

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 17TH APRIL 2016

I/V DAVID DAVIS

AM: David Davis, the Conservative MP has just come back from Damascus and a face to face meeting with President Bashar a-Assad and he joins me now, Good morning. David Davis clearly not President Assad.

However you have been speaking to this man who is regarded around the world as one of the most blood thirsty and evil dictators going. How did you find him?

DD: Well, you've got to start with the fact that he does oversee a regime which murders and tortures prisoners and carries out barrel-bombing. He was polite, courteous. We had warned him before we arrived that we were going to be very frank with him and his opening words were, 'please be blunt.' So we were.

AM: So you asked him about the barrel bombs and the torture and so forth, how did he respond?

DD: In particular my colleague Adam Holloway who's incredibly fierce about it. He sort of sidestepped the barrel bomb argument, but on the torture and killing of prisoners he tried to claim that that was down to enemy propaganda, as it were. He said, you know, 'our opponents are very good at online propaganda.' Of course that may be true to some extent, but the – 'cause it's two years ago a British citizen, Doctor Assad Khan was tortured, we think and killed in their custody and there's other evidence that it's still going on. So other ministers in his government said 'oh put it down to revenge and their lack of control.' But the simple truth is it's still there.

AM: Now of course his troops are in Palmyra now and they're moving forward again thanks to President Putin's intervention. Did he talk to you about that and do you think he feels safe as a result of President Putin doing what he did?

DD: Well, absolutely. I asked him about Putin 'cause I was quite interested as to why Putin downscaled what they were doing. I mean the Russian intervention, you're quite right, actually completely put the Syrian Army back on its feet and so I asked him why has he downscaled it. He said, "because Russian was being criticised for stalling the talks. Taking away the incentive for him to negotiate." But then there was a line that came out of it, almost as a throwaway line. He said: "but Putin said we will not let you lose." Which for me was in fact in some ways the most important phrase of the entire visit. Because that actually defines what the outcomes are going to be. If the Russians will not let them lose then there are two possible outcomes. I mean the Jihadist victory, which will be a disaster in my view by the way, the Jihadist victory is not on the cards, but either a negotiated outcome or a Syrian victory is on the cards.

AM: It wasn't long ago we were being told of 70 thousand moderate Syrian fighters taking on the regime by the government. Any sign of that at all?

DD: No. We talked to a lot of other people. Where we could we talked to people like NGOs and journalists, both inside Damascus and in Beirut and the most telling comment was from an NGO, a very good NGO leader in Damascus who said that there is nobody that the west would recognise as a moderate amongst the various sorts of Jihadists and so called freedom fighters.

AM: So it's an unappetising choice between sticking with Assad and the Russians on the one hand and allowing complete turmoil of extremist groups on the other. Is there any other way forward?

DD: Well, there is a negotiated outcome. The reason I went in the first place was because Europe's biggest two problems are massive security problems, a thousand Jihadists a year arriving in Europe and tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of refugees. Both of those go back to the Syrian conflict. The longer it goes on, the longer negotiation goes on the worse that will be. We won't be able to cope with it. So outcomes. Either a Syrian government victory, which will take a long time, or a negotiated outcome. At the moment just with Syria just under the aegis of the Russians, who are not going to stop them torturing, who are not going to stop them killing their prisoners. So it seems to me the west has got to get a card in this game and I think one of the most important things the west could do is draft, as it were, a Marshall Plan for Syria, rebuild Syria. Syria used to be the Germany of the Levant. Breadbasket, pharmaceuticals, textiles, you name it, but it then allows us to say to them, you want this? You've got to negotiate properly. You've got to do what we want, which is create a civilised regime. I mean Syria's fascinating.

AM: Do you take the view that Assad eventually must go?

D: The other thing this NGO head said was, if Assad stood for government – stood for election tomorrow he would win. When he stood a few years ago – they've had a general election this week, which is a bit of a farce frankly, but when he stood a few years ago he got 63% of the vote. Now he'd probably get more, because everybody's terrified of the alternative. Not 'cause they like him, but they're terrified of the alternative. So we're going to leave that - I think we'll leave that to the Syrian people, although we insist –

AM: So you think the west would put 'Assad out' off the table for the moment, talk – if you were in the Foreign Office you'd be talking to Putin?

DD: I wouldn't make that a red line at the moment. I'd say we want a democratic, civilised state. At the moment you've got a repressive state with a civilised society. It's really weird, a liberal society. Churches alongside mosques, women not wearing veils, you name it. You want to maintain that piece whilst rebuilding Syria. So yes, I'd talk to Putin, I'd talk to the Assad government. And bear in mind this was here by the way before Bashar Assad took over. His father created the regime we have now.

AM: Yes, indeed.

DD: So the machinery is important too.

AM: it's been there for a long time. Absolutely.

DD: So you have to sort that out too.

AM: Very, very interesting. Since you are a leading enthusiast for the leave side of the argument let me ask you about Ken Clark's comment this week. "The Prime Minister wouldn't last 30 seconds if we vote to Brexit."

DD: You ask me if I agree with that?

AM: Yes.

DD: No, I don't. Look, if we vote for Brexit then it's clear that David Cameron can't lead that bit of his government's activities. He'll have to point –

AM: What the renegotiation do you mean?

DD: The renegotiation, exactly. He'd have to appoint somebody who the public had faith in, who his own party had faith in, but

most importantly who believed in the negotiation. If he did that I don't see any reason why he shouldn't go on. I mean listen, this is...

AM: So what kind of person? We're talking about somebody who's been on the leave campaign sign, a Boris or a Gove, or somebody who's been in the Foreign Office, David?

DD: Oh go away. You're referring to me. Let us confine ourselves to the plausible, shall we?

AM: Okay, but if he brought in a Gove or a Johnson, to do the renegotiation do you think he would then remain as Prime Minister?

DD: Yes, I think so. I think if he made it plain that he was going to give those people enough power to do the job.

ENDS