

Leading journalist Robert Fisk asks: Who killed Margaret Hassan?

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Leading Middle East commentator Robert Fisk has questioned just who is responsible for the apparent murder of aid worker Margaret Hassan in Iraq.

In a front-page article in the November 17 *Independent* newspaper, Fisk raises a number of important questions that throw doubt on the official version of events that Hassan was killed by Iraqi insurgents.

Fisk is a man whose opinions on Iraqi affairs should be taken seriously. Now a journalist for the *Independent*, he is an expert on the Middle East who has lived in Beirut for more than 25 years and wrote a book on the civil war there, *Pity The Nation*. He has written extensively on Iraq and the Israeli Palestinian conflict and is one of the most highly decorated British journalists, winning the Amnesty International UK Press Awards in 1998 and in 2000.

The kidnap of Margaret Hassan on October 19 created an understandable outcry and widespread consternation, particularly because she was an outspoken opponent of the US-led war and subsequent occupation of Iraq who had dedicated herself to the cause of the Iraqi people. Hassan had lived in Iraq since 1972 after meeting her husband Tahseen Ali Hassan when he was studying in Britain. She converted to Islam and took Iraqi citizenship. After the 1991 Persian Gulf War, she became a director of the humanitarian organisation Care International and a vocal opponent of United Nations sanctions.

That such a person had apparently been seized by an unnamed resistance group became an invaluable propaganda weapon for the British and US governments, with Prime Minister Tony Blair and others making public statements on what it revealed about the character of the forces opposed to the supposed efforts to establish a democratic government in Iraq.

Following the release of a tape showing a woman being shot through the back of the head, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said that Hassan had “probably been murdered, although we cannot conclude this with complete

certainty...

“To kidnap and kill anyone is inexcusable. But it is repugnant to commit such a crime against a woman who has spent most of her life working for the good of the people of Iraq,”

In his article “What price innocence in the anarchy of Iraq?” Fisk acknowledges that many will be forced by Hassan’s possible death to question “how much further can we fall into the Iraqi pit?” But he continues, “For the bureaucrats and the western leaders who will today express their outrage and sorrow at her reported death, she had nothing but scorn.”

He then enumerates a number of factual and political inconsistencies in the events surrounding Hassan’s abduction.

Firstly, Fisk draws attention to earlier videos of Hassan released by her kidnappers (on October 19, 22 and 27) in which she is shown crying and pleading for the withdrawal of the UK’s Black Watch regiment.

He notes, “In the background of these appalling pictures, there were none of the usual Islamic banners. There were none of the usual armed and hooded men. No Koranic recitations.”

He goes on, “And when it percolated through to Fallujah and Ramadi that the mere act of kidnapping Margaret Hassan was close to heresy, the combined resistance groups of Fallujah—and the message genuinely came from them—demanded her release. So, incredibly, did Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the al-Qa’ida man whom the Americans falsely claim to be leading the Iraqi insurrection—but who has very definitely been involved in kidnapping and beheading foreigners.”

Fisk adds, “Other abducted women—the two Italian aid workers, for example—were freed when their captors recognised their innocence. But not Margaret Hassan, even though she spoke fluent Arabic and could explain her work to her captors in their own language.”

Why would any group opposed to the occupation proceed so ruthlessly against Margaret Hassan given such widespread demands for her release, including a demonstration by Iraqis in Baghdad on October 25?

Fisk indicates one alternative grouping that could possibly have seized Hassan. He notes what he refers to as “one mysterious video that floated to the surface this year, a group of armed men promising to seize Zarqawi, claiming he was anti-Iraqi, politely referring to the occupation armies as the ‘coalition forces.’ This was quickly nicknamed the ‘Allawi tape’: after the US-appointed, ex-CIA agent and ex-Baathist who holds the title of ‘interim Prime Minister’ in Iraq, the same Allawi who fatuously claimed there were no civilian deaths in Fallujah.”

More generally, Fisk concludes with remarks that ask the question: who gains from Margaret Hassan’s death?

He writes, “So, if anyone doubted the murderous nature of the insurgents, what better way to prove their viciousness than to produce evidence of Margaret Hassan’s murder? What more ruthless way could there be of demonstrating to the world that America and Allawi’s tinpot army were fighting ‘evil’ in Fallujah and the other Iraqi cities that are now controlled by Washington’s enemies.”

Fisk states that “nobody is suggesting that people associated with the government of Mr Allawi had a hand in Margaret Hassan’s death,” and notes that Iraq is “awash with up to 20 insurgent groups” as well as “rival gangs of criminals seeking to extort money from hostage-taking”:

“But still the question has to be answered: who killed Margaret Hassan?”

Should Hassan’s death be confirmed, this is a question that must indeed be answered. And it is entirely legitimate to ask, as Fisk does, Cui Bono—who benefits?



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