PM's visit enrages anti-war Greeks

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Helena Smith in Athens

Tony Blair flew into Athens for the historic EU enlargement ceremony last night, against a backdrop of criticism from one of the most anti-war populaces on the continent.

"Blair the Butcher!" said the posters that greeted the prime minister's motorcade. "Blair: the divider of Europe and American poodle," read others.

Some 41 leaders, including those of the union's 10 new entrants, are attending today's treaty-signing ceremony beneath the Acropolis.

As the current holder of the rotating EU presidency, the Greeks have ensured that the capital resembles a fortress, with 11,000 police officers patrolling its ancient centre.

But the almost visceral dislike of Mr Blair as the European leader most Greeks hold responsible for the war threatens to overshadow what Athens has billed as the "mother of all fiestas".

Polls show that 94% of Greeks — the highest in the EU — are opposed to war in Iraq, irrespective of UN backing for action.

Today, 150,000 anti-war protesters are expected to take to the streets. With the ruling Socialists declaring the day a public holiday, civil servants and schoolchildren have vowed to demonstrate outside the British, Italian, Spanish and American embassies.

"The message we want to send out is 'no to this war, no to the occupation of Iraq and yes to a united, strong and socially-oriented Europe'," said Georgia Kokkinou of the Confederation of Greek Unions, the country's biggest trade union force. "Blair does not seem to represent any of these things."

Many Greeks say that while George Bush's stance was predictable, they were profoundly shocked by Mr Blair, not least because of his Labour background.

The anti-British feeling spilled into the cultural domain this week when the organisers of the international Athens Book Fair suddenly withdrew an invitation for Britain to be its guest of honour.

The British stall, they said, would instead be replaced by a stand displaying anti-war books from around the world.