

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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AM: Mr Raab, first of all, the British government's actual response, do we approve of this killing or not?

DR: Well, we understand the action the Americans have taken. Let's be very clear.

AM: Do you agree with that?

DR: Well, frankly it's the decision that the Americans have taken. But we understand why they did it. Let's be clear about this, they have the right to exercise self-defence, and General Soleimani was the head of, the Commander, of the Quds Force, the wing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard that is destabilising countries across the Middle East to assert Iranian influence. And indeed attack western countries who are legitimately there. So we understand the position and the action they've taken.

AM: Was this killing – some people say it's an assassination – was it legal?

DR: Well, my view is, and the operational assessment has been done by the Americans, is that there is a right of self-defence there.

AM: Tightly circumscribed under international law.

DR: Well, it is. But if you're attacked, and there's no doubt – look, it was General Soleimani's job description to engage proxies, militias across not just Iraq but the whole region, not just to destabilise those countries but to attack western countries that were legitimately there. In those circumstances self-defence clearly applies.

AM: The former head of MI6, Sir John Sawers said this was an act of war, do you agree with him?

DR: No, I don't agree with that assessment. The reality is Iran has for a long period been engaged in menacing, destabilising activity,

partly through the work of General Soleimani. We've also had the flouting of international law when it comes to the pursuit of the potential to acquire a nuclear weapon. We've seen the appalling treatment of dual nationals, UK and others. The President of the US, the President of France, through the Macron-Trump initiatives, have left the door open to a diplomatic route through this to a better place for Iran. The leadership have decided not to take it. And I think the important thing now is to de-escalate the tensions, to try and restore some stability, and make sure whilst we're containing the nefarious actions Iran is undoubtedly taking, that that door to a diplomatic route out from the international cold is there for Iran. But it's ultimately got to be for the regime and the leadership in Tehran to make that choice.

AM: When did you yourself first know about this killing?

DR: Well, I became aware of it as it happened. And I - we don't comment on operational matters, but I spoke to my opposite number, Mike Pompeo, on Friday about it and we're in constant dialogue, as you'd expect.

AM: So after it had happened, you had no warning that it was going to happen?

DR: We don't comment on operational matters, as you know, and we of course stay very closely in touch on all these issues with the Americans, both through the diplomatic channel, but also the military.

AM: It's just that we're told that we've got this special relationship with the Americans. We have a lot of people in a vulnerable position in the region. And if we'd known in advance we could have taken action perhaps earlier to help them.

DR: I'm not sure it would have made the kind of wholesale difference that you're suggesting. But the reality is we understand why the Americans took this action. Let's not be doe-eyed or naive about General Soleimani. And the engagement through the

Revolutionary – Iranian Revolutionary Guard in not just Iraq, but in Syria, in the Lebanon, in other countries through the region. And we totally share the concerns that the Americans have about the threat that that poses, not just to western interests but those countries in the region and to wider regional stability.

AM: So you've spoken to Mike Pompeo, you're going in this coming week to see him directly, face to face. So far he's a bit disappointed. He said, 'the Europeans haven't been as helpful as I wish they could be. The Brits, the French, the Germans all need to understand that what we did, what the Americans did, saved lives in Europe as well.' What are you going to be telling him?

DR: I spoke to Mike on Friday morning . In fact, just to be clear, this was a pre-scheduled meeting, but of course we want to be in close contact with our US partners. We understand the action they took. But we also need to be very clearly focused on what happens next. We want to de-escalate the tensions, we want to see a route through this crisis. We do not want to see major war in the Middle East. The only group or players that would benefit from that would be the terrorists and Daesh. And whilst we totally understand and agree and share the need to contain the nefarious activities, not just of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, but Tehran more generally, on the nuclear issue, on destabilising countries throughout the Middle East, the disruption of international shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. We also need to see that there's a route, a door left ajar for a diplomatic solution so that when the leadership in Tehran wake up to their options they understand that there is a positive route through for them if they're willing to live up to the basic responsibilities that come with being a responsible member of the international community.

AM: That could sound a bit doe-eyed or optimistic, frankly, at the moment. They're talking about revenge and they will take revenge somewhere. And I wonder what our kind of response is going to

be to that. We have – I don't know how many civilian contractors, for instance, in Iraq at the moment. But I think it's more than a thousand. And we have several hundred troops in fairly exposed positions. Are we bringing those troops back to safer, more secure positions inside American compounds?

DR: Well, I'd say first of all this isn't something that's come out of the blue. The behaviour of Tehran. We have seen a steady deterioration of its behaviour over recent months, and indeed last year. So on the first point, of course we're going to take all the measures necessary to protect contractors, people that might be travelling through the region. I've changed the travel advice.

AM: How many people are we talking about?

DR: We're protecting our diplomatic and military missions. We don't go into the operational details, for obvious reasons.

AM: Not operational details, but how many British people are under threat in Iraq and Iran at the moment?

DR: Well, I think you have to be a bit more focused on what you're asking.

AM: I'm asking you how many contractors do we have in Iraq?

DR: Well, I don't know the precise number and it's fluid because they're travelling to and from. But for example, we've made clear, we've changed the travel advice. I did that yesterday to make sure that there isn't anything other than essential travel to both Iraq and Iran. So what we're going to do across the board, and it applies to shipping through the Straits of Hormuz as well, it make sure we take every essential measure that we can to reduce the risk to the UK, whether it's our nationals, our diplomatic missions or indeed our military personnel.

AM: There's been a fair amount of criticism in the papers about the prime minister not being back earlier to deal with this crisis.

And a sense that in London there has been an, albeit brief, political vacuum.

