ANDREW MARR: The hundreds of British troops who’ve died in recent campaigns such as Iraq and Afghanistan will be remembered today, along with the fallen from the two world wars and many other conflicts. Earlier, I spoke to the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nicholas Houghton, about some of the challenges facing the armed forces, and I began by asking him about today’s remembrance ceremonies. With security tighter than ever, will the mood be different this year?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: Yeah, I think the mood is definitely different this year, but the biggest thing that makes the mood different, I think, is the intensity and the poignancy about it borne of the aggregation of the hundred years commemoration of the First World War, the seventy years of D-Day, I think the end of combat operations in Afghanistan. But certainly the proximity of the sense of threat for this weekend, which has intensified the nature of the security that’s attendant on it, yeah all that has sort of contributed to you know quite a different feel about this year.
ANDREW MARR:
What would you say to all of those people wondering this morning shall I go to my local service because it’s not just the London service; all across the UK there’ll be services of remembrance and many people will be wondering this time round are there security threats?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
No, well I would in an absolutely unreserved way I’d say we’ve just got to keep continuing our normal life. The last thing that we at all would want to do is succumb to any sense that there is a terrorist threat there that is at all going to stop the British way of life, and I cannot think of another day when most British people would not want to do what absolutely comes naturally to them and want to spend a small amount of today collectively coming together in an act of collective remembrance.

ANDREW MARR:
A hundred years since the beginning of the First World War, of course. What do you personally feel about that war? Michael Gove weighed into the argument about whether “lions led by donkeys” and the Blackadder caricature of it and Oh! What a Lovely War and all that sort of stuff had actually undermined what an important war it was. Do you feel in any sense that we have underplayed and we now mock the First World War too much?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
I think certainly there has been an attempt to caricature as it were in many respects the stupidity of leadership and the huge courage of the lions, as it were.

ANDREW MARR:
Yes.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
I think that this does a massive disservice because it takes the actions of that time out of context. It sort of applies a post facto rationale borne of many decades that have gone since. It’s military caricature, it’s hobbyist history to make money, not to do justice to people in their time.
ANDREW MARR:
Now one of the things that carried on of course all the way through the First World War was a vigorous political debate about the way the war was being fought and whether the forces had the right kind of backing and we remember the shells crisis and Kitchener and all of that. Which leads us onto Afghanistan because we’ve been talking on this programme a lot about that and the current Defence Secretary said that he thought that perhaps in the past, in the first phase of that conflict in particular, the armed forces hadn’t had the political backing they deserved. Do you agree with that?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
I’m not certain about the political backing. I think …

ANDREW MARR:
I think I mean by that the money, the resources, the kit.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
Yeah, I can see that. By and large our kit is based for generic war, not specific war, and that theatre was very dynamic, it moved very quickly; the nature of the threat grew very rapidly. The Taliban themselves went from a quite conventional form of attack to an asymmetric form - you know the advent of IEDs at scale, demanding an increase in the number of helicopters, a change in the sort of protected mobility that was needed. So again I think that we’ve got to study and perhaps draw lessons that could we have been more agile? But I think that there is a basic truth that armed forces are never absolutely equipped to fight every sort of conflict on a given day. It takes time to change and to adapt.

ANDREW MARR:
Now you say in an article this morning very clearly that you think the British forces in Afghanistan have left that country a better country – better education and so forth – and yet down in Helmand, the Taliban are still on the march, they’re still pushing forward, and that country remains a very fragile one.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
I mean in the article of course my main point is that the prime strategic purpose of our
being in Helmand and all international security forces in Afghanistan has been achieved – that of denying Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorism, such that the streets of the United Kingdom are safer - and indeed in the last thirteen, fourteen years there’s not been a single international terrorist attack launched from Afghanistan. I think that even although today at the Cenotaph and around the country, there will be many families who are still very proximate to the sense of loss and grief and sacrifice that Afghanistan has caused, nevertheless I think that there is a genuine sense that the primary mission has been achieved and we’re leaving a country with a legacy of significant hope.

