NR: We don’t know, as I said, exactly who carried out this attack, but perhaps it’s a reminder to us of the way in which conflicts in the Middle East can easily and are easily spilling over into the streets of Europe as well.

F: Yes, and our thoughts must be with the Turkish people this morning on this. Another appalling atrocity in Turkey illustrates why we need to keep Turkey close as a key member of NATO. Why we need to work with Turkey and the Turkish Minister will be in London on Thursday when I’ll be hosting the Counter Terror Coalition meeting to review progress against Daesh terrorism in Iraq and in Syria. We’ll be reviewing where we’ve got to. Mapping out plans for longer term peace in Iraq and the next phase of the operation in Syria.

NR: There’s been another bomb we’re just hearing in Egypt where 20 people have been killed too. I mean this conference that you’re having later in the week, we often hear said, here, the United States, elsewhere, we’re winning the war with IS or Daesh, whichever you prefer to call it. Isn’t the evidence, as we look for example at them taking over Palmyra, that iconic city in Syria, that actually they’re proving very, very resilient?

F: We’re clearly winning the war in Iraq, there’s no doubt about that. Daesh are down to their last 10%. They’ve lost 11 cities in Iraq and they’re now being attacked in Mosul, which we hope to liberate shortly, and we’ll be reviewing progress on Thursday with the military commanders of the operation. They’re well into Mosul as the moment and Daesh is losing ground there. The campaign in Syria is more difficult but on Friday the Syrian Democratic forces started their advance in Raqqa, which is the other great capital
that Daesh is hanging onto and there’s no doubt that Daesh are being degraded and they have to be, because it is Daesh, ISIL, whatever you call them that is actually the biggest threat to western Europe and to Britain.

NR: Do you not find yourself, even as you say those words, wanting to sprinkle quite a lot of scepticism on them? When you first became Defence Secretary back in 2014, the word then, the briefings you had then, Mosul’s about to fall, we’re going to take it, it’s a crucial city. Still not fallen.

F: Deash were within a few miles of the gates of Baghdad then. They had swept through Syria and Iraq. Now they’ve being pushed out of Iraq thanks in large part to the coalition. A coalition of 60 countries in which Britain is playing a leading part. The coalition’s carried out some 25 thousand strikes, the British Army has trained 30 thousand Iraqi and Kurdish soldiers and the RAF are continuing to work on these targets opening up the advance to Mosul and now onto Raqqa.

NR: Now, as you say, onto Syria, onto Raqqa. Is it time to express a painful truth and say to people, you know what, the battle against IS, as you put it, the battle against Daesh, is so important we’ve got to forget all our other concerns and our compunctions, we’re going to get into bed with Russia and Vladimir Putin, we are going to once and for all take this battle to them?

F: Well Putin has been doing something quite different. He’s been propping up the Assad regime in Syria. He’s been helping them to bomb his opponents in Aleppo. Bombing hospitals, preventing humanitarian aid getting through and prolonging the civil war, which actually makes it more difficult to deal with the Daesh.

NR: But Aleppo is about to fall, isn’t it?
F: It looks now as if sadly Aleppo will fall.

NR: Brutal though it is, would it not be better to say let it go? Let us understand that Assad is winning, that Putin is winning and we might as well accept that reality and move on to IS?

F: How can you be winning by bombing hospitals? By blocking humanitarian aid convoys and you end up with a country that the regime only controls 40% of and is still opposed by most of his people? That’s not a victory for anybody, on the contrary. We keep appealing to Russia to use its influence to get this civil war stopped, to help us rebuild Syria with a genuinely plural government that can appeal to all the people of Syria and then we can get on with the task of dealing with Daesh.

NR: So you are prepared to turn to the new American administration to say to President Elect Trump, to say to the people he is appointing one by one, when you say let’s do a deal with Putin we Britain hold out. You’re wrong, we’re not going to that.

