

TONY BLAIR IN JERUSALEM

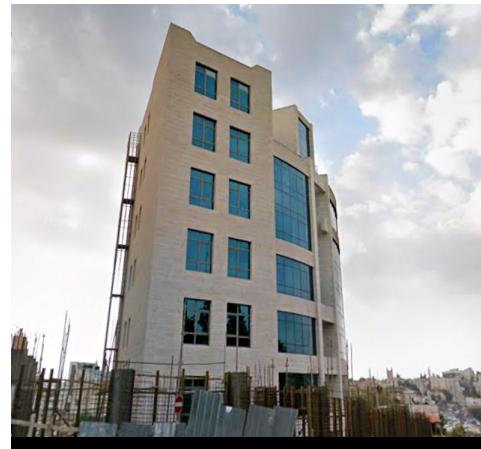
It's becoming less and less likely that former United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair will be tapped to head a future "board of peace" in Gaza. This is because Turkey, and possibly also Qatar, view him as pro-Israeli. However, it appears that he is still the leading candidate in the eyes of US President Trump, who intends to oversee the body no matter who heads it. Either way, Blair is still likely to have an important role and authorities in the body that Trump hopes will govern Gaza.

The plan at present is this: Overseen by President Trump, Blair or someone else will serve as a type of Steering Committee chairman for the establishment of various committees, which will function alongside the technocratic governing council comprised of Gaza residents. Hamas and Fatah (the Palestinian Authority) are currently disputing who will head this council, though the decision will ultimately be in the hands of Egypt.

In recent weeks, Tony Blair has met in Ramallah with PA chief Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) and with his deputy, Hussein Al-Sheikh. He also met Al-Sheikh on another occasion in Amman. The main topic of discussion was reportedly the Palestinian Authority's reform plan demanded by the Biden administration, in light of repeated charges of corruption and mismanagement. The PA had requested to reestablish the American consulate in Jerusalem, and the Americans took the opportunity to make the reforms a condition for reopening the consulate. (It could be that this was mainly just a pretext, after the Americans realized – under pro-Israel pressure – that it was illogical and probably illegal to have a consulate where they already have an embassy; they thus set a condition they knew the PA would not be able to fully meet.)

The topic of the technocratic government was also raised at these meetings, and of course the PA wants its people to serve prominently in it. At the same time, Blair was holding Zoom meetings with another body that has already been established: a private initiative of the head of the Chamber of Commerce in Gaza, someone who is not identified with either Hamas or the PA. This council was established even before the Trump initiative, and its members include the mayor of Gaza City, blatantly identified with Hamas, and the mayor of Khan Yunis. The Chamber head told Blair during the Zoom that his council would help anyone who comes to help Gaza.

Under the Trump Plan for Gaza, the PA will be invited to participate in the governing of Gaza only after an unspecified number of years from the beginning of implementation. Even then, however, this will happen only after the PA completes its reforms. The Saudis and Egyptians



The building in the Shimon HaTzaddik neighborhood originally used for Blair's Quartet activities, next door to the Ambassador Hotel.

are pushing for the reforms, on which Blair is working with the PA, while Qatar and Turkey – which are much more on the side of Hamas – are not as enthusiastic about them.

One of the steps that Abu Mazen has so far announced is the establishment of a committee to examine the feasibility of holding elections. Keep in mind that he was originally elected to succeed Yasser Arafat as President in 2005 for a four-year term; no elections have been held since then.

Other steps include: the appointment of a vice-chairman, Hussein Al-Sheikh, both for the PA itself and Fatah; giving instructions to establish a committee to formulate a constitution; and stating that there will be reforms in the educational system.

American mediator Steve Witkoff held a meeting of his own with Al-Sheikh in Saudi Arabia not long ago. On the agenda was the "pay for slay" PA salaries paid to terrorists. Abu Mazen claims that this has been stopped, but in actuality, 1,600 families of terrorists and shahids are still receiving salaries – in addition to 2,000 other families that receive social welfare payments according to a particular credit system formulated by the PLO. Thus they receive money not under the rubric of terrorism, but for welfare.

Background:

After Blair resigned as Prime Minister in 2007, he was appointed representative of the so-called Quartet (US, Russia, UN, and EU) to the diplomatic process then taking place between Israel and the PA. The Quartet acquired a six-story building for offices for Blair and his staff in the Shimon HaTzaddik (alongside Sheikh Jarrah) neighborhood in Jerusalem, near the Ambassador Hotel. In 2015, Blair resigned from his Quartet duties, and although replacements were found, the building is currently not being used; the Quartet's activities in general have been greatly reduced.

Blair's next step was to establish the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI). It is funded to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars annually, with operations in over 40 countries; its major backer is Oracle founder Larry Ellison. TBI also receives or has received large-scale funding from Saudi Arabia and the US State Department (apparently under the Obama administration).

The latest reports say that Blair's salary is currently paid directly by the United Arab Emirates. Together with Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, he works as a "reforms advisor" to the Palestinian Authority. His name has arisen several times as the possible "governor" of New Gaza, but as stated, this idea has apparently been vetoed by some leading Muslim countries.

In sum:

Blair and his team maintain ongoing contacts with PA officials. According to various reports, some of the meetings take place in Jerusalem – representing a continuation of the illegal presence of PA officials and PA activities in Jerusalem, mainly at the Ambassador Hotel. The hotel is part of the "PA government compound" in the city, a kind of continuation of the Orient House, spread out in various locations. Official PA activity is illegal in Jerusalem, according to the Oslo Accords and Israeli law.

Bringing Tony Blair into the "New Gaza" picture thus also means bringing the PA into a leadership role there – which Israel strongly opposes – even if only as part of technocratic government.

It should also be noted that Blair's wife Cherie has close personal relations, also on a diplomatic level, with Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, mother of Qatar's Crown Prince Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Ms. Blair helped the Sheikha hold meetings and promote Qatari interests in the United States, including in the White House itself. It is reasonable to assume that various Qatari institutions are involved in TBI, including in terms of funding.

