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INTERVIEW:

TONY BLAIR

FORMER PRIME MINISTER

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ANDREW MARR:

Now looking at the violence now engulfing Iraq, with much of the country under the sway of militant Islamic extremists, some have concluded that the West is now reaping what it sowed when the US, supported by the British government under Tony Blair, invaded Iraq in 2003. Can the current instability be traced back to that decision and what should the West do now to prevent the situation spiralling further out of control? Tony Blair spoke to me a little earlier this morning from the Middle East and he agreed that events in Iraq are desperately serious.

TONY BLAIR:

It's vitally important that we realise what is at stake here and act. And that will require I think both targeted action from the United States of America; it will require I think a national unity government of some sort on the Iraqi side, which should be one that's representative of all the political parties, one that is endorsed specifically by Grand Ayatollah Sistani, and one that has the support of the international community. And then we have got to make sure that in respect of Syria, we shift policy – as myself and others have been calling for a long time now – and realise that if we don't deal with the Syria issue, then the problems are not just going to be for Syria and for the region; the problems are actually going to come back and they're going to hit us very directly, even

in our own country.

ANDREW MARR:

What would it mean for the West, as well as for the Middle East, if ISIS succeeded in creating an Islamic caliphate going right the way down to the shores of the Mediterranean?

TONY BLAIR:

Well it would be a total disaster and it mustn't be allowed to happen. I mean what is important is to realise how this has come about. It's a situation which has grown up over these last three years and there is no point in trying to deal with Iraq unless we also accept the wider regional context, so you're going to have to deal with Syria too.

ANDREW MARR:

And yet ISIS would not have been able to have its spectacular military successes if Iraq hadn't been torn apart by civil war and a lack of authority at the centre for the last ten years, would it, and that is partly our responsibility from the West?

TONY BLAIR:

Yeah, but we've got to be very, very clear about this. Three years ago in Iraq, al-Qaeda was beaten effectively. Now it's absolutely correct – and this is why Iraq also needs a different type of politics and a different way of governing itself – it's absolutely correct that the activities and the policies of the Maliki government have contributed to this situation. But we also have to understand what is happening in the region as a whole and this is where it's important although we can have the debate about 2003, we realise we're eleven years later in 2014, and the single biggest thing that has changed in the region in the meantime are these Arab revolutions that have spread right across the region. So my point is very simple: even if you'd left Saddam in place in 2003, then when 2011 happened and you had the Arab revolutions going through Tunisia and Libya and Yemen and Bahrain and Egypt and Syria, you would have still had a major problem in Iraq. Indeed you can see what happens when you leave the dictator in place, as has happened with Assad now. The problems don't go away. So one of the things I'm trying to say is you know we could re-run the debates about 2003 and there are perfectly legitimate points either side, but where we are now in 2014 we have to understand this

is a regional problem but it's a problem that will affect us. If you talk to security services in France and Germany and the UK, they will tell you their single biggest worry today: returning Jihadist fighters, our own citizens by the way, from Syria. So we have to look at Syria and Iraq and the region in context, we have to understand what's going on there and we have to engage. And that doesn't mean, by the way, engagement as an Iraq or Afghanistan and ground troops, but it does mean that we actively try and shape this situation with our allies in the region and don't believe that if we just wash our hands of it and walk away then the problems will be solved.

ANDREW MARR:

Shape it how?

TONY BLAIR:

Shape it by, for example as I suggest, we will have to take immediate action in respect of Iraq. Shape it, as I'm saying in respect of Syria, where for three years frankly we have had this catastrophe unfold in Syria. And shape it by supporting within the region those people – and by the way they're virtually a majority in the region – who believe in open and tolerant societies and properly run economies and countries. And you know let me just say long-term by the way I'm an optimist about this region. Long-term I think these more modern minded people will win. But we have to understand that this toxic mix between religion and politics has created this situation in the region and we are, I'm afraid, also going to be drawn into trying to solve it.

ANDREW MARR:

Meanwhile we have an urgent crisis to address and in specific terms can I ask what you think needs to be done? Are we talking about drone strikes? Are we talking about the provision of military aircraft to the Iraqi government? And what do you think about the fact that at the moment the fight back seems to be being led by Iranian military commanders?

TONY BLAIR:

President Obama I think very rightly is saying all the options are on the table. He will be debating with his military commanders what the best form of assistance to the Iraqi government is and, whether that's through drones or through fighters or whatever, is the

right and appropriate response. The key thing is that they need to know they're not going to be able to continue their push unhindered. And as for the Iranian help – look for many, many Iraqis, they will want to make sure that they're not simply dependent on Iran, okay? Iranian support may be one aspect of this, but for your Iraqis who believe passionately in the independence of their country, they will want that treated with some caution.

ANDREW MARR:

What about putting special forces in – troops on the ground – and what about Britain's role?

TONY BLAIR:

Well I think Britain's got to coordinate very closely with the United States of America. I mean I won't put forward (because I don't think it's very helpful at this stage) put forward specific options that we might introduce into this situation, but the key point is to understand we are going to have to engage with it and if we don't then the consequences will come back on us, as we see from Syria today.

ANDREW MARR:

Nevertheless, reading your essay a lot of people will conclude that you believe that Britain, as well as America, ought in effect to go to war in Syria to help topple Assad as a question of urgency. Is that what you're saying?

