ANDREW MARR:
Now then, news out of the Middle East overnight remains grim. More exchanges of fire, as we’ve heard, between Israel and Gaza; many more civilian casualties; and, frankly, who is retaliating against whom rather recedes as the violence goes on. And over another border in Syria, Britain is edging nearer to the French position of recognising the opposition. Now I’m joined by the Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander to talk about some Europe as well, I hope, but first of all about that. This is in a sense groundhog day. People will turn on their televisions over the years and there’s more rockets and there’s more attacks and there’s more counter attacks and so on. Is this particular round significant? Is it worse than others? Are you particularly concerned?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well the scale of human suffering of course is significant, but also the Middle East is both more fragile and more febrile than at any point in the last fifty years. That’s why we have been clear that there needs to be a cessation to the violence. We’ve urged the Secretary General of the United Nations to travel to the region because there is no future in seeing just ever greater escalation of violence in the region when, as you say, we have seen this so many times in the past.
ANDREW MARR:
Your former leader, Tony Blair, of course was the Special Envoy there for a long time and, frankly, just seemed to be banging his head on a series of brick and concrete walls.

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well there’s no military solution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict. There needs to be a willingness for the violence to end and the talking to begin, and in that sense, Tony has done important work over recent years. But if you look back over the last thirty or forty years, the real breakthroughs have come when the parties themselves want to see that negotiated two-state solution, and in that sense there is a heavy burden of responsibility both on the Palestinians but also critically on the Israelis to evidence a commitment. We talk about a peace process. There hasn’t been a peace process in the Middle East for years. There’s been no meaningful negotiations and that’s why this latest round of violence with all of the suffering and loss of life doesn’t offer a way forward.

ANDREW MARR:
And then you add into all of this Syria and a hugely unstable position. We seem to be edging towards recognising the opposition as the formal government of Syria. Is there a danger - we’ve seen it in other places - that actually inside that opposition, there are some very extreme elements, extreme Islamists, and that we may be not only legitimising them but shortly arming them too?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Okay, well let’s take those in turn. One of the difficulties in Syria has been over eighteen or nineteen months, we haven’t seen the emergence of legitimate leadership. We saw it within days in Benghazi. We simply haven’t seen it in Syria. So I think it is right that the British Government now recognises the Syrian National Coalition as the legitimate voice of the Syrian people, but I disagree that it is the right response to arm the rebels. What’s the big problem? We haven’t seen not just unity amongst the opposition, but also the emergence of a credible plan for transition that gives a guaranteed future to the Alawites and others within Syria. So we should support unity.
ANDREW MARR:
Including lots of Christians and so on …

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Exactly.

ANDREW MARR:
… who could be threatened by …

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Which is why we need the unity amongst the opposition but not the arming of the opposition. Frankly there are plenty of small arms reaching into Syria already. What we need to see is the emergence of that inclusive, credible plan for transition, and recognition I believe is an important step in the right direction.

ANDREW MARR:
And what happens if Israel does go for a land invasion of Gaza? What’s the worldwide reaction going to be?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well I’ve already called for an end to the violence. Look at the retired head of Shin Bet, the Israeli Security Forces. He says a ground invasion would give Hamas exactly what it is wanting. We will see more loss of life. Just four years ago, I was the first British minister into Gaza after Operation Cast Lead. On that occasion, there were a hundred Palestinians killed for every Israeli killed. Already in the last three days, there have tragically been the death of three Israelis but more than forty Palestinians. It simply does not make sense for there to be an escalation of the violence when we need the violence to end and the talking to begin.

ANDREW MARR:
Okay, let’s turn to a change in tone, I think it’s fair to say, from Ed Miliband in an interview today in The Sunday Telegraph when he says the euro-sceptics were right
about quite a few things. And I just wonder if this is the moment for people like yourself, for the Labour Party to sort of formally apologise for all those years in which you regarded or you portrayed all euro-sceptics as sort of swivel-eyed, kind of dandruff-flecked lunatics?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
No, listen, I think you’re reflecting the views of the headline writer rather than of the Leader of the Labour Party. The truth is we’re very proud of Britain’s rule in Europe over recent decades and the fact that we’ve seen peace and prosperity in a continent that was divided by war twice in the 20th century. But it doesn’t help the pro-European case to suggest that the status quo doesn’t need change. Change is coming to Europe and that’s why we will remain a pro-European, pro-reform party, taking a hard-headed view of what Europe does well and what Europe does badly.

ANDREW MARR:
But some …

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
And, frankly, we see the future for Britain as being reforming in Europe, not exiting from Europe, and there’s a growing number of Conservatives who believe the latter is the way forward.

ANDREW MARR:
But the argument that David Davis was putting just now, which is that you’re never going to get any movement on the fundamentals unless you really have the wind up Brussels because you had a referendum or whatever, that is a fair point. Very, very hard for British politicians to get movement.

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
I quite like David Davis, but he was talking nonsense. I mean the truth is nobody believes that a narrow agenda of repatriation, the “shopping list” as you described it, rather than a broad process of reform is going to be the way forward because the gap between what Conservative backbenchers would judge acceptable and what could or should be negotiated from European partners is simply unbridgeable. That’s why
David Cameron’s ended up in the bizarre position of seeming to be arguing for an in-in referendum. He can’t answer the question what happens when he takes the shopping list, having shredded relationships and alliances to Brussels, and Brussels says no thanks.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Because the other … I suppose the other side of the question is if you don’t do something dramatic and radical like that, you are drawn again and again (as you have been in the past) to the sort of Franco-German agenda, and it’s quite clear that because of the crisis deeper integration, more money for the central budget is now seen as absolutely essential. And if the alternative isn’t that kind of referendum, what is it?

**DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:**
Well that’s why we voted just two weeks ago for restraint and reform in the European budget. It’s a losing argument, not a winning argument for pro-Europeans to suggest that the measure of our commitment to a future in Europe is ever larger budgets for Europe. What we should be arguing for this week at the European Summit, what I want David Cameron to be arguing for is fundamental reform within the European budget, so that instead of spending as much money on agriculture, money’s being spent on jobs and growth, fundamental reform of the structural fund, there’s a big agenda for reform. Alas, the Prime Minister doesn’t seem to be making that case.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Alright, Douglas Alexander, thank you very much indeed for joining us.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**