1955 in which the former Prime Minister discussed Israeli territorial withdrawal from the 1949 Armistice lines as a means to securing peace with the Arabs and specifically President Abdul Gamal Nasser.¹³ Moreover, there are clear linkages

between the Suez Crisis of 1956 (a mere year after Eden's Guildhall speech) and the Iraq War.¹⁴ As an aside, it is worth remembering that Israeli's public and hostile reaction to Eden's speech led to a poisoning of relations.¹⁵ Relations only warmed after the two countries found common interest over Egypt that resulted in the Suez War/Crisis of 1956.¹⁶ Additionally, along with other issues, the speech poisoned Anglo-Israeli relations in late 1956 to early 1957. To date, there has not been a similar official Israeli reaction to Mr. Blair's remarks, made almost exactly 51 years later.¹⁷

In truth, Mr. Blair had come under strong pressure from his colleagues to change both his strategy on Iraq and his seemingly pro-Israel policy. During Israel's war with Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, Blair's Israel policy has come under great criticism (particularly from within his own Cabinet).¹⁸ During the war, Mr. Blair's own position and authority were under intense pressure. There were growing signs of an internal revolt within his own Cabinet and party with calls for him to resign and hand over power to his Chancellor (Minister of Finance), Gordon Brown. Though Mr. Blair's apparent pro-Israel policies were not the reason for this rebellion, they highlighted just how much he was personally out of touch with his Cabinet and party.¹⁹

BRITISH POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST UNDER BLAIR: A DUAL BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST

It is an exaggeration to suggest that there are two sets of British policies towards the Middle East, and specifically the Arab-Israeli conflict: one run out of Number 10 Downing Street, and the other out of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. There are, however, differences and tensions between these two offices regarding UK policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and more significantly the management of the war in Iraq. These tensions were publicly highlighted in 2004 when fifty-two leading ex-diplomats took an unprecedented step and published an open letter criticizing Mr. Blair's policies in Iraq, in the Israel-Palestine conflict and in his relationship with President Bush and America.²⁰

These tensions were highlighted more recently during the 2006 Lebanon War. While Mr. Blair was seen bravely doing the right thing for Israel and understanding the key issues of the conflict (according to Benjamin Netanyahu), the Foreign Office was adopting a much more skeptical approach towards Israel.²¹ This skepticism was illustrated in attempts by the Foreign Office to adopt a more measured response and on the Palestinian track encouraging Israel to make political and economic concessions to the Palestinians. In truth, the history of the Foreign Office's relationship with Israel is a difficult one.²²

HISTORY OF THE UK POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST

Before outlining and examining in detail UK policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict under Blair it is worth understanding both the historical origins and development of UK policy towards the region and to look at how current British foreign policy is formed and influenced. To illustrate this point it is worth looking at the birth and early years of the state of Israel.

In the words of the Foreign Office's Annual Report of 1949 on Israel:

Israel is young, intensely chauvinistic and highly-strung. Its people suffer from an acute inferiority complex and are preoccupied with themselves and their own affairs. They are incapable of seeing the other side's point of view or, on occasion, of admitting its existence. Thus opposition or even criticism by others must be due to anti-Israel or anti-Semitic feelings.²³

The tone of this Foreign Office Annual Report became more condescending to Israelis when it claimed that *de facto* British recognition of the state of Israel, and the establishment of diplomatic relations, had done much to flatter the pride of this abnormally sensitive people.²⁴ The report also claimed that the Israelis were paranoid of the British government, and the Foreign Office in particular, whose Machiavellian hand was seen by Israel in every unwelcome development to the Jewish state.²⁵ This paranoia, however, appeared to be a double edged sword; the Foreign Office

suspected that behind Israeli action lay a plan to apply pressure to get something out of the British.²⁶ That something was usually arms.

