ANDREW MARR:
Europe, the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan. The Foreign Secretary has a pretty considerable in-tray, and William Hague joins me now from North Yorkshire. Good morning, Foreign Secretary.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Good morning.

ANDREW MARR:
Can we start, I think we have to, with Europe at the end of this particular week. Are you clear in your own mind that there is going to be a referendum? You don’t want an in-out referendum as such, but there will be a proper referendum within the next couple of years or so?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well the Prime Minister and I have set out our position on this and he will speak further about it at the appropriate time. We’ve said enormous changes are happening in Europe, partly because of the crisis in the Eurozone that may change the relationship between the countries of the European Union. We’ve also said we want to
improve our relationship with Europe. Of course at the last General Election we stood in the Conservative Party on returning some powers to the United Kingdom. We do believe that sometimes less is more in Europe - that doing less at the European level would be better for this country and other countries - and what we’ve said is that when we see how that crisis in the Eurozone plays out and when we’ve tried to improve our relationship with Europe, well that will be the time to seek fresh consent from the British people. And the cleanest and clearest way of doing that would be in a referendum, but we will spell out our policy for the coming years and for the next General Election when the Prime Minister speaks about these things.

ANDREW MARR:
Can I ask you about this audit of European powers or competencies that you’ve announced and that you are undertaking as a government? An audit sounds rather a neutral thing, but I wonder does this then lead inevitably (and rightly in your view) onto a sort of shopping list of powers that you are determined to repatriate?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well I think it should lead to a balanced debate, to an informed debate. This is a review of the balance of competences. It’s the biggest exercise any country has ever undertaken about the impact of European competence and European law on how decisions are made, and that should help all the political parties at the next General Election to be properly informed. It should help the people and the media of the country to see what the real arguments are, where there is the strongest case for EU competence and where there’s the weakest case for EU competence. So I hope it will lead to that well informed debate that we are going to need to have because, as I’ve said, as I said in the last answer, when we come to the right point, the fresh consent of the British people will be required.

ANDREW MARR:
A lot of your colleagues will listen to that and think they’re kicking it into the long grass as usual. This is delay, it’s the old story – euro-sceptics in opposition become euro realists in government. What about the notion of having a referendum ahead of the negotiation, possibly ahead of the election, so that a British government is able to go to Brussels and say we have the will of the British people at our backs?
WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well I think for instance in the negotiations that have just taken place, in which the Prime Minister did an outstanding job for this country, it's not necessary to have a referendum to show where we stand on an issue like that; that we want European spending to be held down. And so I don’t …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) I'm talking about something rather bigger than this … I’m talking about something rather grander than this one negotiation.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
(over) Well talking about whatever set of negotiations, I’m not sure that people would want a whole string of referendums actually. But, as I say, we will set out our policy on this. It's for the Prime Minister to set out our policy on this …

ANDREW MARR:
Yeah.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
… but we have no difficulty representing very hard, in a very tough and effective way, the interests of the people of this country in Europe, as was demonstrated in the last few days.

ANDREW MARR:
And when you look at the sort of radical lack of economic competitiveness of a lot of the West at the moment and you look at how much of our trade is with the rest of the world rather than with the EU, do you think it is still the case (if you thought it was before) that it would be a disaster for us economically to actually leave the union rather than stay in if that’s the choice? If they’re going to go for a deeper union, as they clearly are, we’re going to have a pretty big existential choice to make.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well again it partly depends on what you’re saying in your question. If they’re going
to go for a deeper union, of course that changes then the relationship between European countries. We’re setting out our positive vision of the European Union. I did so to the Germans in a speech in Berlin a month ago - deepening and widening the single market, improving trade within Europe, having more free trade agreements with the rest of the world, using our collective weight in the world in dealing with other powers like Russia or on big issues like the Iranian nuclear programme; and at the same time accepting, as I was just saying, that sometimes less is more - that less can be spent, that less can be done at the centre. Now that’s the positive vision of the future of the European Union …

ANDREW MARR:
Okay, final European …

WILLIAM HAGUE:
… and I think that’s one that the British people support.

