JEREMY VINE:
Now the Defence Secretary Philip Hammond is fresh back from his first meeting with his new US counterpart Chuck Hagel. No doubt Syria was high on their agenda, with the regime’s alleged use of chemical weapons perhaps sharpening the case for some kind of intervention. And then there’s Afghanistan where more British troops died last week - the loss of life all the harder when the end of the allies’ mission is in sight. Closer to home, the Chancellor is looking for more government spending cuts, but Mr Hammond is fending him off. We’ll find out how that’s going as he joins me now. Good morning to you.

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Good morning.

JEREMY VINE:
So I’ll start if I can with Syria and news overnight really that there’s been a strike by Israel in Damascus, but we’re not sure what it’s on. Do you know?
PHILIP HAMMOND:
Well I’ve seen the reports. I don’t think it’s probably helpful to speculate, but Israel has consistently said that if it sees weapons moving towards Hezbollah, weapons that would present a threat to Israel, then it would intervene to prevent those transfers, and I think we’ve probably got to look at these reports in that context.

JEREMY VINE:
Okay so the separate story that’s running, which is it’s an attack on Syria’s ability to use chemical weapons against the rebels, you suspect is not true?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Well as yet these are unconfirmed reports, but Israel has been pretty consistent about drawing a red line, as they say, around weapons moving out of Syria into the hands of Hezbollah, which they would then see as a direct threat to Israel.

JEREMY VINE:
Okay. Speaking of red lines, the Americans seem to have one on Syria’s use of chemical weapons and you’ve been meeting with Chuck Hagel. Do you sense that they’re now minded, the Americans, to arm the rebels?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Well, as Chuck Hagel said at our joint press conference on Thursday, America is now looking again at the question of potentially arming the opposition groups …

JEREMY VINE:
So they’re shifting?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
… but I think they’re in the same place that we are. They are very alarmed by the limited but persuasive evidence that there is that chemical weapons use may have taken place and they are very keen, as we are, to establish the facts and put those facts in front of the international community - ideally in the forum of the United Nations.

JEREMY VINE:
But we’re two years in and there isn’t really a sense of urgency here, is there?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Oh I think there is a sense of urgency. No-one is suggesting that chemical weapon use has taken place over two years. This is a recent set of reporting and it’s causing very significant concern. We demand that Assad allows in the UN team to investigate the use of chemical weapons - a team, incidentally, that he originally asked for and is now blocking.

JEREMY VINE:
And allowing in a UN team is not going to …

PHILIP HAMMOND:
(over) Well we need to …

JEREMY VINE:
… frighten President Assad, is it?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
But we need to establish the facts. We need to establish whether chemical weapons have been used. This is a crime under international law. We need to establish if they have been used. We need to confront the international community with the facts. We need to present them to the Russians who have made clear that they would not support the use of chemical weapons although they have been supportive of the Assad regime in other ways.

JEREMY VINE:
So what’s stopping us - i.e. the British, French, Americans - at the moment is that we’re not sure? Is that right?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
We haven’t got enough evidence.

JEREMY VINE:
And when you become sure, then what?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Well once we’ve got the evidence, we will present it to our allies and partners. This is not something that Britain can deal with alone or even America can deal with alone. It’s got to be … It’s got to be something …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) But meanwhile all these people are dying there. I mean it’s such a cumbersome process, isn’t it?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Well, look, we’ve seen terrible attacks over two years, as you say, on their own people.

JEREMY VINE:
(over) Seventy thousand people, apparently.

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Seventy thousand, probably seventy thousand people have been killed; a million or more displaced; millions suffering. We have to get rid of this shocking regime. We have to see …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) But you’re talking about having a series of meetings.

PHILIP HAMMOND:
But you’re talking specifically about chemical weapons, the use of chemical weapons, and there is limited but quite persuasive evidence that there has been recent limited use of chemical weapons. Frankly that is not what’s delivering the tally of seventy thousand people that have been killed. Most, the overwhelming majority of these people have been killed by conventional weapons, heavy weapons being used.

JEREMY VINE:
Well even more reason to do something then.

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Of course and we are trying to build a coalition against the Assad regime. But, as you know, there are some nations that are supporting that regime at the moment that have rejected and blocked any attempt to move in the United Nations to stop this terrible set of atrocities against the Syrian people.

JEREMY VINE:
And is part of your concern about arming the rebels, and the Americans’ concern as well, that you arm the wrong people, you arm Jihadis? Is that your worry?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Well we’re very clear that we would support the National Coalition. We recognise them as the sole legitimate representatives of the Syrian people and we want to strengthen the moderates in the opposition against the extremists - the Jihadists, the extreme Islamists among them - and that’s part of the equation that we would have to take into account in deciding to change our stance in the future.

