
Fisk talks about Lebanon, Israel, US and Iran

Ya Libnan, Lebanon - 26/4/2008

Wajahat Ali interviews renowned journalist Robert Fisk on his 32 years of experience in Lebanon, along with his thoughts on Iran, Bin Laden, and the media's influence on the drive to war in the Middle East.

"One thing I'm going to say to you now, please make sure - and I hope you're tape recording this - but please make sure you're quoting me accurately. Don't even for the basis of shortening something make me say something I haven't said," orders celebrated journalist Robert Fisk. "Because the biggest problem I have in journalism is being quoted or misquoted and then being asked to defend something I haven't said."

I assuage him, "I've taped every single word, and I've got what you've said down, and so far no interview has..." "And when you're putting it together, because you're not going to use it all, try to make sure my counteracting points are there. So, if I call Ahmedinjad a "crackpot" keep it in, but make sure I'm also talking about Iran in general. Where I'm criticizing the Israelis, make sure I also criticize the Arabs." The world's most decorated foreign correspondent would have an equally brilliant career as a headmaster or drill sergeant.

Robert Fisk, Middle East correspondent for The Independent, has lived in the region for nearly three decades. When contacting him, he offered multiple numbers - one land line in Ireland, another cell line in Lebanon, and ever changing appointments due to his frenetic travel schedule. A fifteen-minute interview promise quickly ballooned into a lengthy, hour-plus conversation and an enlightening and entertaining Middle East history lesson.

Rumors of Fisk's passionate, opinionated garrulousness are indeed fact. Some detractors claim his personality infects his writing with a biased bombastic flair reflecting arrogance, while his supporters - who are many - highlight his impassioned voice as authentic and refreshing. Here, Fisk talks to us about Hezbollah, his upcoming book on Kosovo, and those pesky CNN questions. Of course, we've kept every word.

A recent British report said Gaza is in its worst condition since the last 30 years. Just last week, a seminary was targeted and several civilians were killed. Americans see this and think "Arabs vs. Jews, they're just always killing each other." What's the ground scene reality regarding the current volatility? Is one side to be blamed more than the other for the recent conflagration?

Oh, God! Sounds like a CNN question! You know, this is about history, this is about the way our societies develop and what we're told and what we're not told. You've got the same situation in The West Bank, Gaza, Israel or "Palestine" as you had after the end of the First World War. Two groups of people want to live on the same piece of real estate and they have conflicting claims, one of which is based largely on deed which goes right back to the Ottoman period and the British period.

And the case of settlements seems to be based on the idea of what God

has promised. And those two things don't work out. You can't say on the one hand, well, I have got the deeds to the land, but no God's actually given it to me. That's the end of conversation, isn't it? >From there on, you can spin out to all sorts of historical allegories, and ways of reporting, and ways of reporting history, and it doesn't go anywhere. Each time we're told we have to start again, we have to start the clock from now and we have to forget the past. You can't forget the past anymore than you can in Iraq or you can in Europe or America.

The Second World War is and was constantly being drudged up by Blair and Bush to rationalize the invasion of Iraq. Well, you can't constantly go back to WW2 and call Saddam the Hitler of Baghdad, and then on the other hand say we aren't going to go back to history to other parts of the Middle East, because that's inconvenient, so we're just going to start from here. We always hear people say, "Let's move forward" (Laughs). The psychobabble language of marriage guidance counselors, you know, only look to the future let's not look at the past even though so much sorrow has happened. I'm afraid you have to.

The Middle East is a land of great injustice. The Israelis can claim, or wish to at least, that Lord Balfour's Declaration of 1917 promised Britain support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, which didn't just mean the left hand bit that became Israel. Many Israelis now and would be Israelis they could claim that Palestine meant everything up to the Jordan River. It was Chaim Weizmann's hope that Jewish settlements would be allowed East of the Jordan River after the Cairo conference held in 1921. You have two groups of people who were made conflicting promises by the British. One for Arab independence and promises that Jewish immigration would not in any way make the indigenous Arabs dispossessed or suffer in any way. And the other which was a promise by Britain for support of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Those things are as impossible to integrate then as they are today.

We keep going around the Middle East and setting up our various dictators, whether they be the Kings of Arabia, or whether they be King Farooq in Egypt, or King Idris in Libya. Then, when people didn't want the various kings, we brought in the various generals. General Sadat and Colonel Kaddafi. King Abdullah was a soldier, King Hussein was a soldier. So, we get surprised when people say, "Enough is enough!" But, in the end of the day, when you say, "Who is right and who is wrong?" It's history that is wrong. It's the mistakes we've made and the injustices we've committed in that region. You can start it off with the Ottoman Empire, you can start it off in post WW1, and you can start it off with the Americans. And as you look back in history, the papers get more thin and fragile, don't they?

You've been in the Middle East for decades. You've seen both Republican and Democratic foreign policy...

What's the difference? There's no difference. Where's the difference between Clinton and Bush? It's like people saying Labor government is going to come in Israel and be different than Likud, and it turns out not to be different at all.

Well, Obama as you know before his run as President, was more partial towards Palestinian rights. But, last month along with Clinton, he wrote a letter strongly condemning Palestinian violence. Many wonder, if he or even Clinton wins, is there going to be any change in policy?