ANDREW MARR:
Final European question. The unusual thing at this summit was that France and Germany broke apart. They’re normally in lockstep and now they don’t seem to be in lockstep any longer. How significant is that, do you think, for the sort of general European picture?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
It is significant, you’re right about that. There was no agreed Franco-German approach to the summit in advance. There were instead many shifting alliances, but I’m glad to say very firm alliance between the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands, also working closely with Denmark, Finland and indeed Germany to bring down some of the outrageous expectations, outlandish expectations about the European budget. So it is significant and may be significant for the future, but any idea that Britain was isolated at such a summit is way off the mark. We were there working very closely with those countries that I’ve mentioned.

ANDREW MARR:
Let’s come to matters closer to home. Do you take the view of some of your
colleagues, such as Michael Gove, that any state regulation of the press is inherently dangerous and should be resisted?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well I’m a big supporter of press freedom, as I’ve said before, and as indeed Michael Gove is. But I think since what you’re obviously getting at is how we will react to the Leveson Report shortly…

ANDREW MARR:
(Interrupts) Well spotted.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
…we will have to read the report. The Prime Minister’s not seen the report yet. There are newspapers saying today you know that we’re set for this battle and that battle about it, but none of us have seen the report yet. So although I’m a big supporter of the freedom of the press, I’m also a big supporter of actually reading something before we pronounce on it (Marr laughs) so we will have to do that - but in my case from that philosophical viewpoint that you have to err on the side of freedom.

ANDREW MARR:
Very interesting. Let’s turn, if we may, to the Middle East where it has been an appalling period. Are you concerned that after all the optimism of the Arab Spring, as indeed David Miliband put it, we are entering an “Islamist Autumn” where people like President Morsi are trying to grab more state powers in Egypt and a lot of Islamist influence clearly among the opposition groups in Syria; this is now part of the world where we have to tread even more carefully than we used to?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Of course we have to tread carefully and each country behaves in a different way. Each crisis that we’re seeing in the Arab world is different from the others. But nevertheless, they have something in common, which is people who do want what we want for our country - economic success, dignity, a peaceful way of life - and we’ve got to respect that and keep some faith with those people, with millions of people who want those things, understanding though that this process will throw up endless crises,
conflicts and difficulties over a long period of time.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Isn’t it …

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
So I don’t think we should lose faith in the Arab Spring.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Isn’t it now time for a much greater renewed effort to bring Israel and Hamas together involving the United Nations, involving Europe, involving more people than the original Quartet and certainly including Arab countries too?

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
It is time for a huge effort on the Middle East peace process. This is what I have been calling for - particularly calling for the United States now after their election to show the necessary leadership on this over the coming months because they have crucial leverage with Israel that no other country has. But yes, it does need the very active support of European nations and Arab nations to create incentives and disincentives for all involved, to make sure that this final, this last chance … We’re coming to the final chance maybe for a two state solution in the Israeli Palestinian conflict to be successfully resolved.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Would you like to see Bill Clinton coming in?

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
Well I heard David Miliband saying that earlier. I think in the government we will keep our conversations with the Americans about these things private. But certainly one form or another, whatever personal form it takes, we do look to the United States to give a decisive lead on this in the coming months. And after the tragic conflict in Gaza in the last ten days, if it’s now possible to move on to the opening up of access in and out of Gaza and stopping the smuggling of weapons into Gaza, well then some good could actually come of that awful crisis and terrible casualties.
ANDREW MARR:
And very briefly, if we may, chances of us being involved in a humanitarian military style operation around Syria as the winter grinds on?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
We’re not ruling anything out in our options for Syria over the coming months, but what we’re doing at the moment is stepping up the humanitarian assistance that we’re sending - sending more of it through the new opposition coalition to try to help people as winter approaches.

ANDREW MARR:
Would you like to see a palace coup?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well that would depend what sort of palace coup. I’m not sure the British government advocating that would help bring it about.

ANDREW MARR:
(laughs) Alright, okay.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
But indeed, remember, there are people around Assad who are just as bad or worse than him, so it’s not necessarily the answer.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright. William Hague, thank you very much indeed for joining us today.

INTERVIEW ENDS