F: No. I’ve been over in the States just last week talking to the military leadership there and we’ve been welcoming the appointment of the new Defence Secretary, James Mattis who is well known to us here.

NR: Well known as ‘mad dog’.

F: No, well a thinking solider, I think very highly respected, he was a former NATO Commander, we know him well and we’d be working with him. Look, on talking to Putin there are things we have to talk to Russia about, of course, to de-escalate tension, to explain the purpose of our deployments within NATO to reassure the eastern members of NATO and to persuade Russia to use its influence where it has great influence, and one of those countries
is Syria. But it can’t be business as usual or some great deal with Russia.

NR: Can’t be business as usual? We’re talking about the man who looks set to be the next Secretary of State, effectively the Foreign Secretary for the United States, Mr Tillerson who was awarded in person by Vladimir Putin the Russian Order of Friendship. A man who opposed sanctions when Russia move into Crimea. This is an argument in the United States you have already lost.

F: No. I’m not going to comment on an appointment that hasn’t yet been made. What I can tell is the appointment –

NR: Would you like to work with anybody who’s had an Order of Friendship from Vladimir Putin?

F: Well let’s be clear. I’m ready to work with the new Secretary of Defence, Jim Mattis, whose appointment has been widely welcomed by the US military, by all our allies in NATO to be strong against Russian aggression towards NATO. To de-escalate tensions with Moscow and as I said to continue to work with Russia on how we get towards a settlement in Syria, but that can’t be treating Russia as an equal. Russia is a strategic competitor to us in the west and we have to understand that.

NR: Talking of friends, talking of painful truths, let’s turn to the Foreign Secretary, your close colleague and friend and what he said. Wasn’t Boris Johnson telling the painful truth when he spoke about Saudi Arabia earlier in the week?

F: No, Boris does a huge job for this country as Foreign Secretary.

NR: Including speaking the truth.
F: He’s promoting British interests around the world, indeed he’s setting out the new bigger international role we expect to play when we’ve left the European Union.

NR: I’m sorry, I pause because I thought you were going to tell me that he was or wasn’t speaking the truth. Let me help you with it. He said, that Saudi Arabia ‘twists and abuses religion.’ The government said in the form of Downing Street, ‘that he was not speaking for the government.’ So it is your view, is it, as Defence Secretary that Saudi Arabia does not twist and abuse religion?

F: No, let’s be very clear about this. The way some of his remarks were reported seemed to imply that we didn’t support the right of Saudi Arabia to defend itself and it’s being attached by Houthi terrorists from over the border with Yemen. Didn’t support what Saudi is doing in leading the campaign to restore the legitimate government of Yemen. Some of the reporting led people to think that and that’s all that Downing Street -

NR: It was simply the way he was reported and interpreted?

F: The way it was interpreted left people with the impression that we didn’t support Saudi Arabia and we do. And he is making that clear by the way in Saudi Arabia today where he is.

NR: If he was misinterpreted we can assume that the Foreign Secretary was speaking for the government when he said that Saudi Arabia and I quote – ‘twisted and abused religions’ and indeed were ‘puppeteers’ and indeed fought quotes ‘proxy wars’. So that now is the view of the government?

F: No. The government’s view is absolutely clear that what Saudi Arabia is entitled to do is to defend itself from these attacks across its own border. It’s had its cities in the south of Saudi Arabia have been shelled by the Houthis. It’s perfectly entitled to defend itself
and it’s also leading the coalition to restore the legitimate government of Yemen.

NR: Well it’s slightly baffling this. If Downing Street issue a statement saying that the Foreign Secretary is not speaking for the government and you’re making clear that the Foreign Secretary was merely misquoted who are we to believe?

F: Look, you’ve got a very big personality like Boris who makes speeches all around the world and I think there’s a danger all this gets slightly over textualised. Downing Street was asked what the policy was –

NR: It wasn’t desperately complicated was it?

F: No. Downing Street was asked what the policy is so far as Saudi Arabia’s right to defend itself and we’re very clear on that. Saudi Arabia is fully entitled to defend itself against missile attacks over its own border.

