

A LETTER TO TONY BLAIR

The following is the letter sent by more than 50 former British ambassadors and other dignitaries to Tony Blair, urging him either to influence US policy in the Middle East or to stop backing it

We the undersigned former British ambassadors, high commissioners, governors and senior international officials, including some who have long experience of the Middle East and others whose experience is elsewhere, have watched with deepening concern the policies which you have followed on the Arab-Israel problem and Iraq, in close co-operation with the United States.

Following the press conference in Washington at which you and President Bush restated these policies, we feel the time has come to make our anxieties public, in the hope that they will be addressed in Parliament and will lead to a fundamental reassessment.

The decision by the USA, the EU, Russia and the UN to launch a "Road Map" for the settlement of the Israel/Palestine conflict raised hopes that the major powers would at last make a determined and collective effort to resolve a problem which, more than any other, has for decades poisoned relations between the West and the Islamic and Arab worlds.

... But the hopes were ill-founded. Nothing effective has been done either to move the negotiations forward or to curb the violence.

Britain and the other sponsors of the Road Map merely waited on American leadership, but waited in vain.

Worse was to come. After all those wasted months, the international community has now been confronted with the announcement by Ariel Sharon and President Bush of new policies which are one-sided and illegal and which will cost yet more Israeli and Palestinian blood.

Our dismay at this backward step is heightened by the fact that you yourself seem to have endorsed it, abandoning the principles which for nearly four decades have guided international efforts to restore peace in the Holy Land and which have been the basis for such successes as those efforts have produced.

This abandonment of principle comes at a time when rightly or wrongly we are portrayed throughout the Arab and Muslim world as partners in an illegal and brutal occupation in Iraq.

The conduct of the war in Iraq has made it clear that there was no effective plan for the post-Saddam settlement.

All those with experience of the area predicted that the occupation of Iraq by the Coalition forces would meet serious and stubborn resistance, as has proved to be the case.

To describe the resistance as led by terrorists, fanatics and foreigners is neither convincing nor helpful.

Policy must take account of the nature and history of Iraq, the most complex country in the region.

... The military actions of the Coalition forces must be guided by political objectives and by the requirements of the Iraq theatre itself, not by criteria remote from them.

It is not good enough to say that the use of force is a matter for local commanders.

Heavy weapons unsuited to the task in hand, inflammatory language, the current confrontations in Najaf and Falluja, all these have built up rather than isolated the opposition.

... We share your view that the British government has an interest in working as closely as possible with the United States on both these related issues, and in exerting real influence as a loyal ally.

We believe that the need for such influence is now a matter of the highest urgency.

If that is unacceptable or unwelcome there is no case for supporting policies which are doomed to failure.

The signatories are: Brian Barder; Paul Bergne; John Birch; David Blatherwick; Graham Boyce; Julian Bullard; Juliet Campbell; Bryan Cartledge; Terence Clark; David Colvin; Francis Cornish; James Craig; Brian Crowe; Basil Eastwood; Stephen Egerton; William Fullerton; Dick Fyjis-Walker; Marrack Goulding; John Graham; Andrew Green; Vic Henderson; Peter Hinchcliffe; Brian Hitch; Archie Lamb and David Logan.

Also: Christopher Long; Ivor Lucas; Ian McCluney; Maureen MacGlashan; Philip McLean; Christopher MacRae; Oliver Miles; Martin Morland; Keith Morris; Richard Muir; Alan Munro; Stephen Nash; Robin O'Neill; Andrew Palmer; Bill Quantrill; David Ratford; Tom Richardson; Andrew Stuart; David Tatham; Crispin Tickell; Derek Tonkin; Charles Treadwell; Hugh Tunnell; Jeremy Varcoe; Hooky Walker; Michael Weir and Alan White.