In truth, the relationship between the UK (FO) and Israel was complicated by the experience of the British Mandate in Palestine, and by the conflict that led to the creation of the state of Israel in May 1948. Israel looked to the UK in its quest for Western allies, and perhaps most importantly as a supplier of weapons. In general, British policy towards Israel was shaped by national self-interest. In practical terms, this policy revolved around the regional defence system between Britain and the Arab states.²⁷ Within this framework, Israel was neither strategically nor economically significant to the interests of the UK. Furthermore, the FO viewed Israel as both a real and a potential threat to British strategic and economic interests in the Middle East. In simple terms, any cooperation with Israel risked damaging the UK's friendship with key Arab states with whom good relations were much more important than Israel.²⁸

So why is the Foreign Office perceived to be rather unsympathetic to Israel both historically and in the era of the Blair administration? Outlined below are five possible explanations for the alleged hostility between the Foreign Office and Israel.

1. Colonial Hangover

The British were effectively forced out of Palestine by Zionist military and political resistance to their presence in the area. Eventually, when the cost of maintaining the size of a British garrison in Palestine in both economic and human terms outweighed the strategic value of the territory, the British handed responsibility for the governance of Palestine to the United Nations. However, the decision of the UN to propose a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute angered the British. Since 1948, the Foreign Office conduct with regard to the Zionist state has been characterised by a sense of dislike and distrust.

2. The Strategic Value of the Arabs to Britain

Throughout the British Mandate in Palestine (1922-1948) and after, the Foreign Office always argued for the strategic importance of the Arab countries rather than the Zionists. During the 1930's there was

genuine concern among key personnel in Whitehall that the Arabs might be tempted by Hitler to ally with Nazi Germany. During the period before WWII, this resulted in considerable appeasement of the Arabs and their growing nationalist aspirations; nowhere more so than in Palestine where British foreign policy was directed at checking Zionist nationalist aspirations.

After the establishment of Israel, British policy has been guided by two related aims: protecting the supply of oil from the region and maintaining as much influence within the Arab political and economic elite as possible. In recent decades, the economic focus has shifted towards developing lucrative new markets for selling arms to the Arab states, ranging from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to the oil-rich Persian Gulf states.

The idea that the Arabs have been more useful than the Israelis to the attainment of self-serving British economic and political goals in the Middle East is rational rather than a result of prejudice. The Foreign Office has naturally supported states that offer the greatest strategic value to Britain. The FO's policy towards Israel is merely a reflection of the larger political and economic preference for the Arab states rather than a specific policy against the Zionist presence in the region.²⁹

3. The Lawrence of Arabia Old School

Among the political and intellectual classes in Israel, the so-called Foreign Office love affair with the image and work of Lawrence of Arabia is a popular explanation for British Foreign policy in the region. During the 1950's and 1960's, it was often alleged in Israel that Arabists who perceived themselves as modern day Lawrences staffed the Foreign Office. Career development at the Foreign Office was often based on service in a British Embassy in the Arab world. To be posted to the British Embassy in Tel Aviv was often regarded as the end of a career; similar to a posting in Northern Ireland during the height of the conflict in the 1970's and 1980's. This somewhat crude mixture of ideas and influences upon advancement within the Foreign Office contributed to an alleged pro-Arab bias.

4. Israel as an Occupying Power – Post-1967

When one talks to recent Foreign Secretaries and officials at the Foreign Office, it is clear that almost all regard Israel's policies towards the Palestinians since 1967 as the main reason for the tensions in the relationship. Many cite Israel as an aggressor state that flouts international law to maximize its control over the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This group argues that if Israel does the right thing or is seen as doing the right thing – allowing the creation of a Palestinian state in 100 percent of the West Bank and Gaza Strip – then relations between the Foreign Office and Israel will thaw and eventually warm. Supporters of this explanation point to the fact that when Israel was making generous political concessions to the Palestinians between 1992-96, the Foreign Office was extremely supportive of the Rabin/Peres' governments.

