ANDREW MARR:
The government is poised for another Commons vote on whether the RAF should bomb so-called Islamic State positions in Syria. The trouble is of course that Russia are already there and the possibilities of an accidental confrontation leading who knows where are terrifying. Michael Fallon, the Secretary of State for Defence, is with me. Is it still your intention or your hope that RAF jets will be flying across Syrian air space before too long?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well, the logic is inescapable. ISIL, that is a huge threat to this country, to the stability of Iraq, to the stability of the whole region, has carried out barbarous acts. ISIL is run from north east Syria where Assad has not been in control for a couple of years – is run from north east Syria. Its command and control is there, its logistics, its supply routes into Iraq. And the others in the coalition have been striking at those targets. They’d like us to take part, but we don’t yet have parliamentary authority to do so.

ANDREW MARR:
Meanwhile, the Russians have arrived with ground to air missiles and fighter jets and
who knows what. Surely the dangers of an accidental confrontation in the skies over Syria are very real?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well, they’ve arrived with all sorts of things. They’ve arrived with some tanks, with artillery …

ANDREW MARR:
Absolutely.

MICHAEL FALLON:
…with a cruiser offshore. And what they’re doing is propping up the Assad regime, making the resolution of all this more difficult. They’re prolonging the conflict and civilians are being killed. The RAF strikes are done to very strict rules of engagement. They’ve been striking in Iraq for a year where, so far, there have been no civilian casualties. The Russians have been at it in Syria for a couple of weeks and independent reports estimate they’ve killed several hundred people already.

ANDREW MARR:
And the Russians have also in effect closed the skies over Syria or warned us off. Will RAF jets, as has been reported, be carrying air to air missiles to protect themselves?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well, first of all, they’ve not closed off the skies over Raqqah in north east Syria where operations are going on against ISIL. Indeed, that’s one of the criticisms: that most of the Russian strikes, over 80 per cent of them …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Have not been against ISIS.

MICHAEL FALLON:
… have been in areas where ISIL isn’t even present, in fact have been against groups that have been opposing Assad, which is simply making this conflict worse. But our Tornados of course are not flying over Syria at the moment, so this issue about
whether or not they’re carrying missiles doesn’t arise over Syria.

**ANDREW MARR:**
But may well arise in the future if this Commons vote goes through. Doesn’t it make it much harder to get the Commons approval given the fact that Putin’s people are in place there already?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
No, I don’t think we should let Russia divert us for a moment from our focus against ISIL. Don’t let’s forget that ISIL beheaded British hostages. They were behind the slaughter of 30 British holidaymakers on a beach in Tunisia. They’ve been killing Christians, they’ve been killing gays, they’ve been carrying out unspeakable acts of brutality. They’re a very direct threat to the peace in the Middle East and they’re a direct threat to us here in the United Kingdom and we should not be diverted by Russia from tackling ISIL harder.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Now, of course what Putin would say, we also want to get rid of ISIL. We are … we are fighting with you, is what he would say.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
But he isn’t, he isn’t. Most of his bombing – and he’s been using unguided bombs, which is why so many civilians have been killed – most of his bombing is taking place in areas that ISIL have nothing to do with. They’re over on the western side of Syria.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Our strategy depends upon getting rid of Assad. You’ve said again and again this man is a butcher who’s killed even more people than ISIL. He’s a very, very dangerous and evil man. He must be out of the equation. Now that he has the support of Russia, he’s not going to go any time soon, is he?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well, I think Russia …
ANDREW MARR:

(over) In the real world, I mean …

MICHAEL FALLON:

Well, if Russia wants to help here, Russia needs to be part of getting a new political solution for Syria, working with us and other western governments - us, the United States, Germany and France - to put in place in Syria a new government that is properly representative, in which Assad will play no part.

ANDREW MARR:

Why would they? They have stolen a huge march on all of us. They are there, they’re doing what they want, they’ve got a very clear strategy and there’s nothing we can do about it.

MICHAEL FALLON:

Well, I think we can make Russia see that Assad is not part of Syria’s future. He’s only supported, he only has control of a quarter of the country of Syria. He’s lost control over his own people, which is why he’s having to barrel bomb them, and we want Russia to come and work with us on a political solution for Syria that will end all this fighting.

