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Britain's standing is now at a nadir in the Middle East

Posted: 2006/03/16 From: Guardian



By colluding with the Israeli attack on Jericho, Straw has underlined the Americanisation of British policy in the region (Photo: Britain's Jewish foreign minister Jack "the last" Straw)

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Seumas Milne

Jack Straw has brought Britain's standing in the Arab and Muslim worlds to its lowest point for half a century. By withdrawing British monitors from a Palestinian jail in Jericho on Tuesday, the government as good as handed over to Israel the prisoners it had made an international agreement to protect. In doing so, it colluded with its American co-sponsor and - at the very least tacitly - with the

Israeli occupation regime in an armed attack on the prison and the seizure of an elected political leader regarded by many Palestinians as a national hero.

As the ruins of the British Council building in Gaza smoulder, the foreign secretary can reflect on his contribution this week to peace in the Middle East: the humiliation of the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, the undermining of efforts to form a viable Palestinian administration and the confirmation in Arab and Muslim eyes that Britain cannot plausibly be regarded as an honest broker in the region. No wonder the prime minister struggled to defend the blunder in parliament yesterday.

As the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan turn ever bloodier and more disastrous, you might think that the last thing Britain would want to be responsible for was more degrading TV footage of Arab men being paraded in their underpants by another occupying army. But then this is the foreign secretary who used a recent visit to Beirut to praise Ariel Sharon's "courage and statesmanship" and "work towards a long-term peace settlement" - in the very city where he oversaw the massacre of 2,000 Palestinian refugees by Lebanese Phalangists in 1982. It's perhaps no wonder that British complicity with Israel's assault on Jericho was yesterday being compared in the Arab media to the duplicitous US deal which led to that slaughter. As anyone who has spent time in the Middle East will know, while Britons may not be familiar with the history of their country's involvement in the region, it is not forgotten by those who suffered at its hands: from the 1917 Balfour declaration, which promised Palestine as a homeland for the Jewish people, to the collusion with France and Israel over the 1956 invasion of Egypt.

Both Straw and Tony Blair have claimed that a security threat to the British (and US) monitors justified the decision to withdraw them from Jericho. But no credible evidence of any such threat has been offered - and the complaint that the prisoners were allowed to use mobile phones cannot be treated as a serious reason to end the four-year-old agreement. The five prisoners captured as a result - including Ahmad Sa'adat, leader of the leftwing Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - are accused by Israel of responsibility for the killing of the racist cabinet minister Rehavam Ze'evi in 2001, carried out in retaliation for the assassination of Sa'adat's predecessor, Abu Ali Mustafa. The deal to hold them in a Palestinian jail under British-US supervision later ended the siege of Yasser Arafat's compound.

But judging by last week's joint British-US letter to the Palestinian president, it was the pledge by the newly elected Hamas to release these prisoners, rather

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