5. Anti-Semitism at the Foreign Office

The belief that anti-Semitism exists at the Foreign Office is perhaps the least convincing and the most difficult to measure. The claim was raised during the tenure of Ernest Bevin as Foreign Secretary (July 1945 to March 1951), and more recently during the current difficulties in the Middle East peace process. The fact that a number of Jews have served in senior positions in the Foreign Office further complicates this issue. People who support this point of view downplay the rational options mentioned previously and argue that there are other regimes that the Foreign Office views as more barbaric than Israel and yet maintains cordial ties.³⁰

THE RISE OF A MORE PRESIDENTIAL PRIME MINISTER

The Foreign Office, however, is no longer the major instrument of British foreign policy, either in its formation or implementation. As a result, much of the exoticness and glamour of the Foreign Office has decreased. There is a case to be made that the influence of the Foreign Office waned with the gradual decline and fall of the British Empire. The lowering of the Union Jack in Hong Kong marked the last major ceremonial act of the empire. The truth, however, is much more stark. The powers of the Foreign Office have been stripped away by successive Prime Ministers from both sides of the House of Commons

who have developed a more presidential style of leadership. The days of *primus inter pares* for Prime Minister's have long vanished.

To a certain extent the decline of the Foreign Office can be traced back to the era of Margaret Thatcher. She succeeded 'Gentle Jim Callaghan' in 1979 and ruled for over a decade until late 1990. There are a number of complex reasons that brought Mrs. Thatcher to power.³¹ Thatcher, in short, had little time for the Foreign Office, initially regarding it, along with the Treasury, as 'bastions of compliancy'.³² Once Thatcher's confidence in foreign affairs grew, she was determined to take on the Foreign Office and her own Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington (the last of the genuine aristocrats to hold the position).³³ It was the Falklands War, however, that gave Thatcher the opportunity to finally move against the Foreign Office.³⁴ Thatcher blamed the FO for the British diplomatic bungling of the period leading up to the Argentinean invasion.³⁵ John Nott, the Defence Secretary, points out in his memoirs that Lord Carrington had argued strongly for the retention of the HMS Endurance, whose planned withdrawal from service played an important role in the Argentinean invasion.³⁶

From this point onwards, however, a deeply trustful Thatcher started to develop her own foreign policy unit at Number 10. The Thatcher revolution, in other words, reached the door of the Foreign Office, and the office never fully regained the power it lost to the expanded Prime Minister's office.

In the current era, the so-called New World Order of foreign policy remains very much in the hands of the Prime Minister and his relevant advisors. For example, Tony Blair probably devotes considerably more time towards foreign affairs than to domestic politics. Though the shift towards a more presidential style in the UK is far from complete (certainly when compared with the American executive branch) it has shifted policy focus away from the Foreign Office. This is largely true in the absence of a pressing international crisis. The Foreign Office, as a result, has had to adjust to a downgraded role. The Middle East fits into this new *modus operandi* of the Foreign Office: its officials try to carve out new roles for the FO to increase its influence in the region.

BRITISH POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT UNDER BLAIR

To evaluate the Prime Minister's dominance in British foreign policy-making, it is important to outline and analyze Mr. Blair's policies towards the Middle East. In terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and specifically the Israel-Palestine track, there are four distinct time periods.

1. 1997 – 1999: *The Era of Ethical Foreign Policy?*

British policy was hard on the new Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. There was strong opposition to facts on the ground – the major focus being on attempts to prevent the building of the Har Homa neighborhood. After assuming office, the largely inexperienced Netanyahu attempted to devote the majority of his time to domestic issues.³⁷ With the deterioration of the Middle East peace process, however, Mr. Blair was forced to become more involved than he would have liked in the region. Mr. Blair's involvement in the process could not be divorced from his administration's close relationship with the Clinton Presidency. Mr. Blair did not carry the same emotional or political attachment to the Oslo Accords as President Clinton, who viewed the implication of the agreements as the legacy of his good friend, the assassinated Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin. He did, however, agree with the Clinton administration's assessment that the Oslo process was the only game in town and much work was required for the accord's successful implementation.