ANDREW MARR:

I just can’t see why he would do it. He seems to have won already.

MICHAEL FALLON:

No, he wants to try and preserve his relationship with the Syrian state. But the Syrian state is collapsing, it’s very fragile now, which is why I think he intervened.

ANDREW MARR:

Yes.

MICHAEL FALLON:

But Assad cannot be part of Syria’s future and Russia really ought to be working with us to get a better and more comprehensive government in place that will bring an end to this bloodshed.
ANDREW MARR:
And just returning to where we started. You’re not worried about the dangers of some kind of accidental confrontation with the Russians if we go to war in Syria?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well, I am worried, yes. I mean, when you have this activity you’ve seen on the Turkish border, which is a NATO border, you’ve seen incursions into Turkish air space, and obviously there is the danger of accidents, of incidents taking place that inflame the tension there.

ANDREW MARR:
But it’s still worth risking that?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well, we have to deal with ISIL. That is our focus. It is ISIL that is a threat to the democratic government of Iraq, but is also a threat to this country and we mustn’t be diverted from that.

ANDREW MARR:
Now, of course for an awful lot of people one of the reasons for being involved there is the huge refugee crisis. Church of England bishops in very large numbers … I don’t know what the collective for a … either a diocese or a synod or whatever. An entire synod of bishops pretty much …

MICHAEL FALLON:
(over) A cloister.

ANDREW MARR:
A cloister of bishops has written to the government saying take many more refugees, take another 30,000 or so, please, and don’t keep ignoring us. What’s your message to the bishops?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well, no country in Europe is doing more in Syria than we are. We’re spending a billion pounds helping the refugees in the refugee camps in Syria and now we’ve announced that we’ll take 20,000 – 5,000 a year – for the rest of this parliament, which is a number we think we can reasonably accommodate; make sure they feel welcome, that they’re given housing and the chance of getting a job here. But the real issue is out in Syria. It’s getting other countries in Europe to contribute more to the feeding of refugees in the camps and making sure their conditions are alleviated.

**ANDREW MARR:**
So, the message to the bishops is in effect no dice?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
No, the message to the bishops is nobody is doing more than we are …

**ANDREW MARR:**
Okay.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
… out there in Syria to help the refugees in their camps.

**ANDREW MARR:**
The refugee crisis in a larger sense has completely changed the tone of the debate, I think, over the EU.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Yes.

**ANDREW MARR:**
The prime minister’s going to come up, I think, next month with his negotiation positions in a public way, but we also read there’s going to be a cull of euro-sceptics from the government in The Telegraph today. First of all, are you worried? Are you one of those euro-sceptics waiting for the cull?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well, first of all, I think we’re all euro-sceptics now. I don’t see any euro fanatics around the cabinet table. We’re all part of the reform commitment we made in the manifesto to get a better deal out of the European Union and I think David Cameron was pretty prescient to make the movement of peoples and the claiming of benefits one of the key areas where we need to see reform.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Would it be a bad move on his part to remove some of his European critics from the government?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
I don’t know where you get this stuff about culling them critically.

**ANDREW MARR:**
The Daily Telegraph.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
We are all, we are all sceptics about Europe. We all want to see reform in Europe. We’re all thoroughly behind the prime minister in his reform agenda.

**ANDREW MARR:**
And do you think that the refugee crisis has changed the terms of debate in an important way?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Yes, I do think other European leaders are now beginning to realise that the original European construct that anybody can move anywhere…

**ANDREW MARR:**
Right.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
…you know, that we were very wise to opt out of the Schengen arrangements …
ANDREW MARR:
Yes.

MICHAEL FALLON:
… and that we are right to pursue what is in our best national interest. And one of the changes that David Cameron will be arguing for is there should be more of those rights …

ANDREW MARR:
Okay.

MICHAEL FALLON:
… to protect us against the kind of creeping federalism that we’ve seen.

