ANDREW MARR:
Now we’ve heard the case for voting against the war this week, but those in favour have at least as many hard questions to answer. Before the Iraq War, there was nothing like enough discussion about what was going to happen after the fighting or civilian casualties during it. Let’s hope this time we don’t make the same mistake again. I’m joined shortly by the Defence Secretary Michael Fallon who has been out there making the case, including – we hear – to Labour MPs as well as his own. Mr Fallon, can I ask … welcome you and ask you, first of all, have you been talking to Labour MPs directly this week?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Yes we’ve been talking to Labour MPs all week. We’ve been giving them briefing, trying to answer some of the very legitimate questions they’ve been asking. In fact you heard some of them from Jeremy Corbyn a few minutes ago about what more can be done to stop the supply of oil or arms or money to Isil. We’ve been briefing them in the Ministry of Defence and I’ve been talking to them in Parliament.

ANDREW MARR:
In your waters, do you think we’re going to see a vote this week?
MICHAEL FALLON:
Well we’d like to have a vote for military action, but we’ve got to keep building the case. The prime minister advanced the case in Parliament on Thursday. He answered questions for two and a half hours from over a hundred MPs, and you could see opinion beginning to shift …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So this is an operation that’s going on, but do you think …

MICHAEL FALLON:
(over) This is ongoing, yes.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) … do you think you’ve got the votes …

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well we’re working …

ANDREW MARR:
… or not yet?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Not yet. We’re working at it and we need to keep working at it because there are lots of questions about this. You shouldn’t extend military operations lightly. There are legitimate questions to answer and we’re doing our best to answer them.

ANDREW MARR:
If you called the vote and to general surprise Jeremy Corbyn and his side won that vote, what would the effect be?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well that would be hugely damaging obviously to Britain’s reputation across the world. It’s our allies who want us to come and help. France has asked us very directly to send the RAF to help alongside French aircraft. It would obviously damage our
reputation internationally and I honestly believe it would leave … it would leave us less safe than we are at the moment.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Well, as we heard, he hasn’t decided yet whether to whip Labour MPs in his view against the strikes. Or maybe he has decided and he doesn’t want to tell us yet. But if he whipped the Labour Party against you, would that stop the vote taking place?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Well this isn’t just a matter for the Labour Party or actually even the Conservative Party. This is a matter on which individual MPs have to make up their minds. They’ve been asking questions. We’re doing our best to answer them, to explain that France wants us to help, the United Nations has passed the resolution, that there are strong military reasons for using our aircraft in this battle. We’re making these arguments and I hope MPs will look at them individually.

**ANDREW MARR:**
I don’t want to get too hung up on the processology of all of this …

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
*(over)* No.

**ANDREW MARR:**
… because actually it’s the fundamental question that matters most of all. You’ll have seen possibly in *The Observer* people who are living in Raqqa now saying for goodness sake don’t bomb us. Because there’s 150,000 people or so in Raqqa of whom a few thousand will be bad guys or terrorists and their accomplices. They, according to journalists who’ve been in Raqqa, go straight underground into bunkers or they disperse amongst the civilian population into schools and houses and other places using the civilians there as human shields. So if we vote to bomb Raqqa, we are voting to bomb large numbers of … kill large numbers of innocent people in Raqqa.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
Absolutely not. We set very strict rules of engagement to minimise civilian casualties and this is actually why the coalition and why the French would like the RAF involved: because we have the precision strike fighters that can take out very particular targets – the command posts, the key personnel, the training camps, the people who are plotting against this country and outrages elsewhere in Europe – they can be taken out very precisely. Let me put the …

ANDREW MARR:
Can they really? I mean …

MICHAEL FALLON:
(over) Absolutely. Let me …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) … we’ve got these Brimstone missiles. They can’t go into underground bunkers, can they?

MICHAEL FALLON:
No but they can take out …

ANDREW MARR:
They can’t distinguish between an Isil supporter and somebody wearing a headscarf along the road selling shoes?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Absolutely, we build up intelligence on all the targets. The targets are individually selected, they’re approved. I have to approve any deliberate target that’s chosen. The commanders last week had around 25 aircraft available with precision strike capability. Eight of those were British Tornadoes. That’s a third of them. Of the unmanned aircraft flying in the region at the moment, about a quarter are British. So we have a very large proportion of high precision strike capability and that’s why the French have specifically asked us to help and why the coalition would welcome the RAF participating. We’re already doing that in Iraq.
**ANDREW MARR:**
And these bombs can find their way into bunkers and so forth, can they?

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
The RAF have been striking, with the permission of Parliament, in Iraq for over a year now and our estimate is there hasn’t yet been a single civilian casualty because of the precision of their strikes. They have been carefully targeted at Isil command posts, Isil supplies …

**ANDREW MARR:**
*(over)* With … with the greatest respect …

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
*(over)* … Isil supply routes.

