ANDREW MARR:
We do turn back to politics now. Imagine if politics had to be conducted without deviation, hesitation or repetition. An impossible thought. Anyway a terrible week for the government, but the work never stops and this morning the Friends of Syria conference is taking place in Istanbul. Estimates are that between nine and ten thousand people have died in Syria since the uprising against President Assad began, and today’s conference is attended by representatives from all over the world, including Hillary Clinton from the United States and William Hague who has just come out of a meeting and joins me now. Mr Hague, welcome.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Thank you.

ANDREW MARR:
Can I start by asking whether you bring any news about the international attempts to rein in President Assad and do something for the people who are suffering under his regime?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well some progress is being made. As you know, Kofi Annan has put forward (he being the UN Envoy and Arab League Envoy) a six-point plan, which the Assad regime say they have accepted - a plan that would bring about a ceasefire, humanitarian aid, a political process, free access for the media and so on. Now they say they've accepted that, but, as with past plans that have been put to them, they haven’t yet implemented it on the ground. So the killing goes on, the torture and oppression goes on. It remains a desperately grim situation. What we have here this morning is seventy-five nations together. That is the largest gathering by far that we’ve had on this terrible issue. We are stepping up our support for the opposition in Syria and they are better coordinated now than they were even a few weeks ago. We’re working on coordinating our sanctions together and sending a clear message that there isn’t an unlimited period of time for the Kofi Annan process to work before many of the nations here want us to go back to the UN Security Council. Some of them will call for arming the opposition if there isn’t progress made.

ANDREW MARR:
Because there has been criticism, hasn’t there, that the Kofi Annan project has given some sort of cover to the Assad regime, has given it time to try and finally crush the opposition in Homs and other places?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well it is important to have an attempt at such a process. Yes absolutely there is that criticism and everything the Assad regime has done looks like stalling for time and trying to use that time. On the other hand, what is now being put to them is a plan from Kofi Annan, supported by the whole United Nations Security Council … And this is an important point - it’s supported by Russia and by China as well as by the more obvious countries: United States, United Kingdom, France, the Arab League and so on. And so if the Assad regime fails to go along with this plan and doesn’t start implementing this on the ground, then they are in defiance not only of what we have said but of what Russia and China have supported as well, and that then may be a different situation at the UN Security Council from those we’ve faced over the last year.

ANDREW MARR:
And yet we are in a situation where by the time all of this goes through, it may be that
the rebellion has been utterly crushed. So many people have been killed, driven out, humiliated, injured and so on, that there isn’t any possibility of the regime toppling.

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**

Well this is why it is an urgent process. But I would say this: President Assad cannot crush the spirit of the Syrian people. One of the lessons of the Arab Spring is that if a dictatorial regime sets out to try to eliminate by force the desire for freedom and democracy of a very large part of their population, then they will fail …

**ANDREW MARR:**

Yes.

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**

… and that is why we remain convinced that this is a doomed regime. That is a question of time, a matter of time, and what we really want to see is a managed transition, a political transition to a plural democratic system in Syria. That’s what Kofi Annan is setting out to try to negotiate, so he does deserve our support but doesn’t have an unlimited amount of time to do it.

**ANDREW MARR:**

In the Bradford by-election that we’ve been talking about in the studio, George Galloway supporters clearly made a lot of British engagement in Afghanistan and the demand that British troops should come home. Are we now in a position which is getting worryingly close to scuttle?

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**

No we’re not. The international event that will discuss this next is the Chicago NATO Summit at the end of May. We’re sticking to the plans that we agreed at the previous NATO summit and that we reaffirmed when the Prime Minister visited President Obama two weeks ago, and that is for Afghans to take the lead in managing their own security through next year, in 2013, so that they then are in complete charge of their own security by the end of 2014. But we will be there helping them. We will be there. British troops will be in a combat role until that point and we and other nations will be assisting them both financially to have their own armed forces after that point and to
train them. We, for instance, will be setting up an office, a training academy in Afghanistan. So the international support from Afghanistan will be maintained. We are not going to scuttle away, as you were putting it, from that.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Right. Can I invite you to swap hats and speak as number two in the Conservative Party hierarchy at this point. It has been the worst week for the government since the election. The opinion polls this morning are withering in their assessment. Why is the government out of touch and what can be done to put it back in touch?

