

Robert Fisk—a courageous and truthful reporter on the Middle East who “covered history” (1946–2020)

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Robert Fisk was that rare phenomenon, a journalist who reported truthfully and indeed courageously for decades on the Middle East. He died October 30 in a Dublin hospital at the age of 74 following a stroke.

In 2005, the *New York Times* described him as “probably the most famous foreign correspondent in Britain.”

The British journalist, who lived in Beirut during Lebanon’s civil war and long after, was a fluent Arabic speaker. His work spanned nearly five decades and included news articles, comment and analysis, a three-part series *From Beirut To Bosnia* (1993) for the Discovery Channel, and several books, most notably *Pity the nation: Lebanon at war* (1990) and *The great war for civilisation: The conquest of the Middle East* (2005).

One of the most outstanding journalists of his era, he received numerous awards for his work, including the Orwell prize for journalism, the Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism, the Amnesty International UK Press Awards in 1998 and in 2000, and numerous British Press Awards in the categories of international reporter of the year and foreign reporter of the year. He completed a PhD thesis on Ireland’s neutrality and relations with Britain in World War II at Trinity College Dublin, receiving the Trinity College Dublin Historical Society award’s gold medal in 2009, as well as numerous honorary degrees from universities around the world. More recently, his talks on the Middle East attracted huge audiences around the world.

Born in Maidstone, England, he was the only child of William Fisk, a local government official who had served as a young man in the Battle of the Somme in World War I, keeping a diary of the war’s horrors. Despite his many disagreements with his father, a right-wing, church-going disciplinarian from whom he became estranged, Robert explained that his father’s punishment for disobeying an order to execute another soldier had a profound influence on him. He said, “My father’s refusal to kill another man was the only thing he did in his life which I would also have done.” He decided to become a journalist at the age of 12 after seeing the 1940 Alfred Hitchcock film *Foreign Correspondent*.

After working for several local newspapers, he joined the *Sunday Express* and then the *Times* of London, covering the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland, Portugal, and then Lebanon’s civil war, including the Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon in 1982 and the massacre of the Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan and the Iran-Iraq war.

While “Fleet Street” was always conservative, there were spaces for different, dissenting work, and a certain range of views as evidenced by the work of the Insight team at the *Sunday Times* in the 1960s and 70s. But following the takeover of the *Times* in 1981 by Rupert Murdoch, with the backing of Margaret Thatcher, journalism changed.

Murdoch, who was opposed to investigative journalism—with its fact-

checking and months of interviews—turned the newspaper into a nakedly pro-Tory, pro-Israeli paper shorn of all editorial independence, leading to increasing conflicts with Fisk. Murdoch’s shift to production at Wapping and a union busting operation in 1986 saw his journalists crossing picket lines that Murdoch won thanks in large part to a scabbing operation by the EETPU electricians union against sacked printworkers. But it resulted in an exodus of journalists to the newly established *Independent*. Fisk joined the *Independent* in 1989 after one of his stories was spiked. There he covered the first Gulf War, the civil war in Algeria, the communal conflicts that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia, the NATO assault on Serbia in 1999, the US-led invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the proxy war in Syria.

Fisk was one of a dwindling breed of journalists—along with John Pilger, Seymour Hersh and, from a significantly different background, Julian Assange—that have dared to question the official narratives from governments and publish what they uncovered. Explaining his approach to journalism, he cited an Israeli journalist who had told him the role of journalists was to “monitor the centres of power.” Fisk said, “I think that is the best definition of my job I’ve ever heard. Especially when governments and politicians take us to war, when they have decided that they will kill and others will die.”

Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s *Desert Island Discs* in 2006, he explained that what he had witnessed during his years covering conflicts and wars, with their horrors, cruelty and inhumanity—he called it the pornography of war—made him angry. He hated violence. It made him determined to report “history as it happens,” so no one could say “we didn’t know, nobody told us.”

