SIAN WILLIAMS:
Now after the 9/11 attacks on New York, Tony Blair promised that Britain would stand “shoulder to shoulder” with the United States in what became known as the War on Terror. Recent events in Algeria and Mali demonstrate that the terrorist threat might be shifting but it hasn’t gone away. Can it be defeated militarily though and just how deeply should British forces be involved? Questions which the former Prime Minister has been reflecting on, saying David Cameron is right to talk of a “generational” struggle. Tony Blair joins me this morning. Good morning.

TONY BLAIR:
Good morning, Sian.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
Thank you very much for being with us. A general struggle. When you look at what’s happening in Mali at the moment, do you think there’s the men, the will, the resources for a generational struggle in North Africa?

TONY BLAIR:
Well, first of all, I think we should just acknowledge how difficult these decisions are. I mean sometimes in politics you come across a situation which the choice is very binary - you go this way or that way - and whichever way you go is ugly and messy. And if we engage with this - not just militarily but over a long period of time and
trying to help these countries - it’s very, very hard, but I think personally that the cost of disengaging is going to be even greater.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
The question is, I suppose, is how long you are in there for and how long Britain can afford to be in there for? And there’s a quote from your memoirs, which was a decade after 9/11. You said, ‘It’s even more clear to me that the battle against militant Islam has to be fought with every means at our disposal, and fought until it is won.’ And that is a big task because you’re fighting a different kind of Islamist extremism at the moment.

TONY BLAIR:
(over) Sure. Yeah no, absolutely, but that’s why it’s really difficult. But if you just look at, for a moment, at the cost of not engaging and not doing what France and Britain’s trying to do now in Mali. Supposing you let Mali be taken over by this terrorist group. They already took over a portion of Mali the size of Spain. That becomes a breeding ground for terror. Supposing Syria really disintegrates. I mean already, what, over sixty thousand people have died there. You’ve now got a situation where increasingly, if you’re not careful, the more extreme elements of the opposition will lead the opposition there.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
So do you go into Syria as well?

TONY BLAIR:
Well I think you’ve at least got to try and shape the events happening in the Middle East. You know the same is true in Egypt. If at the present time you don’t get some sort of political dialogue going between the different parties and try and stabilise the economy, you’re going to face a situation where the largest country in the Middle East is in a state of huge fragility, possibly breakdown, and then you’ve got Iran. Now my point is very simple: when you look at this over the time since 9/11, you know we always want in the West, quite naturally we want to go in and go out and think there’s a clean result. It’s not going to happen like that. We now know that. It’s going to be long and difficult and messy. My point is very simple though: if you don’t
intervene and you just let it happen, it’s also going to be long and difficult and messy and possibly a lot worse. So it’s a very difficult decision. I mean I don’t … You know I found these decisions immensely difficult when I was in government. I don’t envy David Cameron having to take the decision now, but I think he’s essentially right in what he’s saying - that you’ve got to take a view that is a long-term view and be prepared to engage over that long term.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
And when you say “long-term”, are we talking decades?

TONY BLAIR:
I don’t know. We’re certainly I think talking about a generation. I mean I think it’s … If you look at this ideology based on a … It’s based on a perversion of religion in the end because this is what makes these countries difficult. Look I intervened in Kosovo. We went in; we came out with a victory. I intervened in Sierra Leone. We went in; we came out with a victory.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
You intervened in Afghanistan. Still there.

TONY BLAIR:
(over) And Iraq … and very, very difficult. So what is the difference? The difference is that in those countries you had a combination of states that had failed, had become you know rogue states if you like; plus this element of religion and religious extremism. And so I think you know a better way to look at it is like the fight the West had over a long period of time with revolutionary communism. It'll happen in many different theatres, it’ll happen in many different ways, but the truth is you’ve no option but to confront it and to try over time to defeat it.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
When you say “many different ways”, David Cameron has been quite clear and said at the moment in Mali the role that the British forces have is a training role - training the police, training the army. Do you think it needs to be in Mali and in other places as well where these pockets of extremism burst up; that it has to be actually troops on
the ground, it does have to be a combat role?

**TONY BLAIR:**
I’m not going to second guess him on that. I mean there will be different roles in different parts of the world and sometimes you’ll be using special forces and other instruments of fight back.

**SIAN WILLIAMS:**
(over) But you just mentioned Sierra Leone, which was go in, defeat, come back out again.

**TONY BLAIR:**
Right, but Mali’s a more complicated situation for the very reason I give. In Sierra Leone, you had a local group that was trying to take over and topple a democratic government, but they were a local group with no outside connection. Unfortunately this virulent ideology based on (as I say) a perversion of the proper faith of Islam, I mean that is there in Mali but it’s got its connections all over North Africa. What they’re trying to do is destabilise the northern part of Sub-Saharan Africa, so you’ve got terrorist attacks in places like Nigeria arising out of the same type of ideology.