During the first-term Blair administration, the Foreign Office was led by Robin Cook who was not a close colleague of the Prime Minister, but who was extremely popular with the Labour Party faithful. Mr. Cook took a strong line against Israel and blamed Netanyahu for the increasingly problematic implementation of the Oslo Accords. Though Mr. Cook's assessment of Mr. Netanyahu and his government did not differ widely from his bosses view, he pursued a more vigorous campaign to highlight what he saw as Israeli intransigence towards the Palestinian Authority. Much of the tension between Mr. Cook (and the Foreign Office he led) and the Netanyahu administration came to a head with the decision of the Israeli

government to build a new Jewish Housing project, Har Homa, in East Jerusalem in 1997.

Mr. Cook's visit to Israel in March 1998 marked the low point in UK-Israeli relations. During the visit, Mr. Cook traveled to the disputed area of Har Homa and initially wanted to be escorted by officials from the PA. The site of Mr. Cook at Har Homa surrounded by Israeli protestors (some of whom appeared to be jostling him) and security officials, sadly remains one of the definitive images of the first Blair government's Middle Eastern policy. Later that day, Mr. Netanyahu refused to keep a dinner appointment with Mr. Cook at the King David Hotel – a deliberate snub to the Foreign Secretary and his *modus operandi*.

In reality, behind Mr. Cook's bluster was a real challenge for Israel, and an excellent illustration of the tensions between the Foreign Office and Israel at this time. Central to this was Mr. Cook's attempt to develop a wider role for the European Union in the peace process, which had been stalled since the decision of the Israeli government to start building Har Homa the previous year. The criticism of Mr. Cook's visit did not only come from the Israeli government. An editorial in the *Times of London* argued that if the stated purpose of Mr. Cook's Middle East tour was the promotion of the European Union's role in the peace process, it was difficult to see how this could have been advanced by raising the profile of the most contentious and explosive issue in the region.³⁸

Upon his return to the UK, Mr. Cook defended his actions in the House of Commons. As Mr. Cook put it:

On my visit to Har Homa, I am absolutely clear that I was right to underline the long-standing opposition of Britain and Europe to the expansion of settlements on occupied territory. I fully agree with Lord Hurd, who said at the time that I was right to proceed with the visit because to abandon the visit would have been to show that I was abandoning the policy... My hon. friend is right to draw attention to the fact that my visit to the Middle East – and particularly to Har Homa –

achieved the full support of my colleagues throughout the EU, and has had much support throughout Europe.³⁹

Though Mr. Blair publicly offered his total support for Mr. Cook's visit to Har Homa, there was anger in Downing Street that the visit had made the Prime Minister's own visit a month later to the region (and particularly Israel) more difficult.⁴⁰ It came as little surprise when Mr. Blair was reelected in 2001, that he replaced Mr. Cook with Jack Straw. As well as being a close political ally of Mr. Blair (something that Mr. Cook certainly was not), Mr. Straw's style was much less dramatic and his world view more in line with the Prime Minister's.

2. 1999 – September 11, 2001

Anglo-Israeli relations warmed considerably with the election of Ehud Barak in the 1999 Israeli elections. Within Whitehall there was a sense that Mr. Barak was the natural successor to Yitzhak Rabin and that he would reinvigorate the Oslo peace process with the Palestinians, although there was some initial disappointment that Mr. Barak did not offer major concessions to the Palestinians. Indeed, Mr. Barak indicated that he was unconvinced about the prospects of implementing the interim stages of the accords. In truth, Mr. Barak let it be known that he favored attempting to reach a deal with Syria first before moving onto an agreement on Palestinian final status issues. This came as little to surprise to Whitehall, given the fact that as Chief of Staff in the IDF, Barak had advised Yitzhak Rabin to adopt the same order of priorities when he came to power in 1992. Downing Street in particular was seen to accept the widely acknowledged Israeli policy of only making concessions on one-track of the peace process at a time. The feeling within Downing Street was that little progress was better than nothing.

In retrospect, the treatment and understanding of internal domestic restraints afforded to Mr. Barak by both Downing Street and the Foreign Office was much friendlier than that given to Mr. Netanyahu. This fit the previous black-and-white vision of consecutive British government's attitudes towards Israeli politics and the peace process. To put it succinctly, Britain felt the Israeli Labour party was good for peace (willing to make concessions), and the Likud party bad for

peace (much more reluctant to make concessions). The fact a Likud Prime Minister authorized the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai as part of the Camp David Accords between Israeli and Egypt mattered little.