NR: Well let’s talk about that. Let’s talk about the war in Yemen. Do you believe that we in Britain, that the British government, that you as Defence Secretary bare any moral responsibility for the fact there are thousands of dead in that country? Three million people have displaced, 40 million are close to starvation.

F: Yeah, we’ve seen a terrible civil war in Yemen and we want that brought to an end through the United Nations process.

NR: But do we bear any moral responsibility for it?

F: What the coalition is doing there is restoring the legitimate government of Yemen, in dealing with the Houthi rebels, who by the way are supported by al Qaeda, a very direct threat to this
country, so we have an interest in seeing this civil war brought to an end and the Houthis defeated.

NR: So I think you’re saying we don’t have moral responsibility. Now these are our bombs often, they are our planes, they are our military advisors and there are people doing the training of the pilots that drop the bombs. And yet I’m unclear whether you’re saying well quite right too, this is a war that needs to be fought and won, or whether you’re saying it’s all very regrettable.

F: Look, Saudi Arabia is a key ally of this country. It’s a key partner in the fight against terrorism. They share intelligence with us about potential terrorist plots to this country. They’re a key investor in this country, they’re also a key export market. Saudi Arabia is a friend of this country and is fully entitled to defend itself and it’s also entitled to help bring about a settlement in Yemen that restores the legitimate government. And that has the support of the United Nations.

NR: So are you saying that in effect we need to be scared of telling the whole truth about Saudi Arabia? Scared because it might make us less safe on the streets, scared because it might sacrifice British jobs? Tough, but that’s the way diplomacy is.

F: Look, we take up human right issues in countries all round the world. We take those up with a government, but that’s not a binary choice between saying we’re never going to deal with you again. We can’t keep moralising in public about Saudi Arabia. If you want to bring about change in Saudi Arabia then you’ve got to work with Saudi Arabia, and we’re doing that. The Prime Minister was meeting the King earlier this week discussing the future reforms that are needed in Saudi Arabia –

NR: Indeed.
F: to their economy, to their society as to how they reduce their dependence on oil, how they increase their private sector and provide more jobs for their young people and I’m encouraged ...

NR: And the Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson is there, he’s there today?

F: He’s there today making that very clear.

NR: Will he in effect be saying to them look, I think you twist and abuse religion. You know what, I think you abuse this in that way. I think you fight proxy wars? Or are you saying that he will now have learnt diplomacy?

F: He will be reminding Saudi Arabia that we support Saudi Arabia in, as I’ve said several times now –

NR: I don’t want you to repeat it. You’ve said it several times, we’re short of time and you can say something else instead. Is it time to call the dogs off Boris Johnson?

F: No. I mean Boris Johnson is, as I said, is a huge personality, famous around the world. I sit next to him in meetings in Brussels, Washington, everybody wants to know what he thinks about everything and I said you know, the media, with great respect, are now starting to sort of over-textualise every remark he makes in answer to every question.

NR: You know and I know that this is story not because of what Boris Johnson said but because of what Downing Street said. How would you feel as Defence Secretary or indeed any of the other many jobs you’ve done and may do in the future, if No 10 issued a statement saying that is wrong, it is not the government’s view?
F: Well let me just correct you on that. Downing Street was asked whether this misreporting of what Boris has said, whether that was government policy and Downing Street simply answered the question and the question is we support Saudi Arabia.

NR: Downing Street looked at an inaccurate quote, rejected their own Foreign Secretary on the basis of some misreporting without checking with him first. That tells us quite a lot doesn’t it?

F: I think you really are making a meal of this. Boris’ comment, as we’ve already established, was taken out of context in the reporting that implied we didn’t support Saudi Arabia. Downing Street was asked the question and Downing Street answered it.

NR: He’s free to speak, as you Michael Fallon, thank for you the minute, we’ll see on the sofa in just a short time.

Ends