**SIAN WILLIAMS:**
But these Islamist fighters in Mali, for example, are being driven into the hills. They’re disappearing effectively. Are they not just going to turn up somewhere else? Because of course a lot of people are suggesting they came initially from Libya, so the guns and the men went from Libya into Mali. Now they’re leaving Mali and going somewhere else. You’re going to keep having to put out fires everywhere in the world.

**TONY BLAIR:**
(over) Right, so here’s the thing, Sian.

**SIAN WILLIAMS:**
(over) How do we have the resources for that?
TONY BLAIR:
(over) Do you say - so in that case - this is all too difficult; I’m getting out of here? Now I totally understand that. I mean if you’ve been through - as we’ve been through and the United States and others - been through this long, drawn out process in Afghanistan, for example, where we’re still there and still struggling, I totally understand why people would say let’s just get out and we leave them to sort out their own problems. My fear is that because this is being driven by an ideology with a very, very strong desire to push out from the borders of wherever they are, if we do disengage we’ll get a different set of problems further down the line that are more profound, more serious. But that’s the choice. And you know you’re right: if you drive these people into the hills - when you go, they come back. So how do you then stay there for the long-term? Now you know I’ve studied this a lot since I left office - I mean I do work in about, I don’t know, I suppose about twenty different countries around the world one way or another - and two things I have learnt that I think are really important. The first is we’ve got to put effort now into building capacity in these states that could fail to govern themselves sensibly, and that can be done in a different way today from before but it’s really, really important. And the second thing is you’ve got to deal with this issue of religious extremism and you’ve got to deal with the issue of religion in these places as religion.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
How?

TONY BLAIR:
By trying to create a set of circumstances for example in how children are educated in these countries, to lead them to an open-minded not close-minded view of the world.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
But you talk about an Islamist ideology that the extremist fighters have. There is no one ideology. I mean it’s an umbrella group. This is just bringing together lots of disaffected people under one organisation. It’s not al-Qaeda that you’re fighting in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This is a new kind of threat, isn’t it?

TONY BLAIR:
Well it’s linked by very common thread. I mean you’re right in the sense that I’m not suggesting there’s a command and control centre with a designated leader - that’s absolutely true. But if you look all over the Middle East, North Africa, wider than that - through into Central Asia now - there is an identifiable ideology that’s based on, as I say, a perversion of religion. And you know it may have its many different offshoots, but they’ve got that in common, and so trying to deal with that element of it and being express about it, you know saying right let’s get that out there on the table and see how we deal with it, I think is really, really important. Because here’s some good news by the way in all of the bad news: everywhere I go, no matter how difficult the situation of the country, in truth the majority of the people in those countries, they want the same things that we want. You know they want to be able to elect their government; they want to be able to have religion in its proper place and not in its wrong place; they want rule of law, they want to better raise their children with some chance of prosperity; they want to know if they work hard and play by the rules, they can get somewhere. You know the majority of people, even in the countries where the worst trouble is, want something better. In my view – we, rather than disengage, we’ve got to try and help them get there.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
So wherever you see this flame of militant Islam, what you’re suggesting is Britain should get involved militarily in some form of other?

TONY BLAIR:
(over) It’s not just … No, I’m not suggesting it has to be military. It can be in many different ways. Sometimes it’s going to have to be …

SIAN WILLIAMS:
(over) Where should it be militarily?

TONY BLAIR:
Well that depends on the nature of the threat we’re confronted with. So, for example, in Mali, I mean I think France is absolutely right and it’s actually a very courageous decision of President Hollande to go in there and I think Britain’s right to give its support. There’ll be other areas in which it’s not military.
SIAN WILLIAMS:
Well you mentioned Syria and you look at what’s happening in Syria at the moment and the humanitarian crisis there and suggestions, as you say, sixty thousand people have been killed in two years. Should Britain intervene there?

TONY BLAIR:
Well I think it’s not a question just for Britain. It’s for the West and the question is how? I mean, look, it’s very hard. You know if you arm the opposition, who are you arming? You know I’ve been suggesting for a long time you try and create some safe havens for you know the Syrian opposition to operate from. But I do think Assad has got to know that he can’t carry on doing what he’s doing, which is basically by the way because the Syrian Army will not really engage with the rebel forces in hand to hand combat, what they do is they’re firing scud missiles and other heavy artillery into entire villages and just wiping them out. And you know the devastation is there is extraordinary. My anxiety about Syria is that although some people think you know if you look at Syria, okay it’s a terrible tragedy, humanitarian tragedy, but does it have any regional consequences - well I would say it does you know if that spills out from Syria.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
So what does Britain do?