JEREMY VINE:
Let me ask you, if I can, about Afghanistan. Three more British soldiers died this week in a Mastiff vehicle which is supposed to be bomb-proof. This arrow-shaped hull is twenty-three tons, isn’t it? That’s very concerning for you.

PHILIP HAMMOND:
It is very concerning and of course our thoughts are with the families and the friends of the three men who died this week. They died doing a very important job. Although our combat mission in Afghanistan is coming to an end, we will need to expose ourselves to risk right up to the end in order to protect our forces and ensure that we withdraw from Afghanistan in good order.

JEREMY VINE:
But we seemed with those vehicles to have at least eliminated the danger of roadside bombs and so on.
PHILIP HAMMOND:
We’ve invested huge amounts of money in the very best state of the art armoured vehicles and we have seen in consequence a dramatic decline in the number of casualties due to IEDs, but you can’t one hundred per cent protect against massive IEDs, massive roadside bombs. Even …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) This was just a bigger bomb, was it?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
…even the most heavily armoured vehicle will have some vulnerability to those huge IEDs.

JEREMY VINE:
Afghan security forces are due to take the lead role next month, I understand. Is that still the case?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
In …?

JEREMY VINE:
In Afghanistan. Their own security forces take the lead role?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Afghan security forces already have lead responsibility in areas covering about 90 per cent of the population. Over the next couple of months, they will have taken control of security across the whole of the country and that’s a huge step forward. They’re also leading and planning about 80 per cent of all military operations, so there is a huge transition going on to Afghan lead and Afghan control of this operation with ISAF in support.

JEREMY VINE:
And we know we’re coming out. Britain knows it’s coming out by 2014 and in a way
that makes every death now harder to bear, doesn’t it, because the end of the mission is in sight? So as Defence Secretary, do you think actually we should start clearing out faster?

PHILIP HAMMOND:

No we’ve got a very clear drawdown plan that will take us through 2013 and 2014 to end our combat mission at the end of next year. This is a planned transition of responsibility to the Afghans, continuing to support them, continuing to mentor and train them over that period; and also frankly managing the sheer logistic challenge of bringing back the vast amount of equipment that we have in Afghanistan, making sure we don’t leave it behind to fall into the wrong hands.

JEREMY VINE:

Sure, you’ve got a plan, you’ve got a schedule.

PHILIP HAMMOND:

Yeah.

JEREMY VINE:

I’m asking you whether you’d accelerate it?

PHILIP HAMMOND:

No, I think the schedule we’ve got is the right one. I think we …

JEREMY VINE:

(over) Paddy Ashdown says why not get out as fast as we can but don’t cut and run? He says “The writ of the Karzai Government is now less powerful, the rule of the Taliban is more extensive. That does not measure success.”

PHILIP HAMMOND:

I think what we’ve got is a sensible, calibrated plan to leave over the next 18 months or so; that that has regard to the need to support the Afghan forces and make sure they’re able to hold the ground as we drawdown. It also has regard to the logistic challenge of bringing our kit and our people out. I don’t think it’s practical or sensible
to try and go any faster.

JEREMY VINE:
Let me ask you about Afghan interpreters …

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Yeah.

JEREMY VINE:
… who want to stay here because they say they’ll be …

PHILIP HAMMOND:
(over) Want to come here?

JEREMY VINE:
Come here. They say that they’ll be killed in Afghanistan. And I gather that you don’t want them to?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Well, look, first of all we’ve got about 1100 locally employed civilians in Afghanistan of whom about half are interpreters and we estimate that they will have on average between five and six dependents each, so we’re talking about quite a large number of people. And we already have in place a regime which is able to deal with cases where people are under threat or at risk and we have a mechanism for dealing with them and it is possible for people to seek settlement in the UK if they are genuinely at risk. But what we’ve said is this. We’re looking to build the future of Afghanistan, we’re looking to make Afghanistan a success story. And some of these people are well educated, capable people who ought to be able to play a part in Afghanistan’s future, so what we’re trying to do is put together packages that will make it attractive and practical for them to stay in Afghanistan. Not in Helmand because that wouldn’t probably be safe, but many of them are not from Helmand. Many parts of Afghanistan are relatively peaceful.

JEREMY VINE:
So they’re not coming to the UK?

