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THE ANDREW MARR SHOW
INTERVIEW:
GENERAL LORD RICHARDS
FORMER CHIEF OF DEFENCE
STAFF
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ANDREW MARR:

Now then, as Chief of the Defence Staff until his retirement last year, General David Richards built a reputation for speaking truth to power. In his 40 year career as an army officer, he served in Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, and was alongside David Cameron as the Prime Minister decided to launch air strikes on Libya and tried to work out what to do about the unfolding Syrian civil war. He publishes his autobiography *Taking Command* this week, and you can read extracts from the book in the Sunday Times today. General Richards joins me now from our London studio. Good morning and welcome, General Richards. Can I ask, first of all, about a story in this morning's papers – the need to stop funding for ISIS from Qatar and Saudi Arabia in particular; a sense that millions and millions of pounds are going from states which are supposed to be our allies in the region to the very people who are now our deadly enemies.

GENERAL LORD RICHARDS:

Well there's undoubtedly a lot of individuals in those countries, but in a lot of other countries as well incidentally, that have been giving money to people who we now

find ourselves deeply opposed to. But I think you know it's part of the solution stopping them doing that and governments there need to work hard on it, but it's not the total solution by any means.

ANDREW MARR:

We'll come onto Syria in a moment, but you spend a lot of your life looking at the Afghan situation. Did we leave Afghanistan too early and did we leave Afghanistan in the proper condition?

GENERAL LORD RICHARDS:

Well I would say in the context of ISIS finishing off Afghanistan is now really, really important. I thought it always was. To answer your question though, I think we're sort of okay. It's very important that the commitments made by our leaders, including David Cameron and President Obama in Lisbon and in Chicago and more recently in Wales, are honoured, but if we honour those commitments and continue to sort ... to help them in the way that we plan, that NATO plan, I think we'll be okay.

ANDREW MARR:

You say okay and yet you've also said the Taliban could come back in Afghanistan, and we've seen some reports from Afghanistan and Pakistan that the big groups there now want to join the Islamic State.

GENERAL LORD RICHARDS:

Well that latter point is why it's so important that we finish it off properly. I think all the ... the framework is there, the commitments have been made. I just worry – which is why I've sort of worked on this a little bit recently – that the degree of seriousness hasn't really been properly understood. It could revert to a pre-9/11 state. I don't think the chances are huge, but we need to be very wary of that and continue to do what we promised to do. I think then, if we do that, we will be alright.

ANDREW MARR:

And to be clear, by “finish it off properly” you mean keeping British forces there for a considerable time, mainly to train the Afghan Army, but not pulling out in a major way too early?

GENERAL LORD RICHARDS:

That's exactly right, Andrew. I mean we've committed ourselves to staying in a training and support role. I'd like to see the UK do a bit more than I think is currently the plan, but I was delighted to see that President Obama's committing 10,000 American troops there and talking about 2024. I mean if you think Northern Ireland, the time it took us to resolve that – and it's still sort of bubbling along – then that's the sort of time frame that one has to view Afghanistan in. I'm not suggesting boots on the ground need to go back in, but also of course it applies now more pertinently to how we tackle ISIS.

ANDREW MARR:

And turning directly to that, you've made it very clear that you don't think this war against ISIS can be won from the air alone or simply in Iraq without moving into Syria. Do you think there should now be another vote and a debate in the House of Commons to allow British forces into Syria as well?

GENERAL LORD RICHARDS:

Well, it's much bigger than Britain. I would like to see the UK play a role in the aerial campaign over Syria. I think, as I've said, it's a bit of a no-brainer. I'm very clear that that is the view of the prime minister and most of his party. His problem – and I'm not a politician – is delivering the politics that enable us to do that. But air power alone will not win a campaign like this. It isn't actually a counter-terrorist operation. This is a conventional enemy in that it has armour, tanks, artillery, it's quite wealthy, it holds ground and it's going to fight. So, therefore, you have to view it as a conventional military campaign. You either have to put your own boots on the ground at some point or else you have to very energetically and aggressively train up those who'll do that with us and for us. And my worry at the moment is the scale of the challenge isn't being met by the right scale of response.

