

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1254

November 14, 2006

## Britain Must Not Retreat From Iraq

*Nile Gardiner, Ph.D.*

British Prime Minister Tony Blair gives evidence this week to the Iraq Study Group<sup>1</sup> amid mounting calls for a withdrawal of British forces and sagging public support for the war. An early withdrawal of British forces would boost al-Qaeda, risk civil war in Iraq, and severely strain the Anglo-U.S. relationship, to the detriment of the war on terrorism and global security. While the Prime Minister is right to reject calls for a British withdrawal from Iraq, his decision to increase ties with Iran and Syria is a serious strategic error that would do no more than embolden these rogue regimes.

### Mounting Opposition

British support for a withdrawal from Iraq is mounting. In the latest *Guardian/ICM* poll, 61 percent of British voters supported the exit of British troops from Iraq by the end of the year, with 45 percent backing an immediate withdrawal. Just 30 percent of those surveyed favored maintaining a British military presence in Iraq beyond 2006.<sup>2</sup> In a YouGov poll for *The Daily Telegraph*, a staggering 77 percent of Britons surveyed expressed “not much confidence” or “no confidence at all” in the British government’s handling of the war in Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to public disillusionment, Downing Street faces rising political opposition to the Prime Minister’s Iraq policy and increasingly vocal dissent from within Britain’s overstretched armed forces. The government narrowly prevailed in a recent vote in the House of Commons calling for an inquiry into Britain’s handling of the Iraq war that was proposed by the anti-war Scottish and Welsh

nationalist parties and backed by the Conservative Party. And Sir Richard Dannatt, the new Chief of the General Staff of the British Army, sent shockwaves through the British political establishment in October, with a controversial and remarkably frank interview in which he stated that the presence of British troops was “exacerbating the security problems” in Iraq. Dannatt linked the Iraq war to “Islamist violence” in Britain, criticized pre-war planning, and expressed his hope that British troops would leave Iraq “soon.”<sup>4</sup>

### The Consequences of Early Withdrawal

The Prime Minister is right to reject pressure for an immediate withdrawal. In a major speech at the Lord Mayor’s Banquet in the City of London on November 13, he presented a powerful defense of the British commitment to the Iraqi people.<sup>5</sup> Blair also challenged the fashionable and increasingly pervasive anti-Americanism in Britain, describing it as “the surest route to the destruction of our national interest” and reminding his audience of the need “to keep our partnership with America strong.”<sup>6</sup>

An early withdrawal of the 7,200 British forces from Iraq would be a huge mistake. A British pull-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/Europe/wm1254.qfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/Europe/wm1254.qfm)

Produced by The Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

out would shatter the international coalition, greatly weaken America's position in the center and north of the country, strengthen the insurgency, embolden al-Qaeda, and allow Iran-backed militia groups to increase their influence in the Shia-dominated south. In addition to threatening Iraq's future, a pullout would also damage the Anglo-U.S. alliance that has led the war on terrorism.

A British pullout from Iraq would lead to specific consequences:

- **A Propaganda Victory for Al-Qaeda and its Allies:** Al-Qaeda would portray a pullout as a victory. A pullout would embolden al-Qaeda's terrorist network in Iraq and provide a massive boost to the insurgency. Al-Qaeda would certainly link any withdrawal to the July 7, 2005, London bombings, for which it has claimed responsibility, and claim that the attacks forced a change in British policy. This would set a dangerous precedent and greatly increase the likelihood of future terrorist atrocities on European soil.
- **Civil War, Ethnic Cleansing, and a Humanitarian Crisis:** The withdrawal of British and other Western forces would pave the way for a civil war between Sunni and Shia groups, with bloodshed on a far greater scale than witnessed so far. Hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people could be displaced by acts of ethnic cleansing, leading to a huge humanitarian crisis.
- **The Boosting of Iranian Influence:** Iran would be a geostrategic beneficiary of any British pullout from Shiite-dominated southern Iraq, where it already wields great political influence. A

British withdrawal from Basra and its southern bases would create a power vacuum that dozens of Iranian-backed militia groups are ready to exploit—among them, Moqtada Sadr's Mahdi Army, the Badr Brigades, and the Mujahidin for Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

- **A Strained Special Relationship:** A unilateral withdrawal by Britain would have damaging implications for the future of the Anglo-U.S. special relationship, the most powerful military and political alliance in modern history. It would weaken the ties that bind the two nations and create a gulf in trust, greatly reducing the impetus for future joint U.S.-British operations. Anglo-American leadership has been the engine of the global war on terror, and a division between the two allies would undermine the West's ability to combat al-Qaeda and state sponsors of terror.
- **The Undermining of British Power:** Retreat is not a word that figures prominently in British military vocabulary, and Britain has an unrivalled record of military success over the past 300 years. An early British withdrawal, even for political and strategic, rather than military, reasons, would prove damaging to Britain's prestige and standing and force a negative reevaluation of Britain's role in the world. It would echo the Suez crisis of 1956, which split America from Britain and undermined British confidence for a generation. A withdrawal would dramatically weaken Britain's resurgence as a world power and reduce its assertiveness on the international stage.