**PHILIP HAMMOND:**
Well we haven’t said that conclusively and …

**JEREMY VINE:**
(over) That’s what you think?

**PHILIP HAMMOND:**
… we have a mechanism which allows people who are at risk to apply for settlement in the UK. What we’re talking about now is how we deal with the bulk of these people as they end their employment with the UK Government - how can we support them to make their futures in Afghanistan and to contribute to Afghanistan’s success.

**JEREMY VINE:**
Alright, let me ask you about domestic politics in the wake of the council elections and a fascinating result. Calling UKIP “clowns” was a mistake, wasn’t it, firstly?

**PHILIP HAMMOND:**
The great majority of the people who supported UKIP are ordinary, decent people. Many of them are frustrated Conservatives, frustrated at the length of time it’s taking to get the economy growing again, frustrated about the constraints of coalition government, frustrated about the way globalisation limits our ability to control the world which affects us so much. We understand people’s concerns and we are addressing the key issues that they care about - immigration …

**JEREMY VINE:**
(over) Well they don’t think so, do they?

**PHILIP HAMMOND:**
… immigration down by a third …

**JEREMY VINE:**
Well that’s the point.
PHILIP HAMMOND:
… deficit down by a third.

JEREMY VINE:
Yeah, but they don’t think you are.

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Welfare capped. Well we’ve got to go on doing those things. We’ve got to redouble our efforts to deliver on those things that matter to ordinary people and we’ve got to communicate that better, and we’ve also got to remind them that we are governing in coalition. As we come towards a General Election and we start to set out the policies of the Conservative Party for a Conservative Government after the election, we will be able to demonstrate to people how we will address …

JEREMY VINE:
Okay.

PHILIP HAMMOND:
… even more clearly those concerns.

JEREMY VINE:
That is quite a long way away. The election’s …

PHILIP HAMMOND:
(over) Well it’s two years, it’s two years away.

JEREMY VINE:
Well you’ve got the Queen’s speech this week …

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Yeah.
JEREMY VINE:
… which is where you can respond directly on the EU, on immigration. So will you use it for that purpose?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Well, look, we already are doing. We’re reducing immigration. It’s down by a third. We’ve put …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) But again it’s not working from the point of view of these deserting voters.

PHILIP HAMMOND:
… we’ve put a cap on welfare and we’re seeing the rollout of universal credit right now - something that you know the overwhelming majority of people support; the Labour Party opposed in Parliament. On the EU, we’ve made it absolutely crystal clear that a Conservative Government will hold an in/out referendum on the EU membership during the next parliament.

JEREMY VINE:
Okay, let me just on that particular point ask you clearly there is now a head of steam behind the idea of legislating very quickly on that referendum, so at least it’s in the diary. Are you behind that?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Well, look, I understand people’s scepticism - they’re saying yeah, yeah, that’s the other side of an election, what can you do now to reassure us? And we should do everything we can to reassure people about our commitment. We should make it in very clear and unambiguous terms, including publishing a bill so that people can see exactly what will be in it. But the simple reality …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) Legislate this side of the election? That’s what I’m asking about.

PHILIP HAMMOND:
… the simple reality is we would not get a bill through parliament in this parliament. The Labour Party doesn’t want people to have a say on Europe; the Liberal Democrats would not support an in/out referendum on Europe. We will not get a bill through this parliament, but we will do everything we can do to show our clear commitment. And I would imagine that as we go into the next election - we haven’t written our manifesto yet - but I would imagine our manifesto will make an absolutely clear commitment to legislating for the referendum as soon as we begin the next parliament.

JEREMY VINE:
(over) But you’ll publish a draft bill this side of the election?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
We’re looking at doing that and I think that would be a very good idea. I would strongly support the idea of publishing a draft bill ahead of the election.

JEREMY VINE:
Let me ask you about the Deputy Speaker - your colleague Nigel Evans under arrest for alleged rape; and, incidentally, we gather he’s denying it all. People across Westminster seem to be flabbergasted by this.

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Very shocked. I know Nigel well, I’ve known him for years. You know I’m obviously as shocked as everybody else is by the revelations in this morning’s papers.

JEREMY VINE:
Can he remain as Deputy Speaker while this is hanging over him?

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Well I think that’s a very interesting question and I think that is essentially a question for the Speaker, a question that the Speaker will have to consider, probably is considering right now. Obviously Nigel is denying the accusations. I stick rigidly to the view that we should treat people as innocent until they’re proven guilty, but it is quite difficult to carry out a sensitive and high profile role while being under this kind
of scrutiny.

JEREMY VINE:
Defence Secretary Philip Hammond, thank you very much for joining us.

PHILIP HAMMOND:
Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS