

PolicyWatch #1331 : Special Forum Report

## Britain and the Middle East

Featuring Sir Nigel Sheinwald  
January 23, 2008

*On January 15, 2008, British ambassador to the United States **Sir Nigel Sheinwald** addressed a Washington Institute Policy Forum. Prior to assuming his position in October 2007, he served as chief foreign and defense policy advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair. The following are edited excerpts from his presentation; [listen to his full remarks online](#).*

Over the past eighteen months, the regional picture in the Middle East has changed a great deal, and for the better, with the international community reuniting around a common agenda in support of the new Iraq, on the Middle East peace process, and in Lebanon. Our task in 2008 is to seize this moment of opportunity by:

- consolidating the success of the surge in Iraq and the new international consensus, encouraging national political reconciliation and strengthening the people's capacity to take responsibility for their own security and political future
- building on the Annapolis summit to take major steps toward a just and lasting peace on the Arab-Israeli front, which will give the Palestinians their own independent state and lead to a secure Israel, accepted by the Arab world
- making our diplomatic efforts toward Syria and Iran more vigorous and effective, to bring home to both countries that they face a strategic choice between further defiance of international norms and further sanctions and isolation, or cooperation with the international community and the political and economic benefits that would follow.

### What Role for the UK?

It is impossible to measure the full extent of interchange between the United Kingdom and the Middle East, but our ability to act alone is limited. Our relationships with European Union (EU) partners and the United States, our membership on the UN Security Council, and our historical relationships with many of the key players in the region -- Arabs, Israelis, Persians, Kurds -- give us influence which we try to use effectively.

### Iraq

The surge has had real impact, with levels of violence across the country dropping some 60 percent in the past six months, and al-Qaeda on the back foot for the first time in years. Meanwhile, Iraqis are increasingly taking responsibility for their own affairs. The progress in al-Anbar is remarkable because it is sustained and, most important, very much an Iraqi-driven process. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) continue to develop. Moreover, we welcome the recent passage of the de-Baathification law, and we would like to see more progress at the national level on reconciliation. At the same time, we must be realistic about the capacity of the Maliki government. One political priority in 2008 is provincial elections, which would help empower emerging leaders and reinforce the positive bottom-up developments at work across the country.

Iraq remains one of the UK government's highest priorities. Our role has evolved over the past year, as Iraqi

political and security capabilities have developed. In July 2007, we were taking nearly 200 hits per week at the Basra palace complex and the air station. Today, we are taking less than five per week. Our troops remain, along with allies, but their role has been modified to one of overwatch. We remain ready to assist the ISF if requested. In the south, we have already trained some 30,000 ISF members, and such training continues. If the security situation remains stable, we expect to downsize to around 2,500 troops in the spring, with a further 500 or so based in Kuwait, as already announced. Decisions on what we will do after 2008 have yet to be taken.

A significant proportion of our effort is being devoted to supporting other strands of activity, particularly economic ones. That is why we have pushed forward the Basra Investment Promotion Agency (to promote the city as an investment location), the Basra Development Fund (to address weaknesses in the banking system and improve access to credit for small and medium enterprises), and the Basra Development Commission (to work as an advisory body).

## **Peace Process**

Israeli security is absolutely fundamental to a just solution, as is alleviating Palestinian hardship. Both can only be tackled through a political process that creates an economically and socially viable Palestinian state at peace with Israel. The bedrock of the UK's approach to the peace process is threefold: first, supporting a two-state solution; second, supporting those who are committed to peaceful progress in the region; and third, promoting economic and social development across the occupied Palestinian territories. Bilaterally, we are focusing on a few areas, particularly building up Palestinian institutions in support of Tony Blair's agenda and ensuring a step change in financial support to the Palestinians

Security sector reform is a key area in which we believe we can add value. In addition to supporting the EU's civil police training mission and providing equipment for the Palestinian Civil Police through our £1.2 million contribution, we are supporting Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton's team, including through the provision of additional security advisors.

Prosperity for the Palestinian private sector requires reform driven by the public sector. Prime Minister Salam Fayad's Reform and Development Plan is a commendable statement of intent, but if it is to bear fruit, Palestinians must be given the freedom to work and reap the benefits of commerce. We look forward to cosponsoring the Bethlehem investment conference later this year.

Gaza will be an integral part of the future Palestinian state. The rocket fire from Gaza into Israel by extremist groups is a reminder -- sadly, often daily -- of the dangers Israel faces. But the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza is a real cause of concern. The UK supports efforts to prevent attacks that are consistent with international law. We recognize that Israel finds itself in a difficult position, but we continue to urge Israel to lift all fuel restrictions.

## **Syria**

We remain keen to see Syria play a constructive regional role, and the prospects for greater diplomatic and economic engagement remain -- but not at the price of Lebanon's sovereignty, the peace process, or Iraq's stability. We strongly support U.S.- and French-led efforts to help get a new Lebanese president and government in place as soon as possible, and we condemn the latest attack on a U.S. convoy in Beirut.

## **Iran**

UK and U.S. analysis of the problem and prescription remain close. As for the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), we made clear immediately that it did not change the rationale for our twin-track approach. Our concerns about the nuclear program were based on Iran's determination to develop enrichment and heavy water reprocessing capabilities (which would allow it to develop fissile material) and its deliberate

concealment of these activities. Our concerns were intensified by Iran's refusal to accede to legally binding Security Council requirements.

Several important political landmarks will be reached in the next eighteen months, including Majlis elections in March of this year and presidential elections in spring 2009. Therefore, we need to continue to sharpen the choice for Iran. The next step is discussions on a new Security Council resolution, adoption of which would send an important signal to Iran post-NIE that it is not off the hook. EU leaders agreed in December that, once the resolution is adopted, the EU should look at complementary measures of its own. Many European banks have already stopped dealing with Iran. And beginning on December 30, Iranian banks no longer had access to clearance in sterling.

Within Iran we see growing noise about the economy and increasing anxiety -- in the regime and society alike -- about the impact of current and potential future sanctions. We need to exploit this. At the same time, we should not neglect the other strand of our policy. That means continuing to hold out the package that the E3 plus 3 put on the table in June 2006, with Washington's support. This would give Iran the ability to develop a state-of-the-art civil nuclear power industry, as well as significant political and economic benefits, the lifting of sanctions in some areas crucial to the Iranian economy, and the chance to discuss regional security issues with the six as a whole, along with the United States.

In moving forward, we need to use a combination of dialogue, direct engagement, and pressure to persuade the Iranians to change their behavior. The UK, with an embassy in Tehran, has slightly different tools than the United States. But the fact that Europe and the United States are cooperating so closely on Iran policy strengthens our hand.

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