ANDREW MARR:
The problem with this new kind of warfare, however, is that the threat simply moves, and it’s now moved to Syria and into Iraq, and a lot of people would say the streets of Britain are actually less safe than they were ten or fifteen years ago because of that and so you, you know, crush them in this area and then you squeeze them off somewhere else and that will just carry on going on. How big a kind of existential threat do you think IS now are to us?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
Well I absolutely get the point that what perhaps you defeat in one area pops up again in another area, and the threat to the streets of the United Kingdom is an enduring one but it’s one that we are successfully controlling. And I go back to the Afghanistan point: no terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan over many, many years. But this is in many respects why getting the strategy right for dealing with ISIS is so important, and in many respects there are two elements to that strategy: there is the nationally owned strategy, which is all about protecting the United Kingdom; and then that strategy nests within an international one, which is our contribution to the defeat and eradication of ISIS in the places from which it originates.

ANDREW MARR:
And that’s going to be incredibly difficult. I mean the so called Islamic State controls huge amounts of Iraq’s former wheat production, oil fields, cities. It’s a very, very potent enemy now, isn’t it?
GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
It is a potent enemy and I think that what we have got to be very careful as it were in
the formulation of the strategy – and I think President Obama has got this absolutely
right, as have our own government and National Security Council – is that we
shouldn’t miscast this war on ISIS as a military war to be fought by international
troops which will have a decisive military outcome. This is a war on an ideology - an
abhorrent ideology but one that is attractive to certain radicalised elements. And that’s
why the nature of the strategy here is one that is best conducted by local people – by
Muslim people, by local forces – by getting at the ideology by discrediting that, by
delegitimising it both in Iraq and in Syria, but also domestically here amongst the
Muslim people of our own country.

ANDREW MARR:
And yet we’re already seeing in the last couple of weeks more British forces being
sent back to Baghdad, many more Americans going back to Baghdad to try and
reinforce the government there. Lots of people will say yes, I know, it’s just advisers
and so forth, but this is again how it starts boots on the ground; one way or another we
are going back to Iraq.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
Yes, but again you shouldn’t overstate. And here I think that, can I say, the
commentariat has a responsibility not - in their own presentation of this – to
over-militarise it. We are talking about small numbers of advisers. Again the strategic
formulation of this …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Sorry, my point if I may, Sir Nicholas, is that is always how it starts. You get
sucked in, you get drawn in. Small number, large number, and then eventually you’re
back with fighting troops.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
Yeah, but the strategic formulation has got to be very resolute here. President Obama
is absolutely determined, as we all are, not to allow this to be portrayed as another
West versus the Muslim world, the great Satan against Muslim local powers, because that acts as an accelerant to the radicalisation agenda. And that’s why the Coalition, now I think sixty countries strong, and the members within the Coalition, the local ones – the Gulf states, the Jordans, the Lebanons – they’re so keen that the way in which militarily this will be prosecuted is by the use of local forces, not by the introduction of significant numbers of international forces.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Now as we sit here there are unconfirmed reports that the guy, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (I think his name is) who runs ISIS, has been killed in an attack by American aircraft. Do you have any information about that, any sense of how that would change the game were it to be true?

**GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:**
I can’t absolutely confirm that Baghdadi has been killed. Even the Americans themselves are not yet in a position to do that. Probably it will take some days to have absolute confirmation.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Sure.

**GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:**
What I wouldn’t want to do is sort of rush to the sense that the potential death of one of their totemic leaders is going to create some strategic reverse within ISIS. They will regenerate leadership. It’s because of the current potential attractiveness of this warped ideology, unless we get the political dimension of the strategy in place then ISIS has the potential to keep regenerating and certainly regenerating its leaders. And what do I mean by the political dimension? Take Iraq, for example. In Iraq what is needed is government of national unity, inclusive government, so that all the ethnic dimensions of Iraq are combined …

**ANDREW MARR:**
Which is what we haven’t had so far.
GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
It’s what we haven’t had. This is where, dare I say, the Maliki government got it horribly wrong. And I think everybody recognises that and it’s why getting rid of that Maliki government and now the al-Baghdadi government, which in its early days is promising to be one that is inclusive.

ANDREW MARR:
That’s really important. So just going back to this attack, however. Are you saying that attacks like this, even if Baghdadi himself has been killed, aren’t really degrading ISIS?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
Yeah well they are degrading and that’s one of the things I think that in this early stage of this campaign, which could take a long time, the things that international military force can do surgically applied is to both contain and to an extent degrade ISIS, so as it were they don’t become an existential threat to the whole region, so Baghdad isn’t taken and the lawful government of Iraq is not overrun.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Survives, yeah.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
So that I think is we do need - hence the use of air power - we do need to buy some time for the correct political elements of the strategy (like “piecing together a jigsaw” as our own prime minister has described it) are put in place whilst we can, as it were, recondition Iraqi security forces, potentially help build a moderate opposition in Syria, so that locally the solutions to the eradication of ISIS can be brought about.