DR: No, there's not been a vacuum at all. The prime minister is in charge.

AM: Are you holding meetings?

DR: We've been holding various meetings with the Cabinet Secretary, the National Security Adviser, I spoke to them last night. And the prime minister has been in charge from the outset. In fact, I've been in constant contact with the prime minister over the Christmas break on a whole range of foreign policy issues. But the reality is we do have a crisis here. We are focused and we're all agreed – and indeed our partners are agreed with us. I spoke to the Iraqi prime minister this morning, I spoke to the Iraqi President last night. We want to see the de-escalation of those tensions. We want to see some stability in the region. We do not want to give Daesh the opportunity of a vacuum there. And we also want to be very clear that Iran cannot continue its nefarious behaviour. But there is a route through.

AM: ..for what they're going to do next. We'll wait, as it were, to see what that revenge might take. It could involve closing – trying to close the Strait of Hormuz, it could involve attacking our base in Bahrain, it could involve going to the Saudis, there are all sorts of quite scary things that they could do relatively easily. Are you not concerned that this is step one towards a war? Whatever you say, you want to de-escalate, but in terms of how they respond are we not stepping, step by step towards a war?

DR: That's why we need to de-escalate. But let's take hard –

AM: What do you mean by de-escalate? How do we de-escalate?

DR: We reduce the tensions, we make it clear on all sides that actually responding in an aggressive way will only yield an even more robust response from the Americans. But let's also just take half a step back and look at the big geopolitical strategic picture. Iran and the leadership have a choice. They can continue down

this path – we've seen this deterioration in their behaviour on the nuclear issue, on dual nationals, on..

AM: It's been successful for them.

DR: It has. And that's why I think you've seen frustration on the American side. So we do need to contain the aggressive, menacing behaviour of Iran. But I think we need to de-escalate tensions and make clear that the door is ajar, as President Trump, as President Macron, have already indicated, and the UK fully supports, to see a diplomatic route through for the leadership, and I think you're right that there is a choice going on, there'll be a frenetic debate in Tehran between the moderates and the hardliners about which way they go. But if you look at it from Tehran's point of view, and certainly the people of Iran's point of view, their route so far has not – it's just led to deeper political and economic isolation. I don't think they should go down that path. We want to make sure there's an alternative.

AM: Alright. One specific problem that we've got at the moment – I've spoken to your predecessor, now the prime minister, and yourself about this on many occasions. Nazanin Zaaghari-Ratcliffe is still in jail. Her husband is really, really worried about what it's going to do to her. He says that, 'she's one of the aces that the Iranians have to play, she was very bleak that Iran would now keep her and others to serve their full sentences and more.' The truth is, there is nothing we can do about that.

DR: And there wasn't before, in the sense of there's no magic wand that we can exercise.

AM: Have you given up on this?

DR: No, no, not at all. All of our dual nationals, Nazanin included, are at the forefront of our thinking on Iraq. And of course they're part of that pattern of aggressive, bullying behaviour that we've seen from the leadership in Tehran. And so actually what we need to – again it comes back to that strategic choice that the leadership in Tehran have got. They can take the steps to de-escalate and also feel confident that there is a positive way

through for Iran and for the region. And if they take those steps, and that would include releasing – hold on, just a sec – and that would include releasing those dual nationals, there is a better path for the regime in Iran and indeed for the people of Iran. If they don't, of course we will continue to pursue their release, but we cannot keep stepping back and allowing this aggressive behaviour to go unchecked.

AM: Are you still speaking to your opposite number in Tehran about this, and is the nuclear deal which the Europeans have tied themselves to so strongly and the Americans don't like, is that still alive or is it dead?

DR: So first of all I'm going to be speaking to my Iranian opposite number later on today. So we're in constant contact, not just with our European and American partners, but with the key partners and interlocutors in the region. In terms of the nuclear deal, of course we've been very clear, we want to see that made to work. But Iran has taken steps well before Christmas, well before this current set of events around General Soleimani, to backtrack from their commitments. So again there comes a choice. And President Macron and Trump had left the door open to actually a rapprochement and a bigger deal to reconcile Iran's commitments to avoid seeking a nuclear weapon and deal with those other issues like destabilising, through the Revolutionary Guard, all those other countries in the region. And again the question comes back, what is the choice of the leadership in Tehran?

AM: Exactly. Can I ask about one other issue. There is a young 19 year old British girl facing a jail sentence in Cyprus. And she has appealed directly to you. She says, 'I would say to both the Foreign Secretary and the prime minister, both of whom are fathers, please support me with your actions not just with your words.' What's your response?

DR: My heart goes out to her. I think she's gone through a terrible ordeal. My first priority is her welfare, to get her back

home safe and sound. I spoke to her mother on Friday to see what further support we can provide, and we've made very clear, including me to my Cypriot opposite number, that we're worried about her welfare, but also we've got very serious concerns about her treatment throughout that process.

AM: If she's jailed, is there anything we can do? For instance, advising people not to go on holiday to Cyprus.

DR: We always keep our travel advice under review. But I've – one thing you can be rest assured of and the family is rest assured of, because I spoke to her mother on Friday, is that we have voiced our concerns in crystal clear terms. Equally the Cypriots are very sensitive about political interference in that case. So we will encourage them to do the right thing in the right way.

AM: If she's jailed, is there anything we can do?

DR: Well, I'm not going to get ahead of Tuesday, which is the point at which we expect to hear the outcome in terms of sentencing. But put it this way: it is very firmly on my radar and I want to see that vulnerable young woman safe and sound back home with her family to be able to start her recovery.

AM: Dominic Raab, thanks very much for talking to us.
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