**ANDREW MARR:**
With the greatest respect, that reminds me slightly of Robin Cook’s notorious comment about going into Afghanistan and not a shot being fired at the beginning of that war. We have had the war in Iraq, which has been a catastrophe (it killed huge numbers of people) which you supported; we’ve had the war in Libya, which has been a total catastrophe, destroyed that country and opened up migrant routes into Europe, which you supported; and now you’re coming back to the British people and saying let’s try a third time.

**MICHAEL FALLON:**
No we’ve already got permission to deal with Isil in Iraq at the edges, helping the Iraqi government push back Isil, but it makes no sense simply to be dealing with Isil in Iraq when Isil is headquartered in north east Syria. Now Isil is not just a threat to Iraq and Syria. Isil is a very direct threat to this country. Let me …

**ANDREW MARR:**
*(over)* I absolutely understand that.
MICHAEL FALLON:
Let me … well let me put it this way. Last year there were 15 Isil related attacks worldwide. This year there have already been 150 attacks. And we’ve seen them recently not just in Ankara, in Beirut. We’ve now seen the slaughter in Paris. There is a very direct threat to this country from letting Isil continue unchecked.

ANDREW MARR:
There’s been briefing that British supermarkets and stuff might be targeted by Isil. Is that just supposition or is there hard evidence for that?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well we’ve had 7 plots, very direct plots against the streets of Britain already being foiled by our security forces so far, but the current independent threat assessment is that an attack on Britain is now highly likely. We have to do something about that. Of course Labour is right to say there should be a political process to end the civil war in Syria and give it a better government, of course they’re right to say we should look at the oil and financing of Isil, but we also have to defend ourselves. We have to deal here with a very direct threat to this country.

ANDREW MARR:
Jeremy Corbyn – and a lot of people agree with him – say that the thing is if we actually start to bomb in Raqqa, we start to bomb Isil in Northern Syria, we will make it much likelier that they come and attack us here.

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well it's too late now, we're already a target. Isil already regard Britain as one of their top targets. They’re already plotting against this country. We’re attacking Isil already in Iraq. We are part of this fight. And let’s be clear here: France has asked for our help, the United Nations has passed a resolution calling on all members of the United Nations to use their capacities to eradicate any safe haven for Isil. That is a United Nations resolution, but we also need to do this to keep our own country safe.

ANDREW MARR:
Now the prime minister talked about there being 70,000 potential fighters in Syria at
the moment. Jeremy Corbyn’s just said he has deep scepticism about that figure. Do
you know who these people are? Are they actually moderates or are they other forms
of extremists in the wrong parts of Syria, which is what people suggest?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Yes we do know who they are and this is an independent Joint Intelligence Committee
assessment, it’s not ministers making this figure. It’s their assessment and it’s
supported by academics. There’s the Free Syrian Army commanded by General Idris
in the north; there’s the Southern Front, al-Zoubi, in the south.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Not many of them.

MICHAEL FALLON:
There aren’t many of these people standing up to both Assad and Isil and the longer
we wait, by the way, the fewer there will be. But the best estimate of those who are
not extremists, who are prepared to support a new government in Syria and are then
prepared to take the fight to Isil is around 70,000. Now they’re not a new model army,
all perfectly drilled and organised outside the gates of Raqqa.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) No, no, a lot of them are in the wrong part of Syria as well, aren’t they?

MICHAEL FALLON:
They’ve been fighting Assad and Isil in different parts of Syria, there are different
factions, but they are there and there will be fewer of them if we don’t … if we don’t
start getting involved properly in dealing with Isil and its headquarters.

ANDREW MARR:
This takes us right on, however, to the biggest question of all, which is in 2013 there
was a vote in the House of Commons which the government lost, but that was to
attack Assad who is now objectively, as it were, our ally in all of this. Assad’s army
are going to be on the same side as us whatever we do in there. So what happens if
somehow we “win”? What happens if we do take ground or the Free Syrian Army
tackles ground from Raqqa … from Isil and takes Raqqa and we all move in there? Assad attacks them.

MICHAEL FALLON:  
Well, first of all, that was a vote to stop Assad using chemical weapons against his own people and look what’s happened since – we’ve had a quarter of a million people in Syria killed; we’ve had 11 million people displaced; 4 million people have left Syria …

ANDREW MARR:  
(over) Yes absolutely and he’s stronger than ever.

MICHAEL FALLON:  
(over) We’ve had t… No he’s not stronger than ever. He’s only in control of a quarter of his country. But we’ve had you know this huge civil war in Syria and we need to bring it to an end, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be dealing with Isil first. Isil is the threat not just to both countries – Iraq and Syria – but to us here in Western Europe as well.

ANDREW MARR:  
We’ve got … I mean I said that Assad was in a powerful position. He’s got the Russian bear at his shoulder, which helps a great deal. If Isil are defeated with our help and the American’s help and the Russians’ help, Assad will be stronger still; and if the Free Syrian Army go into Raqqa, presumably the Russians will attack them? I mean have there been conversations about what happens?