At a press conference following Mr. Barak's meeting with Mr. Blair on July 20th, 1999, Mr. Blair could hardly contain his enthusiasm for Mr. Barak and his seeming willingness to follow the land for peace strategy of his Labour Party predecessors. As Mr. Blair put it:

I just wanted to put on record our admiration for what he (Barak) has achieved so far and my 101 percent support for all that he is doing for Israel and the Middle East peace process.⁴¹

Later the same year, in the shadow of potential Israeli-Syria talks, the two met again in London. Once more, Mr. Blair voiced enthusiastic support for Mr. Barak saying that he had raised a beacon of hope for people all over the world facing similar conflicts. Mr. Blair further explained that these conflicts can be resolved if there is political leadership and will to resolve them.⁴²

Following the breakdown of the Camp David summit between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Mr. Blair led the European criticism of Mr. Arafat, arguing that the deal on the table at Camp David was the best he (Arafat) would get. There were increasing doubts over whether Mr. Arafat would ever agree to a peace deal with Israel. As a result of this judgment, more attention was given to what became known as the post-Arafat period. Both Downing Street and the Foreign Office hoped a more flexible Palestinian leader would come to power such as Abu Mazen or Abu Ala.

The start of the so-called Second Palestinian *Intifada* complicated Anglo-Israeli relations. In some respects, this appeared to be a separation of cause and effect. Many in the Foreign Office, together with the various anti-Israel elite, saw Ariel Sharon's walk to the Temple Mount as the major cause of the violence. Initially there was little debate in the UK about the central orchestration of the violence and the fact that it appeared to suit the political survival needs of Yasser Arafat. As a result, many key officials in the UK saw the Second *Intifada* as simply a rerun of the first one.

Downing Street was more circumspect, continuing to support Mr. Barak, whose political position was weakening by the day, and blaming Arafat for the failure of negotiations. This policy was, however, heavily prefixed by the feeling that Mr. Sharon's walk was provocative and helped ignite the fuse for the resulting violence. In political terms, there was a sense within Downing Street that everything should be done to help Mr. Barak. In reality, he was a lost cause and was likely to lose the January 2001 election.

Mr. Sharon's landslide victory over Mr. Barak was greeted with both a sense of resignation and concern by the Blair government. Comparisons between Mr. Sharon and Winston Churchill, which were highlighted in some newspaper articles at the time, fell largely on deaf ears. The Lebanon War of 1982, and especially the events at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Beirut, continued to define Mr. Sharon's reputation in the UK.

3. Post 9/11 – Iraq War

The events of 9/11 led to profound changes in Mr. Blair's Middle East policy, and therefore British policy was closely linked to US efforts in the region. Perhaps the most significant development regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict was the emergence of the debate in the UK as to whether Israel was the front-line against global terror or was at the root cause of it? To date, this debate dominates the philosophical thinking behind the UK's policy towards Israel and the Middle East. In terms of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, it initially appeared to be business as usual with another run in between an Israeli Prime Minister and the British Foreign Secretary (Jack Straw). The controversy this time was over comments made by Mr. Straw in an Iranian newspaper prior to his tour of the region in which he appeared to blame the Israeli government for the terrorist attacks against its citizens.⁴³ Mr. Sharon cancelled a meeting with Mr. Straw and only agreed to meet with the Foreign Secretary after a personal phone call from Mr. Blair.⁴⁴

Mr. Blair appeared to adopt the philosophical line that Israel, in alliance with moderate Arab states, was the best buffer to the rise of radical Islam in the region and beyond. He was strongly supportive of

both American and European-led peace initiatives, however, European plans usually ran counter to those of the US. In other words, Mr. Blair's growing closeness with President Bush following the events of 9/11 translated into a near merging of UK and US policy aims towards the Middle East in general, and the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular.

