ANDREW MARR:
“The world is becoming a darker place.” So says the Defence Secretary in one of the Sunday papers today. The conflicts are lapping at Europe’s borders from the Middle East to Ukraine, the old order is under threat triggering large-scale migration around the world and the government is under intense pressure from Britain’s allies and the military here to keep up defence spending. I’m joined now by the Defence Secretary Michael Fallon. Thank you very much indeed for coming in.

MICHAEL FALLON:
Good morning.

ANDREW MARR:
I started the programme, Mr Fallon, talking about this extraordinary migration crisis in the Mediterranean. There is no answer at the moment, is there?

MICHAEL FALLON:
No at the moment we’re simply dealing with the symptoms of the problem, helping to rescue people in the Mediterranean. HMS Bulwark has been out there, saved nearly 3,000 lives so far, but that isn’t going to deal with the problem.
ANDREW MARR:
But also objectively acting as a kind of ferry service for the people smugglers because what we’re doing is we’re taking people out of the sea, which is a good thing to do, and then we’re taking them to where they want to be in Europe, which is doing the smugglers’ job for them. So I ask again: is there a longer term answer to this?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Yes there’s got to be a much more comprehensive approach, tackling the problem much further back - dealing with the trafficking gangs, building up information about the people who are making money out of this incredibly dangerous journey (some nearly 2,000 people have died trying to cross the Mediterranean) - and dealing with the problem much further back in the countries they’re coming from. When I was on HMS Bulwark a couple of weeks ago, they told me they’d picked up migrants from over twenty different countries.

ANDREW MARR:
But in practical terms, the idea of us doing anything to break up people smuggling gangs in Niger and Somalia and stuff is for the birds, isn’t it?

MICHAEL FALLON:
No, I think if we can pool the intelligence we all have as European countries on these trafficking gangs, we can get more information about the routes, we can tackle their financing, and we can use our overseas aid budget – and this is where it should be used – to help stabilise some of these countries and discourage this kind of mass migration from them.

ANDREW MARR:
So is there a debate going on in the cabinet about using aid in a different way to address these kind of problems?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well well-focused aid should be used to help stabilise these countries, to prevent conflict breaking out, to discourage mass migration, so that we don’t have to fish people out of the Mediterranean later on.
ANDREW MARR:
What about a slightly more aggressive use of our military now either to blockade the Libyan coast or to set up kind of enclaves on Libyan territory where migrants could be returned to?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well it’s a European problem now – perhaps half a million people trying to cross ...

ANDREW MARR:
Yeah.

MICHAEL FALLON:
… this year. It’s quadrupled since last year.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Some people say twice that, yeah.

MICHAEL FALLON:
It could be many, many more. So it’s got to be done on a European basis and European ministers are looking this week now at the next phase of this operation, which is building up better intelligence of who these gangs are, where the boats are setting off from. We know already the traffickers are ringing the Italian coastguard and telling them when the boats are setting off. So we need to get to grips with the operation itself and start to tackle the trafficking routes further back.

ANDREW MARR:
But meanwhile we have a country, Libya, which has basically fallen to pieces thanks partly to our intervention to get rid of Gaddafi. We have ISIS coming along the coast and it seems to be very unlikely that we would be able to actually return migrants to Libya for that reason. So this is a problem of our own making.

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well we were clearly right to get rid of Gaddafi. We were right …
ANDREW MARR:
Were we?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well we were right to prevent what would have been a horrific massacre in Benghazi. If you remember why we intervened.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Even at the price of extending ISIS right the way along the African coast?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well what we’re working for is a political settlement in Libya now – getting the various parties there together, so that we have a partner to deal with to encourage a policy of return, to get people to return. We have to break the link between rescuing people from the Mediterranean and settlement because they’ll keep coming …

ANDREW MARR:
They will.

MICHAEL FALLON:
… if they think they’re going to be settled.

ANDREW MARR:
Absolutely. And there is no sign of us being able to do that because we can’t return people to Libya or to Africa for all sorts of reasons that we both understand, we can’t create safe havens in Libya because it’s too dangerous now, ISIS are too close. It seems to me … I come back to the point, I just don’t see where the answer is.

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well people can be returned to countries neighbouring Libya. That happens at the moment - if they’re Tunisians or Moroccans or Algerians, they can be returned to those countries - but we’ve got to work harder at getting a political settlement in Libya that gives us an authority to negotiate with.
ANDREW MARR:
And what about using our ships to blockade the Libyan coast?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well that’s … I mean it’s a matter for Europe to look to see. It’s a very long coast, it’s over 1,000 miles long.

