

Blair's Mideast mission is more than just vanity

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Tony Blair is expected to travel to the Middle East soon on his first working trip as a post-prime ministerial peacemaker. His appointment as the special envoy of the Quartet – the US, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations – produced something unprecedented for the Middle East: a consensus. Pundits were united in their response: why would anyone, let alone the parties to the world's most intractable conflict, listen to the Poodle?

Observers in the region rushed to label Mr Blair a "loser", a "lapdog", a "warmonger" and an "on-off button controlled by the White House". British commentators, grown weary of their former darling, thought the "preposterous" arrangement was simply a case of "jobs for the boys". One famous correspondent was "overwhelmed that this vain, deceitful man, this proven liar, a trumped-up lawyer who has the blood of thousands of Arab men, women and children on his hands, is really contemplating being 'our' Middle East envoy".

The critics are correct that the odds are stacked against the new emissary. The record of past Middle East negotiators is not pretty. The blood feud between Hamas and Fatah has brought the future of the Palestinian national project into question. Neither Israel nor the Palestinians seem to have leaders strong or skilful enough to reach meaningful agreements.

As a co-author of the Iraq folly, the former prime minister is in no danger of winning a popularity contest in the Arab and Muslim worlds. His role in that reckless war – given the lives lost, blood and treasure spent, influence squandered and adversaries emboldened – raises questions about his geopolitical judgment.

Finally, the unseemly rush to announce Mr Blair's commission on the day he vacated Downing Street suggests this appointment is not purely about the conflict: it is also about Tony. Enoch Powell observed that all political careers end in failure, but that was before the Carter Center, the Clinton Foundation and soon, no doubt, the Blair Foundation. These days, some political careers never end.

Does this mean the cynics are right and this is a fool's errand? Not necessarily. The fact that insiders are against this kind of high-profile envoy – that noses in Brussels are out of joint and the Foreign Office is reported to be in an "institutional sulk" – is the first clue that there might be something to it. Occasionally special envoys are able to achieve results that the striped-trousers brigade cannot. Think of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's representative Harry Hopkins, who helped establish the wartime triangular relationship between Washington, London and Moscow. Or Richard Holbrooke's pushy brinkmanship in the Balkans, or Senator George Mitchell's patient negotiations in Northern Ireland. The diplomatic freemasonry did not like any of those gentlemen either.

Mr Blair has some relevant experience from his work in putting Belfast's trigger men on ice. He retains a prestige that must make other former world leaders such as Gerhard Schröder and Jacques Chirac sorely jealous. The Quartet has been moribund for some time; why not shine some star power on to it? Maybe Mr Blair can create a dynamic that develops into something more substantial.

Yes, Mr Blair's initial mandate is restricted, covering only Palestinian governance, institution-building and economic rejuvenation – but it may well expand over time. The fact that the former premier is so close to the Americans and Israelis is not a disqualification, but rather an essential precondition for success. Perhaps there is no one who can persuade Washington and Jerusalem to compromise on some issues, but Mr Blair stands a better chance than any other special representative. President George W. Bush owes his friend many quids in return for the quos he received over Iraq; and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert may find it easier to make concessions if Mr Blair, who refused to criticise Israel over the Lebanon war, is sitting at the negotiating table.

Mr Blair brings energy and optimism to a region that lacks both. There are grave risks attaching to his assignment – but for the most part they are risks to him and his reputation. Any improvement in circumstances would be welcome and it is unlikely he will make the situation any worse. Sure, Mr Blair probably views all this as part of his own personal narrative – but let us not prejudge the outcome of the mission before he even gets to the gates of Jerusalem.

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