4. 2003 – Present

The Iraq War and the difficult state of affairs that emerged coincided with the Israeli Prime Minister's increasing flexibility in making concessions on the Palestinian track. Though there was skepticism about the unilateral nature of the Israeli disengagement plan, there was also a growing sense in Whitehall that Mr. Sharon was the man to reach an accord with the Palestinians. As Mr. Sharon's plan started to emerge in greater detail and his statements and actions confirmed that he was actively pursuing the path of disengagement, British support for him personally grew, especially in Downing Street. Indeed Mr. Sharon was a welcome guest at Number 10 with routine photo opportunities with Mr. Blair at the front door – something that Number 10 would not have granted the Israeli Prime Minister just a few years earlier.

After Ehud Olmert replaced Mr. Sharon, Mr. Blair has attempted to develop close ties with the Israeli government (even when this decreased his popularity within the UK). However, Mr. Blair's political strength was rapidly evaporating, partly through genuine unpopularity from the Iraq War, and also by his decision not to seek a fourth term in office. This made it more difficult to support Israel – particularly during the Israel-Hezbollah War of 2006 – when Israel was extremely unpopular with the majority of the UK elite and general public.

Trade Links

Bilateral trade links between the UK and Israel flourished during the Blair-era. As a result, bilateral business relations between the two countries are becoming more important for the UK. As the British embassy in Tel Aviv states:

Trade relations between Israel and the UK continue to flourish. Britain has traditionally enjoyed good trading relations with Israel and is seen as a natural trading partner.⁴⁵

In statistical terms, UK exports to Israel reached £1.35 billion in 2005. Moreover, annual bilateral trade between Britain and Israel has exceeded £2 billion for the past five years and is forecast to reach £3 billion by 2010. In exact figures, in 2005 UK-Israeli trade was £2.38 billion, slightly up from 2004 when the total was £2.34 billion.⁴⁶ Currently, Israel is the UK's 23rd largest market worldwide, and significantly its largest individual export market and trading partner in the region.⁴⁷

UK POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE POST-BLAIR ERA

There are several scenarios regarding the management of UK policy towards the Middle East in the post-Blair era. The two most likely developments, however, are discussed below.

1. Brown and Domestic Political Realities

Sometime in 2007 – probably after the local elections in May – Gordon Brown (currently Chancellor of the Exchequer) will probably succeed Tony Blair as Prime Minister. At present there are no other viable candidates with the exception of the Home Secretary, John Reid. Most other leaders are concentrating their efforts on the race for Deputy Leader.

Until recently, little was known about Mr. Brown's foreign policy leanings with the exception of his less favorable view of the Iraq War.⁴⁸ Though he never publicly criticized the waging or the management of the war, he rarely referred to it in his speeches and writings. Instead, much of Mr. Brown's efforts have been concentrated on efforts to alleviate third world debt.⁴⁹

In terms of the Middle East it is fair to expect Mr. Brown to be pragmatic regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. Given his love of economics, Mr. Brown will probably devote attention to improving

the Palestinian economy.⁵⁰ He also strongly believes conflict management and resolution arise from economic improvement and will support this argument with the Northern Irish model. It is unclear over his awareness of poverty levels in Israel, which, for a Western style democracy, remain worryingly high.

Opinion polls in the UK currently show the Labour Party trailing the Conservatives by an increasingly large margin.⁵¹ Labour's position in the polls can be attributed to ruling party factors – such as electoral fatigue by both Blair and the party, and by the unsuccessful war in Iraq. As previously discussed, much of Mr. Blair's Middle East policy is unpopular with key sectors of the Labour Party and its constituency, notably Mr. Blair's strong support for Israel. Mr. Brown might be tempted to distance himself from this with a more critical approach to Israel.

Perhaps the key issue is the growing strength (numerically and organizationally) of Muslims holding inner city seats (most of which are traditional Labour strongholds). Though Labour's majorities in these seats is often very large, there is evidence of an organized attempt by Muslim groups to target some of these seats: either by attempting to displace the sitting Labour MP or to encourage Muslims to vote for other candidates in the election. The increasing influence of Muslim groups could present an obstacle to a future British Prime Minister developing stronger ties with Israel.

