

Policy Watch: Blair's Mideast logic flawed

Published: Nov. 17, 2006 at 10:02 AM

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair has told the U.S. government-sponsored Iraq Study Group that pushing for an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement "was the only way" to bring about long-term stability to Iraq and the Middle East as a whole. This is a viewpoint that has long been expressed by many Arabs and which has become increasingly popular in Europe. But as desirable as it would be to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement, it is doubtful that this could contribute much to stability either in Iraq or elsewhere in the Middle East.

It's not that an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, or even just the push for one that Blair is calling for, would have no positive impact. America's image in the Arab world would hopefully rise from the abysmal lows that it has fallen to under President Bush, thus making it easier for Arab governments to cooperate with the United States.

But it is not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that Iraqis are divided over. If anything, support for the Palestinian cause is one of the few issues that the contending Iraqi factions are all agreed upon. As is well known, bitter disputes have emerged in Iraq between Arab Sunnis and Arab Shiites, and between Arab Sunnis and the Kurds. There are also conflicts between rival Arab Shiite groups, between rival Arab Sunni groups, and others still. An Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement, if one could be reached, will not magically resolve all these intra-Iraqi disputes. Just pushing for one will have even less impact.

Nor will an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement prevent neighboring states from supporting rival groups in an Iraqi civil war. Even if an Israeli-Palestinian settlement could be achieved, Iran would still support the Arab Shiites while most Arab states would support Arab Sunnis. If anything, an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement might free up resources previously provided to the Palestinians for various groups in Iraq.

Closer to Israel, an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will not necessarily lead to the end of the Israeli-Syrian one. But even if the Golan Heights issue dividing Israel and Syria could be resolved, Syria's continuing desire to dominate Lebanon will lead to continued tension. Conflict between Hezbollah on the one hand and other Lebanese groups on the other also seems likely to continue whether or not an Israeli-Palestinian peace is achieved.

Similarly, it is doubtful that an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement would curb Iran's desire to continue pursuing its nuclear program which both America and Israel in particular regard as threatening. Indeed, since Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has called for Israel to be wiped off the face of the map, he may not recognize an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement as legitimate, but as a sell-out on the part of any Palestinian group agreeing to it.

Further, an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement would not alter the fact that most Middle Eastern states are dictatorships. While America may no longer be so unpopular for supporting Israel if an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement were achieved, it would still be unpopular for supporting pro-American dictatorial regimes in the Arab world.

Thus, as desirable as the achievement of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement (or even the concerted effort to achieve one) would be, this will not bring about an end to the Iraqi civil war, Syrian efforts to dominate Lebanon, the Iranian nuclear crisis, or authoritarian rule

throughout much of the Middle East. Each of these problems will still have to be resolved individually -- if they can be. An Israeli-Palestinian peace is not the panacea for the problems of the Middle East that Tony Blair and so many others think it is.

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