1. The Iraq Study Group is chaired by former Secretary of State James A. Baker III and former Congressman Lee H. Hamilton and operates under the auspices of the United States Institute for Peace.
2. "Iraq Voters Want British Troops Home by End of Year," *The Guardian*, October 24, 2006.
3. *The Daily Telegraph*, October 30, 2006.
4. See "Fighting for His Army," *The Sunday Telegraph*, October 15, 2006; "In the Line of Fire," *Sunday Times*, October 15, 2006; "Army Chief Called in to Explain 'Quit Iraq' Appeal," *The Times*, October 13, 2006.
5. Tony Blair, Speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet, London, November 13, 2006, at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/6145454.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/6145454.stm).
6. It should though be noted that Blair equated anti-Americanism in Britain with Euroscepticism, a false and misleading analogy. Most British opposition to further political integration in Europe is firmly embedded within a pro-Atlanticist worldview. It is striking that much of the anti-Americanism in today's Conservative Party, for example, is advanced by politicians with a pro-European agenda.

## The Perils of Engagement with Iran and Syria

While the Prime Minister staunchly defended the principle of standing shoulder to shoulder with the United States in Iraq, he also sought to create some distance with the White House in his approach toward rogue states such as Iran and Syria. The Prime Minister's Iran gambit is aimed at influencing the thinking of the Baker-Hamilton Commission on Iraq and at placating domestic critics who claim that he slavishly follows Washington's agenda, rather than influences it.

In his Lord Mayor's address, Blair advocated a possible "new partnership" with the Iranians:

Offer Iran a clear strategic choice: they help the Middle East Peace Process not hinder it; they stop supporting terrorism in Lebanon or Iraq; and they abide by, not flout, their international obligations. In that case, a new partnership is possible. Or alternatively, they face the consequences of not doing so: isolation.<sup>7</sup>

This call for U.S. and British engagement with Tehran to find a solution to the violence in Iraq is naïve and risky, and the Bush Administration should reject it.

Iran remains the world's biggest state sponsor of international terrorism and the greatest threat to world peace, alongside North Korea. The Iranian regime is reportedly building close ties with al-Qaeda's leadership and training senior al-Qaeda operatives in Tehran in an effort to build a strategic terror alliance against the West.<sup>8</sup>

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is pressing forward with plans for a nuclear weapons program and continues to maintain that Israel should be "wiped off the map." Iran is also a huge

part of the problem in Iraq, with Iranian-backed Shia militias actively engaged in a war against British forces in the south of the country. Blair's strategy of reaching out to Iran follows the European Union's fruitless policy of "constructive engagement" with Iran over its nuclear ambitions and is similarly likely to embolden rather than weaken Iran as a destructive force on the world stage.

Blair's call for a new approach to Tehran mirrors the British government's growing engagement with Syria, another world leader in facilitating terrorism. In late October, Blair sent his most senior foreign policy adviser, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, to Damascus in a "secret diplomatic initiative" to meet with President Bashar al-Assad and discuss Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel.<sup>9</sup> The visit was London's highest-level contact with Syria since the Iraq war and was a highly controversial move, coming at a time when Syria is expanding its ties with Tehran, increasing its political and military support for Hamas and Hezbollah, and providing assistance to Sunni insurgent groups inside Iraq. The rapprochement with Damascus also took place against the background of the ongoing United Nations investigation into Syria's role in the 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

The British government's decision to engage with Iran and Syria is a serious strategic error in judgment that is likely to exacerbate the situation in Iraq rather than improve it. It risks dividing the Anglo-American alliance and strengthening the hands of rogue regimes that have a vested interest in weakening the partnership between Washington and London on the world stage.

The U.S. and Britain must remain united in their determination to win the war in Iraq, despite inev-

7. Tony Blair, Speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet.

8. "Iran 'Is Training the Next Al-Qaeda Leaders,'" *The Daily Telegraph*, November 14, 2006, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/11/14/wiran214.xml>; "Iran Plotting to Groom Bin Laden's Successor," *The Daily Telegraph*, November 14, 2006, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/11/14/wiran14.xml>.

9. "Blair in Secret Overture to Damascus," *Financial Times*, November 1, 2006.

10. The Syrian government has hired British law firm Matrix Chambers, whose lawyers include Cherie Blair, to advise it on the inquiry into Hariri's assassination. See "Syria Hires British Law Firm for Hariri Assassination Inquiry," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2006.

itable disagreements over strategy. An early withdrawal of British or American troops would have catastrophic implications for the future of Iraq and be seen by many Iraqis as a betrayal of trust. By liberating Iraq and removing one of the most brutal regimes of modern times, Britain and the United States made a powerful commitment to the future of the Iraqi people that must be honored. There should be no major pullout of Allied forces from the country until key military objectives have been met and Iraq is stable and secure.

The U.S. and the UK share a fundamental national interest in staying in Iraq and defeating the insurgency. The Middle East would view an early withdrawal as a humiliating defeat for the West and an emphatic victory for those who represent al-Qaeda in Iraq. A pullout would be an unparalleled

propaganda success for a barbaric terror organization that has murdered thousands of Iraqi men, women, and children.

Iraq today is the central battleground in the global war against terrorism and, together with Afghanistan, is the only place in the world where American and British troops can actively engage al-Qaeda and its allies in active combat. Iraq tests the West's resolve to confront and ultimately defeat the al-Qaeda threat, and this epic confrontation must be fought and won by U.S., British, and Iraqi forces.

*Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., is the Bernard and Barbara Lomas Fellow in and Director of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation. Peter Cuthbertson assisted with research for this paper.*