ANDREW MARR:
I’ve mentioned The Telegraph several times. For their front page, there’s a very, very interesting story today about the cost to British taxpayers of foreign combatants, including Taliban bomb makers and so forth, actually going to the British courts to sue the British Army for abuse of their human rights. That is something which presumably outrages you, but the question is, what are you going to do about it?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well, we have a manifesto commitment to do something about it, to strengthen our defences against some of these legal claims which turn out to be completely bogus, cost us a lot of money, comes out of the defence budget and hinders the operational effectiveness of our troops out in very dangerous places like Afghanistan, and I’ll be putting proposals to my colleagues soon as to how we implement that manifesto commitment.

ANDREW MARR:
Now, we read also the British Bill of Human Rights is going to be fast tracked by the government. Meanwhile, would you consider abrogating from the Human Rights Convention while we’re at war to stop this happening?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well we’re looking at a number of ways of better protecting our troops from these kind of bogus claims.

**ANDREW MARR:**
And would that be one of them?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well, we’re looking at all these things. There’s a manifesto commitment to deal with this particular problem which is costing us, you know, millions of pounds which would be better spent on better equipment for our troops.

**ANDREW MARR**
Okay, so it’s an option. Let me move onto something else. Jeremy Corbyn has made it very clear that he would not press the nuclear button under any circumstances.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
*(over)* Extraordinary, yeah.

**ANDREW MARR:**
*(over)* There’s a big, big vote coming up in the House of Commons, I think, early next year on the so-called “gateway” vote for Trident. And you believe that there is a new nuclear age. Can you explain a little bit about why you think it’s still important for us to be spending quite so much money on a nuclear weapon which Peter Hitchens described as being a “Cold War weapon”.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well, it isn’t a Cold War weapon. It’s a weapon we use every day, every night. Twenty-four hours a day we are deterring people and there are 17,000 nuclear weapons out there. We can’t be sure in the 2030s, the 2040s, the 2050s that some rogue state mightn’t use nuclear weapons against us. Every government, Labour and Conservative, has continued our nuclear deterrent. The four nuclear submarines we have at the moment are going to become obsolescent by the end of the 2020s. It takes over ten years to build a new submarine, so we have to take this decision now to renew our deterrent for the 30s, 40s and 50s. And I would appeal to moderate Labour MPs to put national security actually ahead of party interest here and come and join us
in renewing the deterrent in the way that all previous Labour governments have done.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Speaking of national security, how worried are you about the Chinese cyber threat and what can be done about it?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well, cyber threats are out there. We’re spending a lot of money protecting our critical national infrastructure – power stations, the grid and so on – from cyber attacks. We’re protecting the centre of government from cyber attacks, we’re spreading good practice amongst our companies so they aren’t commercially damaged. There is a threat of cyber, but we’re responding to it.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Seventy-one of your colleagues apparently believe they’re at threat because of the tax credit policy. It’s becoming incredibly unpopular in the country; there is a kind of build-up of anger about it. Is this something the government has to look at again?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well, I notice that Labour didn’t quite answer your question this morning as to whether they would reverse the tax credit changes.

**ANDREW MARR:**
*(over)* I think in the end she said she would, yes.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well, that’s £4 billion she will have to find from somewhere. But you need to look at the tax credit …

**ANDREW MARR:**
*(over)* This is a policy that is going to be, could be electorally disastrous for your party.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
We need to look at it as a whole. Taking money out of one pocket in high taxation and recycling and give it back to people in the form of credits - nine out of ten families receiving credits, including MPs - is not very sensible. We need to focus welfare on where it’s needed most and move our country to where you keep more of your earnings, lower tax and lower welfare.

ANDREW MARR:
Not much consolation for those people getting those letters at Christmas about it. As a constituency MP, have you noticed this is a problem?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well, we haven’t … nobody’s had these letters yet. You need to look at the overall earnings, including the extra free childcare people are going to be getting, the increase in the tax allowance, the big increase coming in with the national living wage. That’s an extra £20 a week. You’ll need to look at each family in the round to see who’s better off. But we’re all better off if we move to a system where we have lower welfare and lower taxation.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright. Mr Fallon, thank you very much indeed for joining us today. That’s all we’ve got time for.

INTERVIEW ENDS