

The myth of the 'honest broker': Britain and Israel

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Britain's apparent complicity in Israel's military assault on Jericho prison should finally demolish an enduring myth about Britain's foreign policy. Iraq's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction was not the only line peddled by the government to justify the invasion. Another was that Britain was an 'honest broker' in the Middle East and would influence Washington to press Israel for peace with the Palestinians. Now that peace prospects look gloomier than ever following Israeli, US and EU reactions to Hamas' success in Palestinian elections, the reality of Britain's role needs to be exposed.

Since the government of Ariel Sharon came to power in 2001, Britain has exported around £70 million worth of military equipment to Israel. Last year's supplies of combat aircraft technology and components for surface-to-surface missiles follow previous exports of armoured cars, machine guns, components for tanks and helicopters, leg irons, tear gas and categories covering mortars, rocket launchers and explosives.

Growing links between the British and Israeli militaries have just resulted in one Israeli company, Elbit systems, receiving a £317 million contract from the Ministry of Defence. The MoD has trialled an Israeli-built anti-tank missile despite its use against civilians in the occupied territories. It also purchased 26,000 cluster shells from Israel in 2003 and 2004, some of which were used in the invasion of Iraq.

The British government has no mechanisms to monitor whether British firms violate human rights in the occupied territories. The construction company, Caterpillar, a US firm with a large British subsidiary, sells military bulldozers to Israel used to demolish 4,000 houses and which killed the peace activist, Rachel Corrie. At the same time, there is evidence that British companies have exported equipment used in the construction of Israel's 'security wall' inside Palestinian territory.

Britain's diplomatic stance towards Israel has also been striking. A major gain for the Sharon government has been Tony Blair's persistent line, shared with the US, that 'there is not going to be any successful negotiation or peace without an end to terrorism' first. Palestinian suicide bombings are unjustifiable acts of mass murder but, as Uri Avnery of the Israeli peace movement, Gush Shalom, has noted, this Blair line means that 'until the armed opposition to occupation stops, there can be no talk about ending the occupation'.

Blair's personal statements rarely condemn Israel outright but assert that 'both sides' are responsible for the violence. This ignores the fact that one of the actors is illegally occupying the territory of the other. British government statements, however, rarely even call for the occupation to end. At the same time, the British embassy in Tel Aviv describes Britain 'as a good friend of Israel' and its 'natural partner', while 'our two prime ministers are in regular

contact and have a good working and personal relationship’.

London has also helped to maintain the fiction that Sharon’s government supports the ‘shared goal’ of a viable Palestinian state, as Jack Straw recently told a Labour Friends of Israel event. Yet in a confidential document leaked to the Guardian last November, the British consulate in East Jerusalem wrote that Sharon’s illegal building of settlements in East Jerusalem was designed to prevent it becoming the capital of any Palestinian state. Privately, then, even some British officials refute the government’s public line.

Jack Straw’s intense diplomacy to prevent Iran pursuing uranium enrichment compares to virtual silence on Israel’s possession of over 100 nuclear warheads. Whitehall exerted huge pressure on EU members to impose sanctions against Zimbabwe; yet in response to a recent parliamentary question, the government again rejected applying EU sanctions against Israel. Instead, London acts as Israel’s chief defender in Brussels by resisting calls to suspend the EU’s trade and aid agreement, even though it requires ‘respect for human rights’. Whitehall even backs a proposed EU action plan that would deepen political cooperation and economic relations with Israel. By contrast, Britain was key in securing EU agreement to ban the political wing of Hamas and place its leaders on a terrorist blacklist.

Foreign Office minister Lord Triesman told Parliament in December that ‘we do not believe that Israel complies rigorously with international law’ in continuing to build settlements and conducting targeting killings and house demolitions. The government has also provided (low-key) criticism of Israel’s construction of the ‘security fence’ in Palestinian territory. Yet such occasional demarches are meaningless in light of other policies which help to protect Israel from greater international pressure to end the occupation.

Two formerly secret documents help explain British policy. A 1970 Foreign Office report called ‘Future British policy toward the Arab/Israel Dispute’ rejected both an openly pro-Israel and pro-Arab policy, the latter ‘because of the pressure which the United States government undoubtedly exert... to keep us in line in any public pronouncements or negotiations on the dispute’. It also rejected ‘active neutrality’ since this would damage ‘our world-wide relationship with the US’. Therefore, the Foreign Office argued for a ‘low risk policy’, involving ‘private pressure upon the US to do all in their power to bring about a settlement’.

The second document, a Joint Intelligence Committee report from 1969, notes that ‘rapid industrialisation’ was occurring in Israel which was ‘already a valuable trading partner with a considerable future potential in the industrial areas where we want to develop Britain as a major world-wide manufacturer and supplier’. This contrasted to the Arab world where, despite oil, ‘recent developments appear to confirm that the prospects for profitable economic dealings with the Arab countries are at best static and could, over the long term, decline’.

Three decades later, Israel is Britain’s third largest trading partner in the Middle East while the government describes Israel as ‘a remarkable success story for British exporters’, especially in high-tech industry. Appeasing Washington and prioritising profits are Whitehall’s entrenched interests that need challenging if Britain is ever to support human rights in the region.

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