LORD FALCONER, 15th NOVEMBER, 2015

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LORD FALCONER

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AN: How does Labour think the government should react? I’m joined now by the Shadow Justice Secretary, Lord Falconer who was in the Cabinet at the time of 7/7 attacks in London ten years ago. Welcome Lord Falconer.

So you were there at the time of 7/7, what is the government thinking about, now how does this operation work? We hear that COBRA is meeting again today, what actually goes on?

F: Well, COBRA meets, the relevant ministers get together and of course people listen very closely to the Security and Intelligence Service.

Can I just before could I, on behalf of the Labour Party express our solidarity with France and our condolences to the families who’ve lost loved ones and those who are injured. The pictures coming out of the France, the stories coming out of France are horrific and the people who have suffered yesterday and today have a life sentence and our hearts go out to them.

AM: Now your Leader has taken a slightly different view to some people on all of this. He was going to make a speech today on Labour foreign policy and, quite rightly, decided not to make it, but he did release the text of the speech. And in it he says – and I quote: “for the past 14 years Britain has been at the centre of a succession of disastrous wars that have brought devastation to large parts of the Middle East. They have increased, not diminished the threats to our own national security in the process.”

Now a lot of people will listen to that and think he’s absolutely dead right. Do you agree with him?
F: Well, the foreign policy of all of the developed world has not worked. We need to think about what we do now, but I think the key message at the moment has got to be first of all everything has got to be done to protect our citizens. Secondly, everything’s got to be done, and the whole Labour Party agrees with this, to bring an end to ISIL. And thirdly, it’s got to be done in a way that involves the international community, because it can only be done by the international community as a whole.

AM: Do you think that the wars in Iraq and Syria and indeed Libya have increased the danger to us or diminished it?

F: I think it’s – I mean it’s – the foreign policy overall that’s been adopted has not worked. Whether or not there should have been intervention here or not intervention there it’s very difficult to know what the right answer in relation to that is. But it is really important that the international community comes together at this particular point to deal with ISIL, cause the key thing is to be beat.

AM: You’ve said twice you need to defeat ISIL. How can we defeat ISIL?

F: It could only be defeated by the international community as a whole. If possible through an UN sponsored process, but if not that then the nations coming together. A key part of that has got to be solving the Syria problem. ISIL have thrived in the context of a vacuum in Syria and there needs to be real pressure put, if it’s possible, to make sure the Syrian issue is resolved as quickly as possible. And that would be difficult though.

AM: You can’t take Raqqa away from ISIL with a few more bombs. You will eventually need troops of some kind on the ground to defeat on the ground, won’t you?
F: Well that’s the Select Committees of Defence and Foreign Affairs have been saying in the Commons that simply bombing Raqqa on its own is not going to be the answer. You need a plan and that plan’s got to deal with the Syrian issue and you say there needs to be – I’m not urging troops on the ground, but ultimately ISIL have to be defeated and it can’t just be from the air.

AM: so it does need troops on the ground. You’re a lawyer. I’m wondering about the invoking of Article 5 of the NATO treaty, an attack on one country in this case France, is an attack on all. Do you think we could see NATO invoke – the Prime Minister’s in Turkey at the moment talking to other foreign leaders – an international coalition coming from all sides, from the Russians as well, to defeat ISIL on the ground?

F: Well I think NATO will be a part of it. It’s much too early to say whether it’s appropriate or possible to evoke Article 5, but NATO will be part of the group of nations that have got to come together to look at it.

AM : Now this has been one of those cataclysmic events that will have changed a lot of people’s minds about a lot of things and I’m wondering, do you think it has changed the mood - it will change the mood on the Labour backbenches about any forthcoming vote in the House of Commons on taking action in Syria?

F: I think everybody is now thinking that the right thing to do now is to take stock and it means for the government, I think they’ve got to talk to allies, assess how this changes things, the Russian intervention in Syria has also changed things, and I think what is now required is a detailed plan to be brought forward. I don’t think anybody in the political world in the UK will not think what’s happened in Paris is something that makes one stop and think
about what the right course is now in relation to how you deal with ISIL.

AM: So there will be - because it’s very interesting, you know, the Labour Party’s in opposition and quotes ‘doesn’t have power,’ but actually when it comes to this vote it’s in the hands of the Labour Party whether the country votes to go to war in Syria or not, because the Conservatives can only do this with cross party support and they don’t know what the Labour Party’s going to do. So in that sense the Labour Party’s decision on this, whether you take as it were the Jeremy Corbyn line, which a lot of people will agree with and say, d’you know what, the whole thing is too dangerous, we must pull back, it’s not making us more secure. Or, whether you go ahead and you attack ISIL directly in Syria. That is now in the hands of the Labour Party, isn’t it?

F: It’s in the hands of all of the politicians in the UK. I think it’s really important that we genuinely seek some degree of unity in relation to this, because the threat that ISIL pose was demonstrated in France on Friday. We’ve got to get together as a nation and work as strongly as possible. You identified 7/7 at the beginning of this interview. The two things that come out of that very strongly in my memory are first of all the very clear political leadership that was shown by Tony Blair and by Ken Livingstone in relation to saying we are absolutely determined to protect our people, but they were both equally determined that terrorism would not divide us as a nation and in particular, that you wouldn’t allow the nation to become anti-Muslim in any way and they were both very strong in that, and that’s very important. Unity as a nation is incredibly important.

AM: It is. I’m not clear what you think should happen; because it seems to me you’re trying to saddle as elegantly as you can, two very different views. One is held by Jeremy Corbyn which says look, everything we have done in the Middle East has been a total
disaster, it has made this country and France and the west less secure, we should butt out. We should just get out of this and leave it. And those people who say no, no, we have not finished the business. We have to go out there and destroy ISIL and you can’t take both positions as it were. I mean you can but it’s inelegant.

F: Well, Jeremy Corbyn and I are absolutely clear that we must do everything we possibly can to end ISIL. How that is to be done is the debate that now has to be had and we want to participate strongly in that debate and reach...

AM: What’s your own view about that?

F: Well I think the first thing that needs to be done is for Britain to talk to its international allies and see what is possible. Because ultimately, as you rightly said, just immediately bombing Raqqa with the UK will not be the answer. What is required is a plan that covers the whole of the Middle East but also deals with the Syrian situation.

AM: But to be clear, to defeat ISIL will require troops and tanks, wherever they come from. Whether they come from Iran, or Russia or America or Britain or France, whatever, it cannot be done without people on the ground?

F: It cannot be done without there being a major international effort. That is what needs now to be looked at and looked at as a matter of urgency and it needs to be thought out in a way that convinces the people of Britain, all of the people, not everybody but there needs to be a consensus –

AM: Overwhelming agreement?

F: Exactly, that’s right.
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