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CAN TONY BLAIR MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

W. Andrew Terrill

As the entire world now knows, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair has decided not to slip into comfortable retirement. Instead, after 10 years of service as the leader of the United Kingdom, he has sought out one of the world's most thankless jobs at one of the worst possible times to accept it. He has arranged to be appointed special envoy of the Middle East Peace Quartet. The Quartet includes the European Union, Russia, the United Nations, and the United States. Since 2003, this group has been trying, without much success, to implement a "roadmap" for Israeli-Palestinian peace. The post of Quartet representative has been vacant since May 2006 when former World Bank Chairman James Wolfensohn resigned in frustration over the narrowness of his mandate and his inability to use his position to make any progress moderating Israeli-Palestinian problems. Blair's mandate is also narrow and does not currently include a direct mediating role in the negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. Rather, his focus—at least initially—is to be on helping to improve the Palestinian economy and governance. He is also allowed to "liaise with other countries . . . in support of the agreed Quartet objectives."

Blair's motives for putting himself in the middle of this situation with such limited powers have been subject to considerable speculation, and numerous commentators have weighed in on whether the appointment is a good or bad idea. On the negative side, he is widely disliked in parts of the Muslim world for his role in advocating the Iraq war and for his lack of outrage over Israel's invasion of Lebanon in summer 2006. The Palestinian Islamist group Hamas particularly dislikes him for his tough talk about their organization. Nevertheless, Blair's policy approaches to Middle Eastern issues are by no means one-sided. Blair was a leading player in the effort to bring Libya back into the international community in exchange for a renunciation of weapons of mass destruction, and he opposes the Israeli "separation wall" which many Palestinians view as a threat to their livelihood. Additionally, his commitment to making progress on Israeli-Palestinian peace is ironclad, and his experience with diplomacy and conflict resolution is also impressive, especially his role in resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland. These aspects of his background would seem to outweigh the problems noted above.

Blair also has other important credentials recommending him for the position beyond his experience and skills. The most important of these qualifications is that he is a political heavyweight. His appointment is therefore a signal to the world that the United States and the Quartet are taking problems in the Middle East seriously. His political stature may also help compensate for the inherent weakness of the office he holds as it is presently configured. The message of such a high-profile appointment is especially important because the intractability of Palestinian-Israeli problems is not mitigated with "benign neglect." Rather, such problems almost always become worse as the result of global inattention. Those who sought to isolate rather than rehabilitate the Fatah movement of President Mahmoud Abbas have now been treated to the rise of Hamas as a strong political rival for Palestinian leadership, which has gained control of the Gaza Strip. Fatah and Hamas fought bloody battles during the struggle for Gaza, and both sides accuse the other of attempting to assassinate their leader. The Hamas rise to power and the disastrous intra-Palestinian fighting in Gaza occurred at least as a partial result of a stagnating peace process and threatens to harm any future progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. While Hamas has given oblique and subtle indications that it might accept a two-state solution, it has not clearly recognized Israel in a way that removes all doubt in the West about its ability to serve as a negotiating partner with the Israelis. This silence has immeasurably worsened the conflict, although we have by no means hit bottom.

The situation in the Palestinian territories could still devolve to the point that Hamas sees itself increasingly marginalized as even more radical trends vie for influence, including the al-Qaeda types of organizations seeking a role in Palestinian politics. An example of such a movement is the Fatah Islam group that has emerged as a powerful force in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon and has also engaged in bloody combat with the Lebanese army. Moreover, actual al-Qaeda figures, including Ayman al Zawahiri, have no problem in excoriating Fatah for treason and occasionally condemning Hamas for its participation in the political process and thus accepting the "Crusader plan" for ending the Palestinian movement. Zawahiri, at this point, is not a major figure influencing Palestinian politics, and his sporadic hostility towards Hamas (which he may still see as redeemable under more militant leadership) is unsurprising. Hamas is focused on Palestinian issues, and most Hamas members are not interested in making these concerns a footnote to al-Qaeda's worldwide struggle against the West and its supporters. Nevertheless, hopelessness breeds radicalism, and a stagnating political process contributes to this hopelessness. Blair and the Quartet therefore need to make progress on Palestinian issues for a number of reasons, including an effort to help prevent al Qaeda or its clones from becoming serious contenders for power in the Palestinian territories.

Blair correspondingly needs to consider how he is going to approach the heavy lifting of Palestinian politics at this extremely difficult time. Fatah needs to be reformed and at least partially cleansed of endemic corruption and arbitrary abuse of power if it is to compete effectively with Hamas for Palestinian hearts and minds. Hamas needs to be brought into the peace process or marginalized out of it, depending upon its

readiness to reverse earlier courses and indicate its willingness to recognize Israel unequivocally and negotiate in good faith with the Israelis. The Israelis need to stay engaged and look for opportunities to help those Palestinians most willing to live in peace with their neighbors. Blair can, with the support of Quartet members, articulate these kinds of demands and publicly note the success or failure of the Palestinian leadership in high profile ways that it will be impossible for the world to ignore. Even without a direct mediation role, he can pressure and cajole both sides in a way that is of benefit to all except the most radical Israelis and Palestinians. He can also indicate a middle way for those Palestinians who might otherwise see their only choice as between accepting the status quo or choosing violence to implement change.

Tony Blair has undoubtedly made a number of mistakes throughout his career in public life, and some of his critics refer to his time in office as a tragedy. Yet Blair, as a brilliant and high profile politician, will not allow himself to be written off. While he will not be able to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict alone, he may at least help to reverse the frightening downward trend. He can speak to world and regional leaders as equals on these issues, and lay the groundwork for broader diplomatic efforts and direct negotiations that may occur should he indicate that progress is possible. This effort would be a vitally important contribution to the world's future. The long shot question that remains is whether Blair can actually use his charisma, skills, and scheming to help lay some of the groundwork to solve major aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If he does accomplish this challenging task with the limited authority he currently holds, the world will be a better place, and Tony Blair will add a vitally important chapter to his political legacy.

Finally, and of special importance, the Blair appointment must be understood by all parties to be only one part of the effort to reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace. Tony Blair cannot be sent to a crisis area without strong and continuing support for his efforts. Blair's mission should be viewed as part of an overall push for peace in which the United States and other Quartet members are continuously involved. There should also be serious consideration of expanding Blair's powers to include a negotiation and mediation role if this approach appears promising. Even with expanded powers, Blair cannot succeed without a great deal of international help and support. Sometimes he may be overruled, but he must never be ignored, and his role as a peace envoy must remain part of a large and ongoing effort to improve peace prospects in the region and not become an excuse to wash our hands of its problems.

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