ANDREW MARR:

Yes turning to the other boots on the ground at the moment, we've got the Peshmerga in the north hold onto their own territory in Kurdistan; we've got the Afghan – sorry, I beg your pardon – the Iraqi army, which appears not to be very good at fighting; and

we've got something called the Free Syrian Army. In your view, does the Free Syrian Army really exist?

GENERAL LORD RICHARDS:

Not at the moment. I know some of them, I've met them. They can be turned into a more effective fighting force and we need to start doing that. I think what we should be able to see is the first part of a strategy, which is we will contain ISIS. They won't or shouldn't get any bigger. But then we've got to start doing the much more difficult thing, which is attacking them and then eventually defeating them. And this will take a lot of planning, a lot of logistics, outstanding command and control, which is the key arbiter between armies, and then we can get on and probably do it. The issue really is time: how long do we have? And I'm worried that without more intensive use of Western boots on the ground in the support role then we won't do it in the time that actually we need to get on and achieve this in.

ANDREW MARR:

So we need more help and support to the Iraqi army and in Syria as well. That's a major, major commitment from an army which is shrinking all the time. In your book you recount very vividly your struggles to keep the army up to what you regard as a proper level and in the end it was pared back beyond what you regarded as acceptable. Did you ever think at one point that you should resign over that?

GENERAL LORD RICHARDS:

It went through my mind a number of times and often does, but I and good friends would say, you know, it wouldn't achieve anything. Someone else would come along, probably with less moral authority to argue it. I would emphasise that the reservist plan, which was meant to compensate and is meant to compensate for the reduction in the regular army, could yet be made to work, but we're now in a different ... I mean within two or three years, we're in a different era. This needs to be put right quickly. If it can be, then fine I'd go along with that solution. But my instinct is it can't be and we now need to go back to the drawing board and revise the size of the army – the regular army – back up again.

ANDREW MARR:

How many more troops do you think we need from what we've got at the moment to be safe and to be able to play our part in what's going on in the Middle East?

GENERAL LORD RICHARDS:

It's a very open-ended argu... question, Andrew, because it depends on the size of the political appetite. But if we're talking about a generational struggle, as I think the prime minister is and he's absolutely right to talk about, then we need an army that can sustain a demanding operation, not just in Syria and Iraq potentially in a largely support role, but think of all the other places where Muslim extremism is causing havoc. And I'm thinking Nigeria, Kenya's very fragile, the countries around Syria that need more help like Jordan and obviously Iraq and perhaps Lebanon. And then you go into Afghanistan. Pakistan needs more assistance. And even al-Qaeda leadership I saw talking about creating the same sorts of problems in places like Myanmar. We have to see the grand strategic challenge that is confronting us all now and that, I'm afraid, needs a grand strategic response of the type that our forebears dealt with the rise of ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) So we're talking tens of thousands more troops here aren't we, General? We're talking about tens of thousands, not a few hundred?

GENERAL LORD RICHARDS:

Thousands certainly. But look this is not a place to do...

ANDREW MARR:

Okay.

GENERAL LORD RICHARDS:

But I would say this is not about Britain, don't forget. This is about the Western world and all good countries coming together, and a new version of NATO if you like, to solve this problem.

ANDREW MARR:

Now one last thing very quickly. The prime minister said that he wants the SAS to hunt down the killers of these hostages – Jihadi John and the rest of it. Is that a

plausible operation given that it's now public and given where the hostages have been held, do you think? It's a heck of a job.

GENERAL LORD RICHARDS:

(over) Very, very difficult. I mean of course all of us in a sort of visceral response to what has happened would love to see that happen. And as good as the SAS are, they also are – very rightly – very cautious, and I think to expect them to do that is a tall order and it needs to be part of this grander strategy that we've just been talking about.

ANDREW MARR:

General Richards, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

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