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CONVERSATION WITH TONY BLAIR AND ANDREA MITCHELL

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MR. ISAACSON: A man of enormous moral courage, Mr. Tony Blair has been somebody who has been – go ahead, applaud for him if you want.

(Applause)

MR. ISAACSON: Has been fighting the good fight for peace in the Middle East day in and day out and on a day like today, we know how tough that fight can be. But as he said earlier today when we were walking, I said, how do you keep doing it, he says because I am an optimist. He is not just a person of optimism, he is a person of faith and he is a person who puts that faith into action. So, to interview one of my heroes, Mr. Tony Blair, we have one of my friends, Ms. Andrea Mitchell.

(Applause)

MS. MITCHELL: Thank you all so much, thank you Walter –

MR. ISAACSON: Yeah, thank you very much.

MS. MITCHELL: It's wonderful to be back here in Aspen. Tony Blair, welcome to Aspen.

MR. BLAIR: Thank you Andrea, thank you very much for having me here in Aspen. And look, we're going to talk about a lot of quite heavy stuff I think. But before we get on to that, just from an outsider perspective, I'd like to wish you guys the best of luck in Brazil tomorrow against the Belgians. If you win, maybe finally there will be an understanding here that football is a game played with a round ball.

(Applause)

MS. MITCHELL: It certainly is becoming quite – quite a fad in America, so we are beginning to learn from you. Tony Blair, the tragedy in Israel today is very – is top of mind, three teenagers found dead. You have spent so much time on the Middle East. First of all, your reaction and

what does this mean in terms of what is likely to happen. They found – for those of you who've been here today, they found the bodies of the three teenagers, one of whom was an American citizen as well, and people are trying to come to grips with what John Kerry has called a devastating tragedy.

MR. BLAIR: Well, first thing to say is, this is a heinous and a wicked crime. The abduction and the killing of three youngsters in such a brutal way, and my heart goes out to the families of those young people and to the Israeli people right now. And there can be no justification for it. There should be no compromise with those responsible, and there is no place for it because until we take this poison out of the politics, the Middle East is not going to be peace. And so it's depressing and outrageous and wrong, and I grieve for those people who are grieving today.

MS. MITCHELL: John Kerry threw everything added and was frankly criticized by many including some in the administration for "wasting his time" on the Middle East, given who the players were – are, and their lack of a commitment to make compromise.

MR. BLAIR: Look, I first of all think that John Kerry did a fantastic job in devoting so much time and it's not wasted because a lot of the work that was done by him and his team will serve as very well when eventually we get down to what will have to be a negotiation for two states; a secure state of Israel, a viable state of Palestine. But I think my feeling now is that the only way we will – we will get peace is when the conditions on the ground allow the politics to work.

And right now, you have a situation where of course there are young Palestinians also being killed on the West Bank and their families are grieving, that's not the same situation as the kidnapping and abduction, deliberate murder of young people. But it shows you how raw the feelings are on both sides. But I remain absolutely convinced that whatever the other issues in the region, peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians is a necessary part of a peaceful region and a peaceful world and however difficult and however tough, we should not give up on trying to advance that peace process.

(Applause)

MS. MITCHELL: Of course, as we sit here, Iraq, I just am back from Baghdad a week ago, less than a week ago, and the change in just the last few years is so dramatic. And now the lightning attack and advance of ISIS, the disappearance of the border between Syria and Iraq, 200 more troops were authorized by the president and the notification went to congress about an hour ago to secure the Baghdad airport. Do you think that first of all, the larger question of Syria. If we had done more to arm the rebels sooner, as you advocated and others including Secretary Clinton when she was in office, do you think that ISIS would have metastasized as it has, now threatening Iraq and indeed Jordan and potentially Lebanon and the rest of the region?

MR. BLAIR: Well, the short answer is you can't tell, but you know I want to say something about the decisions in relation to these issues because I went through them post 9/11 through Afghanistan and Iraq and those decisions that were taken then. And I speak therefore with a huge amount of humility when it comes to the leadership that is in place today because they are also dealing with an incredibly difficult situation where we wanted to see Assad removed from Syria, but then Iran brought Hezbollah in from Lebanon, then the thing went into stalemate, then the extremist started to gain ground and gain traction and then finally ISIS rebuilt itself, rearmed itself, refinanced itself and then came over the border into Iraq.

I think you can debate forever whether it might have been better if we had established no fly zones around the rebels at an earlier stage, but let's be clear. None of those decisions are easy and none of them would necessarily result in what we wanted. And the thing I want to say to you today is that in my view whether it's in Iraq or Syria or across the whole of the Middle East and beyond, we should understand three things. The first is that these problems are complex and will take a generation to sort out. They predate the presidency of President Bush, they will postdate the presidency of President Obama and they are going to be with us for many years to come.