MICHAEL FALLON:  
Well, first of all, what has changed now is that all the parties involved, the close neighbours like Iran and Saudi Arabia and Russia, which has huge influence in Syria, are now involved in a political process. That wasn’t true last year and it wasn’t true two years ago. They’re all now working together on a new type of government for Syria that can be genuinely comprehensive, include all groups in Syria – Alawite, Christian, Sunni and Jews …
ANDREW MARR:  
Sure.

MICHAEL FALLON:  
… and build a more comprehensive government in Syria that is moderate. Now Russia is part of that process, it’s underway in Vienna. Philip Hammond is representing Great Britain as part of that negotiation and that is … that is a sign of optimism. But we can’t wait for that process to work its way through …

ANDREW MARR:  
(over) But that sure…

MICHAEL FALLON:  
(over) … without dealing with the terrorist threat from Isil to our own country.

ANDREW MARR:  
That surely is the heart of this problem – that on the one hand you want to act now; on the other hand those people who say it’s very, very dangerous to act until we have a comprehensive idea of what’s going to happen next, then have to wait for the Russians to change their mind about Assad and there is no sign of that happening?

MICHAEL FALLON:  
Well our argument is that it’s pretty dangerous not to act when you see a very direct threat to this country, when you’re asked for help by France, when the United Nations requests all its members to assist, when you have the capability – the precision strike aircraft that could deal with this death cult in its headquarters in Raqqa. It’s even more dangerous not to do something about it. What happened in Paris a couple of weeks ago could happen in a British city – innocent people slaughtered on a night out. Isil is not making, by the way, not making demands, it’s not holding people hostage. These are terrorists who are prepared to go in and slaughter people with automatic weapons and then blow themselves up. This is a death cult and we have to do some…

ANDREW MARR:  
(over) I absolutely understand that. My …
MICHAEL FALLON:
(over) Well I hope you do because we have to do something about this.

ANDREW MARR:
My question is whether in doing something about this, we actually trigger a whole series of further wars …

MICHAEL FALLON:
(over) There is a war …

ANDREW MARR
(over) … and conflicts in that region …

MICHAEL FALLON:
(over) … there is a war …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) … and make things worse?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well there is a war going on in Syria at the moment that’s gone on for over four years and hundreds of thousands of lives have already been lost. In Iraq we’re helping the legitimate government of Iraq push Isil back and that is beginning to happen, but the headquarters of Isil is there in north east Syria and we have the capacity to help France and our allies do something about it. So the bigger question is why would we not help?

ANDREW MARR:
Two specifics. Have we actually had a conversation with the Russians about the end game?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Yes the Russians are involved in these negotiations now and that’s the most
encouraging thing over the last few months. They’re involved actively with Saudi Arabia, with Iran, with Turkey and with the various moderates in Syria to give Syria a better government.

ANDREW MARR:
And second: as defence secretary what assurance can you offer that we won’t have an RAF jet shot down by the Russians or the Turks following the ghastly incident at the beginning of last week?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well the Turks, as we understand it, were defending their own airspace against a Russian incursion.

ANDREW MARR:
It’s a very crowded airspace, lots of missiles and planes hurtling all over the place.

MICHAEL FALLON:
But there are already … there’s already a memorandum of understanding between the coalition and the Russians for aircraft operating in the area round Raqqa. We would then be party to that and our planes are already equipped with defensive aids. There are always risks in war, but there is a greater risk from not doing something about Isil and leaving our streets vulnerable to the kind of slaughter we saw in Paris.

ANDREW MARR:
Okay. If I may, one domestic issue …

MICHAEL FALLON:
Sure.

ANDREW MARR:
… which is causing a lot of concern for the Conservative Party at the moment is this sort of scandal over the so-called ‘Tatler Tory’. He’s now left the party. Grant Shapps has resigned. There are calls for Lord Feldman to resign. What’s your message, first
of all, to the parents of … who killed himself?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well deepest sympathy. It’s appalling that anybody should …

ANDREW MARR:
*(over)* Elliot Johnson.

MICHAEL FALLON:
… have to take their life in the particular way that Elliot Johnson did. I would assure his parents that there is now a full-scale investigation going on led by a very senior lawyer from Clifford Chance and of course there’ll be the coroner’s inquest as well. But the person directly responsible for central office, for campaigning, the chairman – Grant Shapps who signed up Mark Clarke’s operation – he has accepted responsibility and yesterday he resigned.

ANDREW MARR:
Do you think Lord Feldman should go as well?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well it was Grant Shapps who was in charge of campaigning and who was involved in this and I think it’s best now to see where the investigation takes us.

ANDREW MARR:
The family would like, as you know, an independent inquiry because they think the lawyer involved, I think he wants to be a Conservative MP himself and so forth, that he should be completely independent of the …

MICHAEL FALLON:
*(over)* Oh he is, he’s fully independent. This is a very senior lawyer from one of the top law firms in the country.

ANDREW MARR:
Overall - you’ve been inside the Conservative Party for a very long time – what goes
wrong with the Conservative youth wing?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well you know it’s trivial I think to say that they get over enthusiastic and over-zealous when somebody has done something as sad as to take their own life, but let me just assure you this is all going to be fully investigated and we will all see what the facts are.

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

INTERVIEW ENDS