ANDREW MARR:
When we spoke a year ago, we’d just had the news that the army was being cut to 83,000 and there was going to be a 30,000 or so TA type boost, and you said at that time, it was too early to say whether that would work. Do you know whether it’s working at the moment? There’s already been reports that the timescale for boosting
the TA side of the army you know is not working, it’s later than you’d hoped.

**GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:**
I think it’s true to say that the numbers are not in as good a position as we would have hoped by this stage.

**ANDREW MARR:**
(over) At this stage, yeah.

**GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:**
At this stage. And I think 30,000 by 2018 was always going to be quite a tall order. There’s been some early glitches in that campaign to recruit those. But I would rather not look at it purely on a numerical basis by a given time. For those who understand the subject of our reserve forces in depth, there is much to be confident about. Our numbers are increasing, in only small numbers, but four or five years ago the numbers were haemorrhaging away, so we’ve stabilised the reserve. We’ve put in place a proposition that is attractive to reserves because it balances the demands of their families and their employers, and the numbers are now increasing. The equipment is better, the training is better, we have restructured. I am hugely confident that on this show in a year’s time the irreversible momentum of the numbers will also be established.

**ANDREW MARR:**
You’re getting there.

**GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:**
This is a cultural thing. You don’t bring about cultural change you know against a stopwatch, but we’re heading in the right direction.

**ANDREW MARR:**
And in terms of the full-time army, the 83,000 …

**GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:**
Eighty-two thousand.
ANDREW MARR:
Eighty-two thousand. Is that an absolute limit now? You’ve been promised I think for 2015 no further cuts, but a new government one way or another will be in power. More cuts, they’ll be desperate to look for cuts everywhere.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
I know the Prime Minister does not want again to cut the physical manpower of the armed forces. But there is of course still further fiscal consolidation to face …

ANDREW MARR:
There certainly is.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
… and we are well aware of that. And if you like what I just want to make certain – and in many ways it’s what coming back to today is all about – is to try to better explain in the minds of the British public and its government the remarkable utility of the British armed forces. We do not live in a safe world. It’s dangerous, it’s uncertain.

ANDREW MARR:
We don’t. If I may say so, you don’t terribly sound like this general is going to fix bayonets and fight the last trench to defend the army at its current size.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
No, I’m … I’m very confident that I will. But what I … If you like, I’m someone … I’ve never courted the cult of military celebrity; I’ve always thought that to work within the system, to allow wise counsel to bring about the best results. Because ultimately I can’t dictate from inside to a government what its ambition is for itself and for the country. I can’t dictate what it’s going to give the armed forces and defence as a settlement. That’s what the people can do, that’s what the media can do. All I can do is just to try to counsel everybody the remarkable utility of the armed forces. Take what we do today and we will very shortly have more armed forces in Sierra Leone fighting Ebola than in Afghanistan. Now who would have thought that twelve months ago? To fight floods during the winter, to guard the Olympics, to
deliver the Commonwealth Games, to go out and cover for the potential industrial action that occasionally happens in the country. It is a remarkable armed forces. Stand fast the conflicts that we fight, the contribution that is made to creating stability and to maintaining world order. I think we are good value for money and I will quietly within inside the system fix my bayonet and fight to the last.

ANDREW MARR:
Very interesting to hear that. Now you mentioned Afghanistan. Finally there are calls again for a big public inquiry, an open inquiry into the entire Afghan experience. Do you think that would be a useful thing for this country?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
I’m not certain. I mean, to be honest, I absolutely got the need for an Iraq Inquiry because there the problem with Iraq is a questioning of the purpose. I don’t think in respect to Afghanistan, there should ever have been any questioning of the purpose, but perhaps some failures in early understanding and therefore early execution. But these are matters for which lessons have already been learnt. If there have been mistakes about Afghanistan, it’s never been about the purpose, it’s been about the delivery.

ANDREW MARR:
Sir Nicholas, thank you very much indeed for joining us. You need to get down to the Cenotaph. Thanks indeed for coming in.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:
My pleasure, Andrew. Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS