EDDIE MAIR:
The bloodshed in Syria shows no sign of abating and some commentators are worrying that with greater Russian and perhaps European involvement in the country, we could be headed for a kind of proxy Cold War. Others still fear that Israel could be drawn in. It’s a concerning moment. The Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander is here. There is still a Syria peace conference in the diary of some people, though there are doubts as to whether it’ll happen. Do you think it will happen? And even if it does, what good might it do?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well I think this is a very dangerous moment for Syria and I sincerely hope that that peace conference takes place because ultimately what we need to see is an inclusive political settlement that gives a credible future for all of the communities within Syria. And I fear that the judgement that the British Government made, a very difficult judgement to effectively break the European arms embargo last week, has not been the right one. The argument that they advanced, in admittedly difficult circumstances, was that the possibility of arming the rebels could tip the balance of the conflict, and
yet we’ve seen the announcement of new Russian sales to the Syrian Government in recent days. And at the same time, they said it would incentivise Assad to come to that peace conference, but I worry that if both the rebels and the Government feel that they are guaranteed arms supplies in the future, then the incentive to turn up at the peace table may actually have been diminished.

**EDDIE MAIR:**
But was there cause and effect there? As I understand it, the Russian arms, the deal for that was signed some time ago. This is simply about delivery.

**DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:**
That’s correct and I think what we want to avoid is a situation where we see an escalation in arms sales on all sides. Syria is awash with arms and you’re right to recognise that Russia has been arming Syria for some time. That’s why I’ve been calling for many months for the kind of shuttle diplomacy that thankfully we’ve now seen from John Kerry flying directly to Moscow and speaking with the Russian Foreign Minister because ultimately we need both the United States and Russia engaged in this process if there is any chance of getting both sides to the table.

**EDDIE MAIR:**
I was speaking to the Czech Foreign Minister on PM this week and he sees a contradiction in the British and French and actually the wider European position in wanting everyone to sit down for talks but saying that President Assad can’t be part of the solution. Do you think there is a contradiction?

**DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:**
Well I think that there’s a question of choreography, if you like. I don’t think it should be a precondition of the conference that Assad has to go, but I very much want to see Assad going. So in that sense …

**EDDIE MAIR:**
So technically you’d like to see him at peace talks?

**DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:**
No, I would like to see representatives of the Syrian Government sitting down at peace talks with the rebel forces and with others. And I think we have to focus all of our efforts in the coming days in making sure these talks actually happen because if we don’t see Geneva II (as it’s called) this process taken forward, then I struggle to see what we are looking at other than potentially a civil war with proxy fighters on each side lasting many, many years into the future. And diplomacy involves talking with people with whom you profoundly disagree. That’s why we need to see not just the rebels but also the Syrian Government represented.

EDDIE MAIR:
Your message to the unarmed rebels, the “good guys”, is what - we’re not helping you?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well, as I say, Syria is awash with weapons. The argument that’s been advanced for arming “the good guys” is contingent on knowing the intent, the ideology and the tactics of those individuals. Today’s moderates can very rapidly become tomorrow’s radicals in a situation like Syria and frankly arms have been …

EDDIE MAIR:
(over) And so because we can’t see the future, they shouldn’t be helped today?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
No arms are being channelled in already by Saudia Arabia, by Qatar and by other countries. Frankly given the proximity of this peace talk, I think the priority has to be to unify the opposition rather than arm the opposition because what we’ve seen with the Syrian National Coalition I’m afraid has been complete incoherence for many, many months, and at the same time not take actions that compromise the commitment of the Russians or indeed any of the potential parties to actually participate in these very difficult negotiations.

EDDIE MAIR:
How do you get the disparate groups, the opposition groups in Syria to unite because goodness knows they’ve tried, and whenever they do, they seem to make no progress
at all? Is there something there that Western European politicians can do to help?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well I think Western European politicians have a responsibility to be clear with the rebels that actually the Geneva II process is the way forward, and if we are saying listen if you don’t turn up at these talks there is the prospect that Europe will provide you with arms, I think the risk is that the incentives are pointing in the wrong direction. So I’m not for a moment disputing how difficult this situation is - if there was a risk free or easy solution to Syria, frankly it would have been found over the last couple of years - but I do believe that the diplomatic path still represents the best way forward.