2. A Conservative Victory

The second scenario is a Conservative victory in the next election, scheduled for 2010. The current two key figures in foreign policymaking in the Tory Party are the leader, David Cameron, and the Shadow Foreign Secretary, William Hague. In truth, the latter did not endear himself to the Israeli government or to his own party leader, with his comments criticizing Israel's actions in the 2006 Hezbollah war.⁵²

In terms of the Middle East, it is possible to identify three groupings within the Tory party. The first of these are 'the Arabists' who share

the Foreign Office's anti-Israel outlook. Others members of this group simply view the Arab states as more important to the UK interests than Israel. The second grouping is 'the Non-Committed'. This group includes people such as Douglas Hurd who view the conflict as a dirty civil war and do not enjoy dealing with either side.⁵³ The final group is 'Pro-Israel', whose members often have strong links to business. Many members of this group are Jewish, and a significant number of them are important donors to the party.

I would caution against being too specific about membership of these groups. It is worth noting, as in the Labour Party, just because an individual MP or Lord is sympathetic to Israel, it does not mean that they will support the country in the House of Commons or in the House of Lords. Finally, the centralization of candidate selection for key seats in the next election has led to canvassing by both sides of the Arab-Israeli lobbying divide for these newly selected seats.

CONCLUSIONS

It is too soon to judge the success of Mr. Blair's Middle Eastern policies. In the short- to medium-term, Iraq will dominate Blair's legacy. Historically speaking, it is still early for the rebuilding of Iraq. Despite criticism of Mr. Blair in this paper, the Prime Minister has accomplished some achievements in the region. In Israel, Mr. Blair appears to have finally cast off the shadow of the British Mandate period that led to tensions in Anglo-Israeli relations. Economically, Mr. Blair and his likely successor, Mr. Brown, can point to strong trade links between the two countries. Politically, while not well liked by the Palestinians, Mr. Blair is at least respected as the major European statesman of the day.

Truth be told, Mr. Blair could not have done much more for Middle Eastern peace than he has already managed to do. The increasingly apparent failure of US policy in the region is not his fault, and it is questionable just how much influence he actually holds in the US. Mr. Blair's weakness is in playing domestic restraints against foreign policy. The Iraq War led Mr. Blair to offer a number of paybacks for the increasing number of politicians who opposed the war. In this

respect, Blair's offers to pressurize Israel appeared to be a prime example.

Finally, Mr. Blair's successor, who will take power later this year, will face increasing challenges in Iraq and Iran as well as in the so-called war on terror. As a result, the Middle East will continue to consume the time and effort of the new Prime Minister. In the long term, Mr. Blair may be remembered not only as one of the architects of the Iraq War, but also as the PM who secured the more Presidential style Prime Ministership carved out by Mrs. Thatcher.

Notes

¹ *Financial Times*, 16th November 2006.

² For the text of the speech see:

<http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page10409.asp>.

³ Blair's decision on the timing of his exit was largely forced by internal party politics in the summer/autumn 2006.

⁴ Speech by Tony Blair, Lord Mayor's Banquet, City of London, 13th November 2006.

⁵ On the findings of the Iraq Study Group see: The US Institute of Peace www.usip.org/isg.

⁶ *BBC News*, 14th November 2006.

⁷ On the findings of the Iraq Study Group see: The US Institute of Peace www.usip.org/isg.

⁸ *The Scotsman*, 6th January 2007.

⁹ Often the reasons for anti-Israel sentiment differ from group to group and from individual to individual.

¹⁰ In his first press conference with the Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, Mr. Blair markedly refused to answer a question from the BBC's Middle East editor on an Israeli withdrawal to 1967 lines. *The Guardian*, 12th June 2006.

¹¹ *The Observer*, 25th September 2005.

¹² On the notion of paying with Israeli currency see; Neill Lochery, *The Israeli Labour Party: In the Shadow of the Likud*, Ithaca Press, Reading, 1997, p. 186.