ANDREW MARR:
Yeah it’s difficult.

MICHAEL FALLON:
A blockade required I think forty ships last time it was done three or four years ago at the time of the war, so that’s a difficult operation. I think what’s more important is to pool the intelligence we have, to go much further back in Africa and see and establish the pattern of these trafficking routes and bear down on the gangs, the criminal gangs that are organising this migration.

ANDREW MARR:
Now I’ve been talking about ISIS a bit already. There seem to be two views of ISIS – one we were discussing in the paper review, those who say actually it’s there, we should try and soften its edges, make it a little bit more humanitarian and live with it – and I was talking to a very senior American who was in town this week who said the only answer is to completely destroy it and pulverize it, which is your view.

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well there’s nothing humanitarian about ISIL and the way it’s been you know …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) And you don’t think it could be tamed or …?

MICHAEL FALLON:
… the way it’s been killing its opponents, the way it’s been killing civilians, those of other faiths and so on. No, we have to help degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL in Iraq and in Syria.
ANDREW MARR:
But we clearly have to do more. We’ve had air strikes and so forth, but ISIL are still winning, they are still strengthening the ground they’re taking, and when it comes to confrontation with the Iraqi Army sadly the Iraqi Army tends to run away. So we have a really big problem, which a lot of people say we’re not really dealing with.

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well hang on a moment. They’ve been thrown out of Tikrit, one of the largest cities in Iraq. There’s been ebb and flow in the fighting. Our own support, our air strikes have played a vital role in that. We’ve done the second highest number of strikes. We have tornadoes flying virtually every day and every night helping the Iraqi Army. And the Prime Minister has just announced a step up in our training. We’re sending more people there to help train the Iraqi Army, particularly to deal with roadside and vehicle bombs, as they start to push ISIL west along the Euphrates and north along the Tigris.

ANDREW MARR:
But they consist of, what, about 40,000 irregular soldiers using mostly captured equipment, not even their own. It beggars belief that if the world did… wanted to defeat them properly, the world couldn’t do it now, and this is the moment.

MICHAEL FALLON:
(over) There are sixty coun… This is the moment. There are 60 countries involved in this coalition to support the Abadi government - the democratic legitimate government of Iraq – in this fight against ISIL, and let me just assure you, you know we’re playing our part. We have some 900 British servicemen and women in this fight and we’re playing the second part in this fight just behind the United States.

ANDREW MARR:
Is that enough?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well the Abadi government has asked us for more help in training and we’ll go on doing that and we’ve supplied equipment, we’ve put a lot of people through the
training programme, we’re flying surveillance aircraft, gathering intelligence on ISIL’s movements. And, as I said, we have aircraft striking day and night.

ANDREW MARR:
But this is not, with respect, a war that can be won from the air.

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well it’s a war that has to be supported from the air, but in the end you’re right – we have to see the Iraqi forces reformed and strengthened and better trained, so they can take on ISIL. And we’ve made it clear right from the start, this is going to be a long war.

ANDREW MARR:
You talked about in your newspaper article today about taking the fight to ISIL. Is there still no chance whatever of British troops being involved on the ground?

MICHAEL FALLON:
No, that’s not what Abadi wants. He does not … The Prime Minister of Iraq has made it clear he does not want foreign troops in this fight. He doesn’t want American or British troops doing his fighting for him. So our role is further back, helping with air support, helping to train and advise, and we’re going to step up the amount that we’re putting in.

ANDREW MARR:
Now you’ve been on HMS Bulwark recently. You’ve also been of course in the Baltics where there’s been a big NATO exercise. Are you concerned that Putin’s intentions towards NATO members, including the Baltic States and Poland, are more than just sabre-rattling?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well he’s clearly building up his conventional forces, he’s modernizing his nuclear weapons, so it is sabre-rattling and that is why we have to continue to strengthen NATO, offer NATO more reassurance through these larger scale exercises. When I was in the Baltic this week, there were 17 different nations exercising together. We
had three warships there, including our flagship HMS Ocean. We had gurkha troops there, we had the Typhoons now flying every day to help protect Baltic air space. So we’re doing our bit, but it’s very important we keep sending Putin this message that we are determined to our commitment to the collective defence of NATO.