Secondly, my view is that the essential problem in the region

and beyond is Islamist extremism. That is the reason why these groups have gained traction in Syria and Iraq, in Yemen, in Egypt, across the whole of the Middle East. Thirdly, we are not going to defeat them until we build an alliance of people both in the region and outside who believe in open minded societies and proper rule based economies connected to the modern world. And this is an essential fight and I know people here, people back home, wish that it would go away and that we could stay out of it. But I honestly believe it is the single biggest security threat we face and like it or not, we are going to have to stand up and fight for what we believe in.

MR. MITCHELL: David Petraeus, whom we will hear from shortly, spent so much time and Americans made so many sacrifices to fight and win the support of the Sunni tribal leaders who were then alienated immediately by Maliki shutting them out of government or worse, jailing some major leaders. Can this government, this Iraqi government survive and lead an effort and push back these insurgents under Maliki or does he have to go?

MR. BLAIR: If he doesn't change, then he should be changed because the sectarian nature of his government has been one of the critical reasons why the opportunities there were a few years ago when actually the Al-Qaida were very much flattened, they have revived in part and part is what happened in Syrian, but in part because of the sectarian nature of the policies of his government. And one thing I think your administration is doing at the moment, I mean, they are right to do it by the way, is to leverage whatever support they give and say, there has got to be one, government in Iraq that is genuinely inclusive; two, it has got to be accepted and condoned by Ayatollah Sistani, who is the leading Shia cleric there, and thirdly it's got to have the real ability to bring in the Sunnis who, you know, this cannot turn into a Sunni Shia fight.

The reason that we take action against these ISIS people is because they are extremists. These DAASH ISIS people, they are extremists who would bring in a society that none of us would want to live in, and in fact the majority of Sunnis don't want to live in it either. But the key to it, you've got to change the sectarian nature of the government. However, you also need to change the sectarian nature of the politics in the region

and that's my point. And that's why I say, if you identify at the heart of this thing is really this issue around the choice for the region because, okay, we removed Saddam, we removed the Taliban, but in fact in Tunisia and Libya and Egypt and Yemen and trying in Syria, they actually want to sweep away these dictatorships and the choice once you get rid of the dictatorship is very clear.

You can either have a society based on a reaction review of politics and religion, where you are trying to return these society to kind of seventh century view of the world or you can embrace modernity. And what does that mean? It means understanding that democracy is a way of thinking and not just a way of voting and the only society that works in the modern world is one in which you are tolerant and respectful of people who have a different faith than yourself.

(Applause)

MS. MITCHELL: People often ask me, what is the American strategy? We now have a situation where the Russians are sending fighter jets to Maliki, the Iranian Quds force leader Suleimani is in Baghdad organizing Shia militia. So Maliki and the government that we support is being supported by the Russians and the Iranians, I mean, how did we reach that wonderful situation?

MR. BLAIR: You know, or a situation where those Arab countries that were calling for the removal of Assad and now very worried about the groups trying to remove him. So, this is my point, the complexity of this region isn't just vested on us, okay? And that's why I say, I have got to get beneath all this. You see, we don't see a lot of this in our own media. But if you take the situation of Libya today where we went into Libya and effectively through air power removed Gaddafi and that was because he was threatening to kill his people and, okay, I support that.

And at first the country settled down because the people by the way were glad to be free of them, okay. But then what happens is the extremist groups get working and today what you have is a situation where Libya is highly unstable, very divided between west and east and in the case of Libya, they are not exporting the terrorism down into the sub-

Saharan Africa.

MS. MITCHELL: It's arguably worse.

MR. BLAIR: Uh?

MS. MITCHELL: It's arguably worse than it was under Gaddafi.

MR. BLAIR: Well, except that here is the thing and this is where I think, you know, because it's the same arguments you have about all these dictatorships. In the end, just bear in mind one thing, these young populations in the Arab world, and remember the population of Egypt for example has tripled in the last 40 years. So, it was a population of 30 million, is now 90 million. The average age in the Middle East, average age in the UK is late 30s, early 40s, the average age in the Middle East is mid 20s, in the Gaza Strip the average age is 19, a quarter of the population is under the age of five, right.

In this world that's developing, these dictators that we used to like to deal with because they offered stability is not stability anymore. So, that's why I say, you know, when we – you say, well, what's the American strategy? The American strategy in my view should be to recognize this is going to be complex, it's going to be long, the next president after President Obama is going to be dealing with it and probably the president after that, the Europeans by the way have got to get onside with America and a proper alliance with them and do their bit to fight this and then we got to identify what the problem is.