EDDIE MAIR:
Do you think William Hague has made Syria a more dangerous place?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
I think there are very serious doubts about the judgement that he exercised last week along with the French in demanding the lifting of the EU arms embargo. It was suggested that somehow Europe agreed to this arms embargo. It required unanimity and basically the British and the French said notwithstanding the opposition of the rest of Europe, we’re simply not going to accept the arms embargo continues after this weekend. And I fear that with the best of motives, he’s ended up in a situation where the peace talks may not happen; and we all want to see that happen, I’m sure, including the British Government.

EDDIE MAIR:
Talking about William Hague on Europe this week, he’s quite keen for a system … There’s a yellow card system, as he put it this week, where countries, individual countries can say to the commission have a think about this again. He wants to see a red card system - individual countries can say no to EC proposals. Are you in favour of that?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Yes, I always agree with William Hague when he agrees with me. It was what I
proposed in a speech at Chatham House back in January.

EDDIE MAIR:
I don’t think he mentioned you in this …

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well maybe flattery is a form of imitation, who knows? But the truth is I think we should recognise that even after a few months, the Government’s got to the right place in saying there should be a greater role for National Parliament. And listen, there isn’t a disagreement between the parties on the need for Europe to reform. I think there are quite profound disagreements as to the character of that reform. For example, I think the Conservative Government want to bring back employment and social legislation, so that they can bring powers home to take rights away. We disagree as the Labour Party. But on the other hand, we are clear and unequivocal that Europe needs to change and that was why back in January, I set out actually a broader reform agenda than David Cameron and William Hague have yet managed to do.

EDDIE MAIR:
You’ve very kindly agreed to answer all of my questions this morning without cash changing hands, but that doesn’t seem to always be the case with some of your parliamentary colleagues. What do you think of that?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well, listen, I think any right thinking person reading the newspapers this morning wouldn’t just feel sad; they would feel angry. People have a right …

EDDIE MAIR:
(over) Are you angry?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Yes, I am angry. I’m angry as a citizen of the United Kingdom that this seems to be happening in Parliament, and I’m angry as a politician that the good name of the endeavour of politics - trying to find shared solutions to shared problems - is once again being smeared by what appears to be conduct that literally cannot be defended.
Now of course there needs to be proper investigations by the parliamentary authorities, but, yes, it doesn’t just make me sad, it makes me angry, and that’s why we need action. As the Labour Party, we want to see cross-party talks immediately with the Government in relation to lobbying and how we can get it on a proper footing. But I think we’ve also got to ask some deeper issues in relation to the House of Lords. I mean I think most people simply don’t understand why you can break the rules, in fact break the law, and then find yourself back in the House of Lords once you’ve undertaken a custodial sentence. And in that sense, I think that there are specific issues in relation to lobbying, but there are broader issues in terms of how do we make sure that people can have confidence as to the motive of their legislators whether in the Commons or whether in the Lords.

EDDIE MAIR:
So you’re suggesting that perhaps the revolving door, if I can put it like that - people who are shown to have done wrong, do time - shouldn’t be allowed back in Parliament?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
I personally don’t see that that can be defended. I think if you break the law, you serve a custodial sentence, then I think most people would simply not understand circumstances in which a few months later you’re back in the House of Lords making the laws of the country.

EDDIE MAIR:
For the Labour Party, if anyone in Labour is shown to have done wrong, would you like to see them expelled?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well, listen, first of all party discipline is a matter for the Chief Whip. Secondly, it’s right that people have the chance to offer an explanation as to what they’ve done.

EDDIE MAIR:
(over) No of course, I’m saying …

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
But if the rules …

**EDDIE MAIR:**

(over) … if wrongdoing is proved?

**DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:**

If wrongdoing is proved, of course action should be taken both by Parliament and indeed by the Labour Party.

**EDDIE MAIR:**

But they don’t deserve to still be in the Labour Party if they were shown to take cash for questions, do they? I mean you don’t want that?

**DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:**

As I say, let’s have the investigation …

**EDDIE MAIR:**

(over) Why are you backing away from that? You were talking about …

**DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:**

(over) I’m not backing away from it at all. What I’m saying is there’s a process that needs to be followed if the rules …

**EDDIE MAIR:**

(over) I’m say saying if they’re shown to have …

**DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:**

If the rules have been broken …

**EDDIE MAIR:**

Yes.

**DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:**

… then I think that the Labour Party should take action. It would be for the Chief
Whip to lead that action, but I would be encouraging her to do so.

**EDDIE MAIR:**
Alright. Douglas Alexander, thank you very much.

**DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:**
Thank you.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**