**ANDREW MARR:**
The Americans are now so worried that they’re talking about returning intermediate range missiles to Europe. Would you approve of that if they took that decision?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well that’s a decision for the Americans, but …

**ANDREW MARR:**
That’s not what I asked. I said would you approve of it if they did?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well if that’s their decision, yes. But we have made clear our commitment to continuous exercising there. We’ve sent troops forward to the new Rapid Reaction Force that’s being formed next year – 1,000 next year, 3,000 the year after. I’ve announced today that we’re going to send a battle group in each year after that; and I’ve also announced today that the Typhoons that we have flying there over the skies in the Baltic, we’ll send them back again next year. So we’re certainly doing our bit.

**ANDREW MARR:**
If the Americans do return missiles, would we accept them in this country?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well we’ve not had any requests like that from the Americans. That’s not been raised with me by the American Defence Secretary.

**ANDREW MARR:**
And if it was?
MICHAEL FALLON:
Well that’s hypothetical. It hasn’t been.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright, okay. Now one of the big issues of course is defence research and development because the Russians have got new tanks, they’ve got new missiles which they say can get through our defences and so forth. We have gone through a very long period of not investing very heavily in military technology over the last 10 years or so. Doesn’t that now have to change and change fast?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well I don’t recognise that, Andrew. If you go up to the … If you go up to the …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) The budget has halved.

MICHAEL FALLON:
If you go up to the Forth, you’ll see us building two aircraft carriers. If you go round to Barrow, you’ll see us building hunter-killer submarines. In South Wales, they’re assembling new armoured cars for the army. If you go to RAF Marham, they’re preparing for the joint strike fighters. We’re investing 160 billion new equipment for the armed forces.

ANDREW MARR
So it would be outrageous, given the level of threat facing us all around the world, for us not to hit our 2 per cent of NATO … NATO 2 per cent by the end of this parliament?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Andrew, I’m very happy to tell you we are already meeting 2 per cent and the new …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) I know, but we both know we’re talking about the future.
MICHAEL FALLON:
Well let’s talk about the future. The figures that are going to be published this week
by NATO will show us comfortably over 2 per cent and I’m proud of that.

ANDREW MARR:
And as Defence Secretary, would you always want it to be over 2 per cent?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well I want us to fulfil our commitment, our manifesto commitment.

ANDREW MARR:
Which is to be over 2 per cent.

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well our manifesto commitment was to spend more on equipment, and I’ve described
to you that we’re modernising everything for the armed forces. It was also a
commitment …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So it’s very straightforward?

MICHAEL FALLON:
... to replace our nuclear deterrent …

ANDREW MARR:
Indeed.

MICHAEL FALLON:
… and it’s also a commitment not to cut further the size of the regular army.

ANDREW MARR:
Which requires 2 per cent or more roughly speaking. So I ask you again is that now
clear for the rest of this parliament that we will hit our 2 per cent because all the way
through I’ve discussed it with the Prime Minister, I’ve discussed it with the
Chancellor and everybody weaves and dodges and tries to avoid answering the question? I’m sure you won’t.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well the reason is very simple: because we can’t set the budget on this programme. We set the budget for the 3 years of the parliament in September and then you’ll have your answer. But we already have three very strong specific commitments in the manifesto to go on increasing spend on equipment, to replace the four ballistic missile submarines, and not to cut the army further. So there is your commitment. But you don’t just have to rely on the commitment. Look at the record. We’re doing 2 per cent at the moment.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Okay. So let’s make this a bit more personal if you don’t mind because you are economically dry, you’re on the dry side - you think dealing with the deficit is incredibly important and you’re with George Osborne and all of that – but you’re also now the spokesman for the armed forces who want more money for all the reasons we’ve been talking about. So which is it?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well look at the connection between them. You can’t have strong defence unless you have a strong economy. This weekend …

**ANDREW MARR:**
But you also have to spend the money …

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
You do. But look what’s happening in Greece this weekend. They’re cutting pensions, they’re cutting teachers’ salaries. Look what we’re doing. We’re cutting the deficit and we’re building aircraft carriers. There couldn’t be a stronger contrast.

**ANDREW MARR:**
So given that the world is dangerous, you say it’s darkening and it certainly is in many respects, I come back to the fact: as Defence Secretary, you have to protect and
enhance defence budgets; and in all the very difficult choices a Conservative government has to make, surely defence has to come higher up the list than it has been in the past?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well defence is the first duty of government, absolutely right, but – as I’ve said – you can’t have a defence that’s deliverable unless it’s affordable. My job is to make sure that the armed forces have what they need and that’s what I’ll do.

ANDREW MARR:
Michael Fallon, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

INTERVIEW ENDS