

Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan >

Tony Blair, who led the U.K. into Afghanistan, criticizes the pullout.



By Austin Ramzy

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Tony Blair, the former prime minister of Britain, on Saturday criticized the withdrawal from Afghanistan, calling it a hasty move made “in obedience to an imbecilic political slogan about ending ‘the forever wars.’”

As prime minister, Mr. Blair sent British troops into both Afghanistan and Iraq, backing President George W. Bush’s decision to invade both countries after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Those conflicts have helped to comprise Mr. Blair’s legacy, particularly the war in Iraq, which a British investigation later found was promoted with intelligence that falsely overstated the threats posed by Saddam Hussein’s government.

In his statement on Saturday, Mr. Blair acknowledged unspecified mistakes in the 20-year military involvement in Afghanistan, some of them serious. But he said that the chaotic retreat would undermine faith in the West and sacrifice fragile improvements in the lives of Afghans.

“And for anyone who disputes that, read the heartbreaking laments from every section of Afghan society as to what they fear will now be lost,” Mr. Blair wrote. “Gains in living standards, education particularly of girls, gains in freedom. Not nearly what we hoped or wanted. But not nothing. Something worth defending, worth protecting.”

Mr. Blair did not mention President Biden by name in his statement. But he argued that leaving Afghanistan raised questions about whether the West had lost its strategic will and that it had resulted in a humiliation that would be cheered on by jihadist groups and exploited by China, Iran and Russia.

The Taliban should be seen as part of a broader ideology of what he called “Radical Islam” that should continue to concern the West, Mr. Blair argued, even if some believe that Afghanistan itself is of little geopolitical importance.

“If we did define it as a strategic challenge, and saw it in whole and not as parts, we would never have taken the decision to pull out of Afghanistan,” he wrote.

He called on the West to exert pressure on the Taliban, including potential incentives as well as sanctions, to protect Afghan civilians.

“This is urgent,” he wrote. “The disarray of the past weeks needs to be replaced by something resembling coherence, and with a plan that is credible and realistic. But then we must answer that overarching question. What are our strategic interests and are we prepared any longer to commit to upholding them?”

Austin Ramzy is a Hong Kong reporter, focusing on coverage of the city and also of regional and breaking news. He previously covered major events around Asia from Taipei and Beijing. @austinramzy

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