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TONY BLAIR AND JOHN MCCAIN TALK ABOUT ISRAEL/PALESTINE AND RUSSIA HANDLING

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SUBJECT: TONY BLAIR AND JOHN MCCAIN TALK ABOUT
ISRAEL/PALESTINE AND RUSSIA HANDLING

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Maura Connelly for reasons
1.4 (b,d)

1. (C/NF) Summary: Tony Blair used his meeting with
Senators John McCain, Joseph Lieberman and Lindsey Graham to

underscore the "centrality" of Israel/Palestine in bringing stability to the Middle East. Blair said progress could be made by "building from the bottom up," including by developing a competent Palestinian security force. Blair and the Senators briefly discussed Northern Ireland and climate change. Blair said his time away from the office of Prime Minister had made him realize Russia had been mishandled in the post-Yeltsin years and an opportunity had been missed. He counseled against making similar mistakes with China. McCain explored his idea of building a "League of Democracies." Blair looked years younger than he appeared during his last months in office. He told the Senators that Europe is not anti-American and asked McCain for his take on the race for the Presidency. End Summary.

Participants

2. (U) Tony Blair and his political director Matthew Doyle met Senators John McCain, Joseph Lieberman and Lindsey Graham in London at the Mandarin Hotel on March 21. Senate staff Fontaine and poloff also participated.

Blair Convinced of the Centrality of Israel/Palestine

3. (C/NF) Quartet Representative Tony Blair said his time out of office had only heightened his perception that solving Israel/Palestine was central to bringing stability to the region. He said the idea up to now had been to cut a political deal in order to produce change on the ground. "I'm afraid it's the other way around," said Blair. "The only way to create conditions which will succeed on final status is for Palestine to radically improve its security capacity and to give Palestine sufficient hope occupation could be lifted while keeping Israel's security concerns in mind," he explained. Gaza, warned Blair, could capsize at any point. Israel will go in very hard when Hamas fires rockets. "But we have to offer the people of Gaza a strong message about what can be done if this stops," said Blair, adding that the population thinks the situation is hopeless. "A huge percentage of the population would immediately move away from supporting Hamas if they were given cause for hope," he explained. Senator Lieberman agreed that people have to be shown again that hope is real.

4. (C/NF) Senator McCain asked Blair whether he had any contact with the Hamas leadership. Blair said, "No, but I know plenty who have." He said a deal could be cut on final status but the Palestinians would have to make a huge sacrifice on right of returns. To achieve this compromise

necessitates a change in public opinion for as it stands the Arab League will reject the deal. This would require a change in the security equation. It would be useful to be able to tell Hamas, that if it stops the rockets, access to humanitarian assistance would increase, explained Blair. Lieberman asked if Blair had talked to Israel; he said he had. As an alternative to changing the security equation, Blair described a worsening scenario whereby, "Hamas empties Gaza, blames Israel, and extremism increases." Lieberman said he was encouraged by what Blair had said about the willingness of the population in Gaza to shift its support away from Hamas. Blair mentioned a program for training Palestinian security forces in Jordan. He said "If you ask both peoples 'do you want a two state solution?' They say 'yes.' If you ask them 'do you think it is possible?' Both say 'no.'" Blair described this as the "credibility gap" for political discussions which had to be got around by improving the security for Israel and lifting the occupation for Palestine. If these changes don't take place on the ground, argued Blair, we'll end up with a "theoretical deal which is very hard to sell."

Regional Import

5. (C/NF) McCain asked Blair for his assessment of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Blair said he was, "well intentioned but not that good." He contrasted this assessment with that of Arafat who, "had the political guile but not the will." Blair underscored that moving this issue was of "fundamental importance" and that moderate Arabs, including the Saudi King, were worried about it and what it could mean for the spread of extremism. Turning to Lebanon, Blair said, "We are ignoring it, but what is happening is terrible." He added that it is a democratic country "where elected leaders are being executed."

Blair's Experience with Northern Ireland

6. (C/NF) Referring to his role in brokering a peace deal for Northern Ireland while he was Prime Minister, Blair said that he had been immersed in the detail and this had been key to his success. Another crucial component had been "having good, knowledgeable military guys" on the ground. Israel needed to find a means to put forward confidence building measures (cbms) and Palestine has to improve security and manage Gaza, suggested Blair. In reply to Lieberman, Blair said a cbm could be regularizing an ID system for Palestinian day traders and cutting the waiting time for them at the border from three hours to half an hour. McCain asked

whether the deal in Northern Ireland itself would hold and whether the police integration problem had been resolved. Blair said it would take time for the deal to jell and for the parties to recognize all changes, including the legitimacy of the police, but he was confident the deal was in place and the parties would uphold their obligations.

Climate Change, the U.S. and Europe

7. (C/NF) Senator Lieberman asked Blair to help on climate change and told him of his legislation. Blair, who had just returned from India and discussions on climate change, said it would be great if elements of an agreement could be agreed upon with Japan and China in time for the G8 meeting in July. McCain said he hadn't realized what an emotional issue climate change was for the Europeans. Blair replied that U.S. engagement on brokering agreed elements would show, "America listens as well as leads."

8. (C/NF) Informing the Senators that French President Sarkozy would visit the UK on a state visit, Blair described Sarkozy as a "force of nature" but added that America could not expect to have a more pro-U.S. head of state in France. It was important, said Blair, that the Senators understood that "when you scratch beneath Europeans, they are not anti-American."

"Missed Opportunity" with Russia; Implications for China

9. (C/NF) Since leaving office, said Blair, he has turned his interests eastward. He was concerned that we risked establishing "two top tables" with the United States at one, Europe at the other, and China playing off the two. This was analogous to the "most damaging thing we did with Russia." He said the post-Yelstin era marked a missed opportunity, when Russia had taken advantage of the lack of a cohesive response from Europe and the U.S. in response to the increasingly autocratic Putin, who had undone much of Russia's democratic progress. Continuing with the boarding school analogy, Blair said, "if America and Europe are at the same table, we can manage China and Russia." McCain said this was why he was developing the concept of a "league of democracies" to join like-minded nations together in common cause based on shared values. He asked Blair his views on Putin. "The problem with managing Putin and Russia," said Blair, "is that we have to deal with them when it comes to Iran." The rest of the strategy, he said, should be to make Russia a "little desperate" with our activities in areas bordering on what Russia considers its sphere of interest and along its actual borders. Russia had to be shown firmness

and sown with seeds of confusion.

American Elections

10. (C/NF) Blair told the Senators the British public was following the U.S. Presidential race and the primary process was a great global advertisement for democracy. He congratulated McCain for completely turning around his campaign and asked for his assessment of the race for the Democratic nomination. Without making any fixed prediction, McCain said the one thing his time in politics had taught him was "to never underestimate a Clinton."

Al Qaeda and Extremism

11. (C/NF) Blair said he understood, even more than when he was Prime Minister, that the Middle East is in transition, adding, but, "transit to where?" We are in a war, he said, if not a conventional one. If we walk away (from Iraq) we send a terrible signal. In the Middle East, at the time of the release of the National Intelligence Assessment on Iran, there was an immediate repositioning of attitudes to Iran. One part of the region is feudal and susceptible to extremism. Israel/Palestine is a cause which allows extremist Islam to claim the center ground, concluded Blair.

12. (U) Senators McCain, Lieberman, and Graham did not have the opportunity to clear this cable.

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