TONY BLAIR:
Well I think what we’ve got - not just Britain - I think what the West has got to do is see how it can bring this to an end now. Now that’s partly through trying to get Russia into a different position and I know efforts are happening to that end, but I also think you’ve got to …

SIAN WILLIAMS:
(over) Well there’s been three UN resolutions that they haven’t backed.

TONY BLAIR:
I know, so you know we’ve got to be careful of putting all our eggs in that basket. But I do think, as I say, there are certain things we could do to help strengthen the opposition and make it clear to Assad that in the end he’s not going to win this and he’s not even going to have a stalemate. It will end with his defeat and his going, and so the question is: is he prepared to do this on a basis that allows us at least some chance of stabilising the country afterwards. Because otherwise the risk is - and you know you see this from other countries that have gone through this process of revolution - you know you end up with a situation which the state then starts to collapse.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
But you mentioned yourself the difficulties getting a UN resolution with Russia already having rejected it a few times. Is the only answer to go in?

TONY BLAIR:
No, I don’t think you’re ever going to go in in the sense of British troops on the ground, but the question is what more you can do to help the opposition. And you know there are options there which I think it’s important to look at.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
Can I turn to Europe, which is a battle that David Cameron is having. At the moment he wants to reform Britain’s relationship with Europe and then have an in-out referendum. You said that when you heard his speech 90 per cent of it resonated with you; you agreed with 90 per cent of David Cameron’s speech on Europe. What about the in-out referendum? Wouldn’t that be a way of solving things once and for all, drawing a line under it?

TONY BLAIR:
Well it’s not a way of solving things. I mean, look, if the case is why should Europe reform, I mean I’m 100 per cent with him and that’s the case been made by British prime ministers - Margaret Thatcher, John Major, myself, Gordon Brown, everyone - and it’s absolutely right. And by the way, step by step there have been significant reforms in Europe as a result of that. So where it’s about should Europe reform, I’m 100 per cent with him actually. It’s where you say but if it doesn’t, then we want out.
That … you know to put the out question on the ballot paper, I mean first of all it creates … I mean we’re now in an uncertain situation. I mean everywhere I go people say to me “Is Britain really going to get out of Europe?” You can’t answer that question conclusively now. And, secondly, the fact is the overwhelming likelihood is that what will happen is he will try to get certain changes in Europe. He may get some changes in Europe.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
He’ll only get them by saying there’s going to be a referendum if you do it, surely?

TONY BLAIR:
I’m not sure about that because, remember, other countries in Europe also have their politics. See if you’re talking about reforming Europe, you’re talking about the interests of 27. If you’re saying this is about Britain’s relationship with Europe, it’s one versus 26. So you’d better make sure that they’re all lined up behind that because if they’re not and any one of them say no … I mean I can’t really believe David Cameron thinks it’s sensible to get out of Europe even if he doesn’t achieve all of that agenda. You see what I mean? So you’re in a situation where, look obviously it depends if he gets re-elected, but you’re in a situation where four or five years down the line, until then there’s uncertainty. And at that point, you know who knows what might happen; and if Britain did vote to go out, I think it would be a huge problem for our country. Because the thing to realise about Europe today is the rationale for Europe is not about peace. That was my father’s generation. The rationale for Europe today is power. You know in a world of China with 1.3 billion people and India with over a billion and increasingly because of mobile capital and technology, you know the weight of your country’s economy is linked to your population. So in time to come, Britain - sixty million people, you know a small island nation - if we want to exercise weight and influence and power in the world, why would we separate ourselves from the biggest political union and largest business market right on our doorstep? So you know …

SIAN WILLIAMS:
If there is a referendum, you would stand alongside David Cameron, Ed Miliband, everybody else who would be campaigning to stay in the European Union?
TONY BLAIR:
Sure - if they campaigned to stay in, of course. I mean if it got to that, you would be
doing that. But I think the tricky question is this. Supposing … Because, look, you
know I’ve spent ten years going through these European negotiations …

SIAN WILLIAMS:
And you wanted an in-out referendum at one stage. We have to say that. In 2005, on
the EU Constitution …

TONY BLAIR:
(over) No, no, not an in-out referendum.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
Well hang on. “ I thought we might turn it into a referendum that was effectively in or
out” is what you say in your memoirs.