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
Well it’s been a controversial week is the way I would put it … *(Marr laughs)* but that happens in the life of governments. Those things certainly happen and we’ve seen that on many, many previous occasions under many governments, including very successful governments. So I don’t think we should be phased or deterred by that. Yes some things have been happening which the government’s had to face up to. Of course there has been the threatened fuel tanker strike. I think my colleagues who handled these things would have been criticised either way because had they not set out the precautions that people should take and alerted people to the situation, then if a strike took place in the coming weeks, it would be said that they were complacent and hadn’t prepared the country. The country is in a better state of preparedness now than it was a week ago for the eventuality of a tanker strike. So I think they’ve handled that correctly, but of course controversies arise over things like that.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Well there are huge numbers of petrol stations around the country still with no petrol, which has worried people and angered them. But more generally it’s been your own supporters - the newspapers who generally support the Conservative Party, the columnists who generally support the Conservative Party - expressing great worry about first of all a lack of direction, a sense of drift; and people like David Davis - I know he’s been a critic in the past - talking about all the kind of well-fed looking public schoolboys in the front bench don’t understand the rest of the country, that sense of out-of-touchness. Isn’t that something the government has to take seriously, that your party has to take seriously?
WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well we should always take seriously criticism, but what the government has to do is very simple, which is to make sure that what we are doing succeeds. And if you look at the Budget - the measures to reduce corporation tax, to take lower paid people out of income tax altogether - these are absolutely the right things to get businesses growing in our country, to make sure that it pays to work and that people have an incentive to work. And these measures will stand the test of time and a government that is in touch is one that delivers those sorts of things that the country needs. Look at our education reforms, our welfare reforms. These are radical measures that are being carried out over several years, over the life of this parliament. And so the test of the coalition government will be the success of reforms like that. People will be able to comment on that, vote on that at the next General Election. But that will be the test rather than the chatter or criticism of one particular week two years into the parliament or three or four years into it.

ANDREW MARR:
And you really think things have been going really well, pretty well this week, do you?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well I’m saying that, as I’ve said on the business of fuel supplies, I think ministers would have been criticised either way. I think my colleagues have done absolutely the right thing to urge people to take sensible precautions and I think they will be vindicated by events over the coming days and weeks. I think the Budget was …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) And the jerry cans and all of that? You know fill up jerry cans?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well on that … As you know on that, Francis Maude has made clear that he was actually refer… that was a technical error. He was actually referring to the smaller petrol cans. He was asking people to take sensible precautions and of course to bear in mind all health and safety advice. So he’s made that clear himself and I don’t think …
ANDREW MARR:

(over) So the sense … Sorry, can I just interrupt?

WILLIAM HAGUE:

… that changes the fundamental position on this.

ANDREW MARR:

The sense that a bit of panic, make people change their behaviour with petrol was a good preparation and might stop any strike working, might beat the unions - that’s an accurate assessment of the government’s thinking, is it?

WILLIAM HAGUE:

No, that isn’t the way I would put it. I would say that the government asking people to take sensible precautions and alerting them to the situation is the right thing. And of course the solution to this is for the union in question to call off the strike, which is not in the interests of their industry, it’s obviously not in the interests of the country as a whole. And it ought to be possible for all political leaders, including opposition leaders, to condemn the idea of a strike; but because of their union paymasters, they are of course reluctant to do so.

ANDREW MARR:

If there’s a single thing that you could change or alter in the way the government projected itself, what would it be?

WILLIAM HAGUE:

(laughs) Well that’s, as you know Andrew, that’s a very loaded question.

ANDREW MARR:

A harmless question.

WILLIAM HAGUE:

I think the government does a good job of that. We will have controversial periods. It is a government with very strong direction from the Prime Minister down and with a
very strong driving purpose and dealing with the most formidably difficult position that we were left by the outgoing government, the most difficult financial position that any incoming government has faced, as well as the difficult world economic circumstances, as well as all the international events - some of which we’ve been discussing earlier.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
So I think very strongly the government is doing a good job of that. And I think when critics don’t have a substantive alternative to offer, well then they reach for the out of touch criticism. You know we haven’t got an alternative programme to the government, but let’s say the government is out of touch.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well it’s very much in touch with what this country needs and we’re going to carry that through to success.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright. William Hague, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

INTERVIEW ENDS