And here is the good news that I think we haven't caught up with in the west. Because of what has happened in the last few years since the Arab revolutions, there are lots of people in the Middle East who are prepared to have this argument about Islamism, about the right relationship between politics and religion and to resolve it. And it's essential for us that they do because we can't win this in the end, we can help them win it, but we can't do it.

And the reason it's so important is that – and you know, I get

this from my own audience back in Britain who say, look, let's just stay out of the whole thing, I totally understand that. But here is the problem. We may be weary of war, but they are not. And part of their fight I am afraid is with us, with us and our way of life. And so whether we like it or not, we're going to be involved in it.

MS. MITCHELL: How worried are European leaders about the fighters, the ISIS fighters, many of them with clean western passports able to easily get to Europe. Our intelligence officials tell us they are worried about our homeland, they are certainly a lot closer to yours.

MR. BLAIR: This is the single biggest security threat we now face in Europe certainly. I mean, what has happened is that hundreds of British citizens, on some estimates over a thousand have gone to Syria to fight, these are British citizens by the way. There was a video posted on the internet the other day of a young British student from Cardiff urging people to come and fight jihad in Syria. The French has got the same problems, the Germans have got the same problems, you have actually got people from the US who are there. And these people are going to return as citizens to our countries.

So, this is why ultimately they won't stay within their own boundary. And therefore, the thing that worries people is if you create this effectively, this caliphate state with a large part of the eastern part of Syria and Iraq, the western part of Iraq, then you are going to end up in a situation where you create a fresh training ground for fresh 9/11.

MS. MITCHELL: Was it a mistake to remove Saddam Hussein?

MR. BLAIR: I don't believe so and I will never believe that we would be better off if Saddam and his two sons were still trying to cling to power in Iraq. Having said that, of course there were mistakes made and I have accepted full responsibility for those that were. But, you know, the difficulty we got into in Iraq and indeed in Afghanistan is very similar to the difficulty we are in today. So, my view is, we can debate that and I totally understand and I've always respected those who have disagreed with me.

But I do think the challenge now is to recognize what the

nature of this problem is and how we unite to defeat it. And we unite with those within the region who want to defeat it and outside. In fact I think there is a case for saying, on this issue whatever our other disagreements that can be common ground even with Russia and China on this issue.

(Applause)

MS. MITCHELL: You spoke of Afghanistan, the Taliban have been increasingly active, we have Abdullah Abdullah, one of the candidates now questioning the election results and the Taliban clearly trying to take advantage in Helmand Province of a vacuum, a power vacuum, what is the prognosis there?

MR. BLAIR: Well, again it's going to be difficult. But you know in all of this because one of the things that happens when I am talking to audience is we go for the Middle East first of all and then someone ask me about the Euro Zone and by the time I'm finished, everyone has gone very depressed, go off in search for the nearest drink. But here is some good news because there is some good news amongst all the bad news. Yes, it's going to be very tough in Afghanistan and it's true the surrounding countries are very worried about it. But think of how these Afghans despite being bombed and terrorized having their index fingers cut off came out and voted with a higher turnout by the way than we have in the average UK election, never mind that in the US - in the USA -

MS. MITCHELL: We don't talk about our turnout here.

MR. BLAIR: No, but I mean, the fact is the thing that we should always remember because there is a tendency that you kind of look at all of these countries and you say, there is a group of crazy people. But the unfortunate thing is, and it's one of the lessons in politics by the way that I learnt very early on in the struggles within my own political party is that decent people are numerous but badly organized, and the extremists, they are ones that are organized because they are the obsessives, so they get out and they are doing it all the time, but they don't represent the majority.

So, yes, Afghanistan again is going to be very tough and the fight the Pakistanis are fighting at the moment by the way, I don't know

whether you followed, what's happening in Pakistan right now, this is existential for Pakistan. The current military battle and the issues over Karachi, this will be fundamental to whether Afghanistan also stabilizes. But the point I am making is this. It isn't hopeless, there are decent people out there, and we should support them.

MS. MITCHELL: Where do you come down on the balance between privacy and security, there is a great debate in America over Edward Snowden and intelligence and surveillance?

MR. BLAIR: Being a politician I tend to come down on this side of privacy, so it's the dime. I don't know whether this will probably offend most of the people at the Aspen Ideas Festival, but I'll tell you what I think about the Edward Snowden thing. I totally disapprove them, I am afraid of what he did, I think it was wrong and I think it was seriously wrong. I do think the issues that are raised by the Snowden affair, if you like, are important issues.

You know, I dealt with all of this when I was in government. Even since I left office what has changed, technology has changed, this aspect of the world as so many other aspects. So, you can survey, you can put surveillance on far more, there is far more information you are generating and there was bound to be a point in time at which we had to get the rules clear for this. So, I don't agree with what he did, but I think the issues that are raised by this, it's sensible for us to see how we make sure people have faith in proper scrutiny in these matters.