He spoke of one of his first assignments, when he was sent at the age of 25 to cover the Troubles in Northern Ireland. He was struck at how poor Belfast was and the brutality of the British army. He couldn’t believe the dead bodies that he saw for the first time, none of which figured on television or in the newspapers.

Fisk said, “You cannot get near the truth without being there,” in *This Is Not a Movie*, a 2019 documentary about his work. He rejected what he called “hotel journalism”—the journalism of war reporters, embedded with American or British armed forces, who stayed in their guarded rooms, using their mobile phones and local correspondents who risked their lives conducting interviews on their behalf. Under the Pentagon’s rules, embedded correspondents were forbidden to report any information that would undermine or compromise the US offensive in Iraq, including reports of military and civilian casualties. Journalists not only had to agree to this but were sucked into life with the troops that altered their perspective on the war.

Fisk was not a socialist. He wrote as a liberal supporter of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism. He cared passionately about the great

historical experiences of the twentieth century. Deeply imbued with a sense of the historical processes that shaped the events he witnessed, he believed that every reporter should carry a history book in his or her back-pocket.

Speaking at the University of Sydney in 2005, on a visit to Australia to give the Edward Said Memorial Lecture, he said, “In 1992, I was in Sarajevo and once, as Serb shells whistled over my head, I stood upon the very paving stone where Gavrilo Princip stood as he fired the fatal shot that sent my father to the trenches of the First World War. It was as if history was a giant echo-chamber...”

Fisk was very aware of role of the imperialist powers in determining the course of events in the Middle East and internationally. He told his audience, “After the Allied victory in 1918, the victors divided up the lands of their former enemies. And in the space of just 17 months, they created the borders of Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, and most of the Middle East. I have spent my entire career, in Belfast, and Sarajevo, and Beirut, and Baghdad, watching the people within those borders burn.”

Returning to the present, he said, “America invaded Iraq not for Saddam Hussein’s mythical ‘weapons of mass destruction’ which had long ago been destroyed, but to change the map of the Middle East, much as father’s generation had done more than 80 years earlier.” The war stemmed from not only the desire to dominate oil supplies, but a “visceral need to project power on a massive scale” on the part of Washington. It was all supported by the uncritical mainstream media.

Giving the keynote speech at the fifth annual Al Jazeera Forum in May 2010, he noted that the *New York Times*, cheerleader in chief for the 2003 war against Iraq, was again banging the drums for war, with claims that Iran was working on weapons of mass destruction. He added, “And after the war, if there is a war, more self-condemnation, no doubt, if there are no nuclear weapons projects.”

Almost every obituary belittled Fisk as an “acclaimed” but “controversial” journalist, which says as much about the writers themselves as their subject, who did not shrink from “speaking truth to power.”

Much of the “controversy” surrounding Fisk stemmed from his efforts to place the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington within the context of the malign US-led machinations in the Middle East. Fully acknowledging the horrific and criminal nature of the attacks, he said, “September 11 was a crime against humanity”, but he added, “I’m actively against the brutal, cynical, lying ‘war of civilisation’ that he [President George W. Bush] has begun so mendaciously in our name and which has now cost as many lives as the World Trade Center mass murder.”

Unlike most of his peers, Fisk was an outspoken critic of US and British wars against Afghanistan and Iraq that followed 9/11, accusing US and British forces of war crimes and his fellow journalists of showing no interest in following up on the killing of prisoners.

In November 2001, he referred to the massacre of Taliban prisoners at the Qala-i-Janghi fortress, writing that “US Special Forces—and, it has emerged, British troops—helped the [Northern] Alliance to overcome the uprising and, sure enough, CNN tells us some prisoners were ‘executed’ trying to escape.” He added, “It is an atrocity. British troops are now stained with war crimes.”

Days later, he continued, more executed Taliban members were found in Kunduz. Yet “The US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, stated quite specifically during the siege of the city that US air raids on the Taliban defenders would stop ‘if the Northern Alliance requested it.’”