¹³ This speech was seen as the defining moment of British policy towards the State of Israel and the lack of an Arab-Israeli settlement following the end of the first Arab-Israeli War.

¹⁴ See proceedings of a one-day conference 'Suez 50 Years On' University College London, 8th November 2006 (forthcoming).

¹⁵ The strong negative reaction to Eden's speech was articulated by both the Israeli government and in its newspapers. For more on this see: Neill Lochery, *Loaded Dice: The Foreign Office and Israel*, Continuum Books, London and New York, 2007 (forthcoming).

¹⁶ See: Neill Lochery, *Anglo-Israel Relations Before and After Suez*, Conference Proceedings (forthcoming).

¹⁷ *Jerusalem Post*, 20th November 2006.

¹⁸ *The Observer*, 30th July 2006.

¹⁹ *The Independent*, 26th September 2006.

²⁰ *The Independent*, 27th April 2004.

²¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5256222.stm.

²² For evidence of this see Foreign Office statements posted on its website: www.fco.gov.uk.

²³ Public Records Office (PRO)/FO/371/82506/ Report on the State of Israel 1949, p. 1.

²⁴ PRO/FO/371/82506, p. 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ PRO/ FO/371/82526/ British Labour Party's Delegation visit to Israel.

²⁷ Orna Almog, *Britain, Israel and the United States 1955-58: Beyond Suez*, Frank Cass, London and Portland, 2003, p. 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁹ For a more detailed version of this argument see: Neill Lochery, *View from the Fence: the Arab-Israeli Conflict from its Present to Its Roots*, Continuum Books, London and New York, 2005.

³⁰ On this see: Uri Dan and Daniel Eisenberg, 'The British Tradition: Foreign Office Traditions', *Jerusalem Post*, 19th March 1998.

³¹ See for example: Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher*, Macmillan, London, 1991. John Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One, The Grocer's Daughter*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2000.

³² Hugo Young, *One of Us*, p. 173.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

³⁴ On the war and its impact see: Lawrence Freedman, *Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, Two Volumes, Frank Cass, London and Portland, 2006.

³⁵ Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: The Office and Its Holders Since 1945*, pp. 413-4.

³⁶ John Nott, *Here Today Gone Tomorrow: Recollections of an Errant Politician*, Politico's, London, 2002, pp. 254-5.

³⁷ It should be remembered that due to the extended period of Conservative Party rule in the UK (1979-1997) none of the leading members of Mr. Blair's Cabinet had previous experience in government.

³⁸ *The Times*, 18th March 1998.

³⁹ Robin Cook, House of Commons, Hansard, Column 139, 7th April 1998.

⁴⁰ *Dispatch*, 19th March.

⁴¹ Comments by Tony Blair at Press Conference with Ehud Barak, 20th July 1999.

⁴² Comments by Tony Blair at a Press Conference with Ehud Barak, 23rd November 1999.

⁴³ *The Guardian*, 25th September 2001.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ See: www.britmb.org.il.

⁴⁶ Reply to question given by Ian Pearson, Trade and Industry Minister, 4th May 2006, House of Commons, *Hansard*, 5th May 2006.

⁴⁷ Figures from British Embassy in Tel Aviv, www.britemb.org.il/ukisrael/bilateral.htm.

⁴⁸ For a general sweep of Mr. Brown's view on the Middle East, see: Interview with Gordon Brown, *The Politics Show*, BBC Television, 24th September 2006.

⁴⁹ *New Statesman*, 18th December 2006.

⁵⁰ An example of this was the joint British Treasury-World Bank Conference on the Economy of the Palestinian Territories, BBC News, 13th December 2005.

⁵¹ See *Daily Telegraph*, 19th January 2007. All major polls confirm a slight to moderate Conservative lead over Labour.

⁵² *Daily Telegraph*, 3rd August 2006.

⁵³ See Douglas Hurd's memoirs on his unease with dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian leaderships. Douglas Hurd, *Memoirs*, Little Brown, London, 2003.