TONY BLAIR:
Yeah, but …

SIAN WILLIAMS:
“I fancied mounting a really big argument on the issue I felt strongly about, and on
which I was right. Although plainly a tough challenge, I relished the fight.”

TONY BLAIR:
Exactly, but that would have been a referendum saying do you agree the new
European Constitution or not. It wouldn’t have been a referendum saying if you don’t,
we should leave. Now the fact of the matter is you know if we’d ended up … Look, I
had to have a referendum because Europe had proposed a new constitution. I was very
reluctant to do that, but in the end I accepted we had to have it. What we are doing in
this instance is not … Because this would be perfectly sensible if David Cameron
said, “I’ve agreed a certain amount of changes and now I want to put those changes to
a referendum.” That’s one thing. It’s the ‘out’ bit of it because once you put that on
the ballot paper, you know you’re then in a situation where who knows what the circumstances will be. And the problem with referendums, which is why you know you should only use them where it’s absolutely necessary, is … I think it was General de Gaulle once said “it’s as much about who asks the question as the question.” So you’ve got to be careful.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
I don’t know whether you heard Deborah Mattinson earlier. Deborah, as you know, has been involved in public opinion polling for thirty years. And she says at the moment looking at Labour, that the Conservatives seem to have a message - whether it’s Europe or whether it’s public sector reform - seem to have quite a clear message. When it comes to Labour, the public aren’t quite clear what it stands for now. Are you?

TONY BLAIR:
Yeah, I think I’m pretty clear what it stands for.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
What does it?

TONY BLAIR:
Well I think it stands for a society in which you combine economic prosperity with social justice. That’s always what the Labour Party stood for.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
But you had New Labour and Ed Miliband sort of sidelined that in his conference speech and said right, now we’re One Nation. What does that mean?

TONY BLAIR:
Well I think what it means is that in circumstances where the country’s got very difficult challenges, it’s important that it handles them as one and that you don’t end up simply governing for a small group of people at the top. So you know I understand the Labour Party message. And by the way what Ed’s trying to do is tougher than what I had to do. When I became Labour Leader, we’d lost four elections, right? This
is attempting to bounce back and win after a heavy defeat, so that is a …

SIAN WILLIAMS:
But you have a clear strategy about what Labour was and what it needed to do to win …

TONY BLAIR:
Sure, but I think he would say …

SIAN WILLIAMS:
… before you came in in 97. What is Ed Miliband’s clear vision? What is the one big message he’s got to …

TONY BLAIR:
(over) It’s the one you’ve just given, which is that if we face these difficult and testing times, we should face them together; that the burden should be shared equally; and that we’ve got to create an economy for the future in which opportunity is given to the many and not the few. So I don’t think it’s a problem with the vision actually. I think what there will be is a big challenge when it comes to how do you translate that vision into practical policy, and that’s for later in this year when the Labour Party will start to unveil its policies. But you know this is a situation where the economy is very tough, where we’re going to face the situation (whoever’s in government) where they’re going to be very constrained, and that’s why it will be important for the Labour Party to show they are reformers and they’re able to reform public services, welfare, the state and so on as well as simply protect people who are vulnerable.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
So a clear policy has to emerge by the end of this year? I mean that is what you seem to be saying if they’re going to win the election.

TONY BLAIR:
They’re an opposition party. So I don’t favour as an opposition party you know hugely detailed policy, but the orientation’s going to be clear.
SIAN WILLIAMS:
Do you advise Ed Miliband? Does he talk to you about these things?

TONY BLAIR:
I talk to him, but I don’t … you know I don’t presume to advise him or anyone else.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
You talk to David Cameron it appears in the papers, yes?

TONY BLAIR:
I of course …

SIAN WILLIAMS:
Officially, unofficially, both?

TONY BLAIR:
I talk to him from time to time as well. I mean I … Look, you know when you’ve gone through all this and you’ve sat in the seat both as Leader of the Opposition and Prime Minister, you know how damn difficult both jobs are. So I don’t … You know I come to it with also a sense of - believe it or not - humility about this. I know it’s really difficult and so the last thing I want to do with either individual, by the way, is end up you know being one of those sort of pains in the neck that sort of sit in the back seat saying “Hey, I would have done this and I would have done that.” Now on something like Europe, you know I will speak out, but even then I try and do it respectfully. But I don’t … you know for Ed and for David Cameron, if they ever want help or advice, I would try and give it in what I thought was the best interests of the country.

SIAN WILLIAMS:
So much more we could get through, but that’s all we have time for. Thank you very much, Tony Blair.

TONY BLAIR:
Thank you, Sian.
INTERVIEW ENDS