MS. MITCHELL: Vladimir Putin, you -

MR. BLAIR: I get all the good questions here.

MS. MITCHELL: Yeah. Hillary Clinton was here earlier, I am wondering, did you ever go and tag polar bears with Vladimir Putin?

MR. BLAIR: Well, if I did, I probably wouldn't admit it. But no, I didn't. Look, the thing I've worked closely with him and then we obviously had disagreements, let's say. It's not complicated, Vladimir Putin, it's simple, he is a Russian nationalist, is what he believes. So, you

know, now there were two routes to Russian nationalism and I wish he chosen the first, not the second. The first is that you reform the Russian economic, you open it up, you become, you know, connected with the west and the world or you revive the spirit of Russian speaking peoples and you go for a more, let's say, conventional nationalist play. So, that's where he is.

MS. MITCHELL: I want to ask you about around because you spent so much time in the Middle East and you know where Israel is about the US nuclear negotiations. Do you think from what you know that a nuclear deal can be reached, obviously there are divisions between President Rouhani and the Ayatollah and others, other are the hardliners, but do you think that there – they've reached a number of impasses along the way, but is there a nuclear agreement that would leave Israel secure and would not involve too many concessions to Iran?

MR. BLAIR: There is an agreement that we do that and by the way, I think the administration is absolutely clear as to what the deal is and should be. And I know there is very strong consultation between the administration and the Israeli government on this. But the deal has got to be a deal that one gets them to step back from being a nuclear threshold state because Iran with a nuclear weapon in the Middle East region is a very bad idea.

And secondly, there can be no suggestion to allowing them greater regional influence to export instability and terrorism around the region as the price of such a deal. Now whether we can get that or not, I don't know. The actual decision maker is the Ayatollah, not the President. And I hope we can, by the way it sanctions that brought the Iranians to this point. So, my view is if the threat is very clear, then it is possible to get a deal and to get the right deal, but the wrong deal would be bad.

MS. MITCHELL: And when we think about the region, again, going back to Syria and back to Assad, here Assad remains in power, the American – the US President said Assad must go and then all these years later a 160,000 are dead, we focus here on Iraq because that's the war that America fought. But Syria is in a worst place than it was, we are beginning to arm the rebels now.

MR. BLAIR: Yeah, but this is why I say, you have got to look at this in the broader perspective. You see, we've just been talking about, right, what have we gone through? We have gone through the Israeli Palestinian issue, where the issue is the kidnap and murder of three innocent people by Hamas. Okay. We then gone through Iraq where the issue is how do we deal with this ISIS group. We have then gone to Iran where the issue is whether a theocratic regime that's based on an extreme view of the relationship between politics and religion is going to acquire a nuclear weapon or not and now we come back to issue of Syria and what we do about it.

My view is that what we do about it is we back within the region wherever we are in the region, whether it's Egypt, Yemen, the gulf, Syria, Iraq, or indeed Iran, we back those people who share a modern minded view of the world, right, who recognize that in a world that's becoming more interdependent than ever before and more connected than ever before, the only thing that works is a pluralistic view and attitude towards others and this is the way the world is today.

I look at London as a city and I think what London is today and what it was fifty years ago. And you go to London and it's a great mix of races and cultures and, now some people by the way don't like all of that, that's why the UK Independence Party won majority in the recent European elections. They hate all the immigration. I think it's fantastic that you got smart capable people coming from all around the world and sharing their culture and beliefs with ours. So, I am believer in diversity, I am a believer in the strength that comes from that.

(Applause)

MR. BLAIR: And that's the fight in the Middle East today. I mean, do you think - do you think most women in the region want to live under an Islamist government? You go and read the website of Muslim Brotherhood, even today and read their condemnation of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Women, right, and what are they saying, they say, this should be condemned by governments because what it does is it allows women the freedom to decide to work and to travel without their

husband's permission and all this antiquated reaction, nonsense in the 21st century and that's the issue there too.

(Applause)

MR. BLAIR: So, the more the go on in politics, the more I think, the biggest divide in the world today is not actually so much traditional left and right. Still important, I am a progressive politician and always would be, introduced the minimal wage in Britain, gave rights in Britain, did the whole thing, but is bigger difference as anything else as right and left is between those with an open minded view of the world and those with a close minded view, and the future belongs to the open minded.

MS. MITCHELL: Now, I can't think of a better note to close on. Tony Blair, I think this is your first visit to Aspen, I hope it is the first of many because we really very much enjoyed -

MR. BLAIR: I never came before. And I used to say to people, why they won't go to Aspen, it's a long way away. And now I have come here and I think it's pretty good actually.

MS. MITCHELL: It's pretty good.

(Applause)

MR. BLAIR: Thank you very much. All the very best to you.

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