In December 2001, Fisk was attacked and beaten by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, suffering facial, hand and head injuries. Describing the attack, he said he understood the refugees’ anger, as many had relatives who had been killed by the US bombing of Afghan city Kandahar the previous week. He wrote a graphic and moving account of the assault because “I

don’t want this to be seen as a Muslim mob attacking a Westerner for no reason.” Responsibility for the “silly, bloody, tiny incident” lay with the West. The refugees “had every reason to be angry”. In their position, “I would have attacked Robert Fisk. Or any other Westerner I could find.” It “was symbolic of the hatred and fury and hypocrisy of this filthy war.”

Fisk wrote about the killing of civilians and the use of collective punishment in Iraq by US-led forces, as well as the looting of Iraq following the 2003 invasion and occupation, noting that the response of American forces “shows clearly what the US intends to protect... After days of arson and pillage, here’s a short but revealing scorecard. US troops have sat back and allowed mobs to wreck and then burn” government ministries and “did nothing to prevent looters from destroying priceless treasures of Iraq’s history in the Baghdad Archaeological Museum and in the museum in the northern city of Mosul, or from looting three hospitals.”

But at the same time, the Americans protected two ministries, “And which ministries proved to be so important for the Americans? Why, the Ministry of Interior, of course—with its vast wealth of intelligence information on Iraq—and the Ministry of Oil. The archives and files of Iraq’s most valuable asset—its oilfields and, even more important, its massive reserves—are safe and sound, sealed off from the mobs and looters, and safe to be shared, as Washington almost certainly intends, with American oil companies.”

Washington’s avowed hostility to any expression of independent journalism was aided and abetted by Tony Blair’s UK Labour government. Defence Minister Geoff Hoon accused Fisk of being a dupe of Saddam Hussein’s regime for revealing evidence that two bombings of Iraqi markets had been carried out by the US and not Iraq. Home Secretary David Blunkett attacked not only the media for treating reports from Baghdad “as though they were the moral equivalent” of reports based on information given by the US and UK armed forces, but also the “progressive and liberal” public that believe their reports.

As well as bringing to light the brutality of Israel’s wars and suppression of the Palestinians, he exposed the lies on which the official pretext for the illegal US-British-French bombing of Syria in April 2018 were based—the claim that the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad carried out a chemical weapons attack in eastern Ghouta. He visited Douma, the town in Ghouta where a gas attack supposedly occurred, and spoke with Dr. Assim Rahaibani, who worked at the medical clinic where widely publicised videos were filmed showing children being hosed down with water, ostensibly to relieve poison gas inhalation. Rahaibani explained what had happened, “Yes, the video was filmed here, it is genuine, but what you see are people suffering from hypoxia, not gas poisoning.”

His account was in line with statements by Russian authorities, who charged that the White Helmets, the anti-Assad “rebel” organization funded by Britain, staged the gas attack under orders from UK intelligence to provide its Western sponsors with a pretext for intervention. Fisk notes that by the time he arrived in Douma, the White Helmets had already left to join fighters of the Islamic fundamentalist group Jaysh-al Islam, who fled Douma for Idlib under an agreement brokered with Russia. The response of the mainstream media was to bury his report.

The Iraq war largely eliminated whatever media independence remained, with most news organisations accepting this without complaint and those objecting subjected to sustained pressure to fall into line. Today, the best journalists write online, or in foreign publications, or not at all.

Fisk spoke out passionately in defence of Julian Assange, WikiLeaks and journalistic freedom, saying that the US prosecution of Assange should set off alarm bells everywhere. In June last year he wrote, “The final punishment of Julian Assange reminds journalists their job is to uncover what the state keeps hidden. If we do our job, we will expose the same vile mendacity of our masters that has led to the clamour of hatred

towards Assange, [Chelsea] Manning and [Edward] Snowden.”

In his revelations of imperialism’s criminal and fraudulent wars, its proxy wars, and the shameless lies of governments, Fisk shone a light into the most deeply reactionary machinations of the late 20th and 21st century. That to expose the truth is deemed “controversial” is an indictment of today’s journalism and a tribute to him.



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