TONY BLAIR:

We don't need to go back to war in the way that we were in Iraq or in Afghanistan, and I think we've got to in a way stop believing that the only alternatives are doing nothing or ground troops as in Iraq or Afghanistan. There are a myriad of responses in between, including the selective use of air power – indeed as we did in Libya to remove the regime there. Intervention is tough. Partial intervention is tough. Non-intervention is also tough.

ANDREW MARR:

Yes.

TONY BLAIR:

But the best policy for us is to realise that whatever form of intervention we choose, it's going to be difficult but it's better than the alternative, which is to stick out, and, as we see from Syria, the appalling results of such a policy.

ANDREW MARR:

And yet where we have intervened – notably in Iraq – we are therefore partly responsible for what's happened. And in Iraq, we have seen so many years of instability and now this, that when we revisit the things you were saying at the time – for instance a congress about Iraq becoming a beacon of peace and stability and democracy – you must acknowledge there was an element at least of naivety in that?

TONY BLAIR:

I absolutely acknowledge that our hopes were not fulfilled. Just remember even in the last few weeks - as in Afghanistan, so in Iraq – millions of people, actually a higher percentage of people came out and voted in those elections than they do in the average presidential election in America.

ANDREW MARR:

And they produced a regime with Mr Maliki which has notably failed to hold Iraq together and has been sectarian in some of what it's done.

TONY BLAIR:

Absolutely and that sectarianism has contributed to the problem. But I think we've got to bear in mind two things. You know sometimes people talk about Iraq in 2003 as if it was stable. If you were a Shia or a Kurd or a Marsh Arab, you were subject to the most appalling repression. Two wars had been started by Saddam in the region. The first military action I took in respect of Iraq was in 1998 with President Clinton, not with President Bush. So the idea that Iraq today would be stable if Saddam had been left in place is I think just simply not credible.

ANDREW MARR:

Sure, sure, but at the time ...

TONY BLAIR:

The question is how do we go from here?

ANDREW MARR:

I absolutely accept that, but at the time you said that this would make Iraq a safer and more stable place. And that has clearly not happened, has it?

TONY BLAIR:

Right, absolutely. And, therefore, as I've constantly said, what we underestimated then – and I take full responsibility for this – is the depth and the complexity of the problem.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) So you're prepared to say we got it wrong on that?

TONY BLAIR:

So I'm prepared ... I have constantly said that what we underestimated about Iraq, Afghanistan, about the whole of the region is that once you removed the dictatorship then out comes this tribal, ethnic and above all religious tension, and then you're engaged in a different type of struggle against that. And my plea is you do not need to engage as we did in Iraq or Afghanistan, but you do need to recognise we have interests in this and these people, if they're allowed to grow these extremist groups, in the end they will pose a threat for us within our own borders.

ANDREW MARR:

Hillary Clinton has just said that she deeply regrets her support for the war. Your close ally David Miliband has said much the same kind of thing. Would you use those kind of words about regret for that original decision?

TONY BLAIR:

Again, as I've said many times, of course you regret the loss of life and the difficulties we encountered ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) But not ...

TONY BLAIR:

... but if you say to me would I prefer a situation where we'd left Saddam in place in 2003, do I think the region would be safer, more stable if we'd done that, my answer to that is unhesitatingly no.

ANDREW MARR:

Fighters are being exported back to the West from Syria and elsewhere. There's a sort of Jihadist movement regaining power and confidence in the Middle East, and we have the debate in Britain about the way that Muslims in British schools are being educated. Do you agree with the Prime Minister that it's time to reassert British values in a much more muscular way, if you like, and the phrase being used here is "drain the swamp" of Islamic extremism in schools and in British communities, or do you think this is a matter of a small number of extremists who are not connected to mainstream conservative Islam?

TONY BLAIR:

I have a very, very clear view of this. There is a fundamental problem that we face that may have originated in this region but has now spread across the world, and that problem is extremism based on a warped and abusive view of religion. It is a problem here in the region, it's a problem in countries like Pakistan, it's a problem in the Far East. We can see from Nigeria and Boko Haram, it's a problem in African countries, and it's a problem in our own society as we can see from the issue over Birmingham schools. What we need to do is not a question simply of reasserting British values. We have to assert the strong values of religious respect and tolerance for difference – in other words to say the only way a modern economy, a modern society can work is if people of different faiths learn to live with each other, respect each other and treat each other equally and fairly. And any politics that is based on a view that this is my religion or this is my view of my religion and if you don't agree then you're my enemy ...

ANDREW MARR:

Absolutely.

TONY BLAIR:

... that is the ideology we have to attack and root out.

ANDREW MARR:

And finally, Mr Blair, your own role. Are you going to stay as a member of the Quartet? Do you think you have a role in trying to put back together the mess that is now the Middle East?

TONY BLAIR:

Well I think in respect of the Israeli Palestinian issue, it remains fundamentally important and yes I'll, despite all the challenges and difficulties, I want to keep on working at it. You know for the last seven years, I've spent a lot of time out in this region. I've studied it, I've thought about it and I want to contribute to it.

ANDREW MARR:

You're not en route back to the cooler, calmer, greyer skies of Brussels?

TONY BLAIR:

Absolutely not.

ANDREW MARR:

Mr Blair, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

TONY BLAIR:

Thanks, Andrew. Thanks.

INTERVIEW ENDS