Here's the thing that's going to be different in policy regarding the Middle East in the United States whoever wins the election: it's

utterly irrelevant.

Lebanon seems to be a forgotten story. In 2006, it had a struggle with Israel which devastated a large part of that society...

Hezbollah did. I don't know if Lebanon did at all, but Hezbollah did.

Has the Lebanese society been able to recover in the past 2 years, or has it only strengthened Hezbollah?

Well, it certainly strengthened Hezbollah, but their political performance since then has been so ambiguous in that whatever it gained militarily in terms of prestige it has substantially lost politically inside Lebanon itself. Look, the only good news in Lebanon is that civil war hasn't restarted. Lot of people thought it would, and I thought it would, but it hasn't. This could mean that they have realized the folly of war: that you don't win. It's all about death; it's not about victory.

It also means that an awful lot Lebanese who were sent away as children to be educated during the civil war - you know to Paris, London, Geneva, and Boston wherever - have returned to Lebanon and said, "I don't want this sectarian nonsense, and I want to live in an ordinary country without any more war." To that extent, Lebanon - the fact it has not disintegrated like Gaza or Afghanistan or Iraq despite the wish of the Americans and Iranians to use it as battleground - which was what 2006 was about - is quite a tribute to Lebanon and the Lebanese. Whether they appreciate their good fortune is quite a different matter.

You have experience in Kosovo and Serbia, and you know Kosovo declared independence and sovereignty from Serbia on Feb 17. Do you believe there is complicity of Western agents in its prolonged suffering? Is this a new chapter signaling hope? And could it have come earlier?

I have a book coming out in two and a half years time which is going to involve quite a lot of things about Kosovo and Bosnia and particularly Islam. It's going to be called "Night of Power" which you don't need me to explain. They are very different places, of course. The Serb actions in Bosnia were not driven by the same political motives as the Serb actions in Kosovo, which Serbs believe is part of Serbia, and you can argue that until the cows home. I don't know about "Agents" being complicit in anything.

On one hand I never totally dismiss the "plot" because we know, for example, the CIA and the British were involved in overthrowing Mossadegh [the democratically elected leader of Iran overthrown by the CIA] and bringing in the Shah in 50's Iran. That's all true. But the idea you can manipulate states into independence is probably pie in the sky.

The treatment of the Kosovars was such that Europe was bound to extend its support for independence in one form or the other. Now, we know in the Balkans, as always, regional European powers have their fingers in it. Just as the Germans supported the Croation independence, and we know why historically. We know historically many Albanians entered Kosovo during and before the Tito Period and changed its ethnic makeup. But, then again, how far do you go back in history when it was the other way around?

I think this is really an Ottoman story and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, which began the First World War. When the Ottoman Empire began

to fray inside Europe, and I'm talking about Bulgaria as well as Serbia, it didn't do so in a neat way. It did so with massacres and horrific killings, which if you read the contemporary accounts seems to be what we were writing about Bosnia in the 1990's. There was a considerable historical heritage left over, unfortunately blood that most dealt with in an imperfect and unjust way.

I think that Kosovo contains the seeds of further hostilities because of course I can't imagine any Serbian leader denouncing Serbia's right to regard Kosova as part of the historic homeland of Serbia. And I don't think Bosnia has been solved for that matter. It's just an independent state in one federal illusion, isn't it? Everyone is illusory in the Ottoman empire of what it was. You have to go back to the Ottomans to work all this out.

There's this very interesting book that came out called Jerusalem 1912 and it argues quite persuasively that fundamental issues of land ownership and Jewish immigration became major issues before the First World War, before the British and Turks were at war, before the Ottoman Empire disintegrated. And I think you have to see the problems in the Balkans, although they don't involve Arabs or Jews, in a similar light. We are constantly trying to cope with what our fathers or our grandfathers did. I wrote the book Great War of Civilization, and my father was a soldier in the First World War which produced the current Middle East - not that he had much to do with that - but he fought in what he believed was the Great War for Civilization.

One of the problems that current leadership has is that in the past they had time to reflect and discuss what they were going to do and how best to deal with a particular situation. Their decisions might have been grotesquely unjust or wrong, but at least they took them based on considered reflections, whether they be in London clubs or Downing Street or while reading Shelley in bed, but at least they had an opportunity to reflect on what they were doing.

Today, we live by press conferences, TV prime time, News at 10, CBS news, ABC, CNN exclusives whatever it might be. We get pumped up by Presidential elections, Primary elections, so policies are made on the move - in the backs of cars, on mobile phones, over drinks before a hurried dinner when you have another press conference afterwards. This is why you have this cult of - and I don't like this phrase - "spin doctors," a man who comes up with an easy phrase. So, instead of having reflective decision making which takes into consideration what will happen tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the year after next, the decision making is taken on the basis on how to respond to some criticism one minute ago based on a Press conference. For this reason, you don't have any long term planning.

That's why we didn't have any plan for post war Iraq, because we were too busy going on CNN announcing victory, so we hadn't thought about that. There is an excellent academic pamphlet by Corelli Barnett, who is a prominent British historian, which goes step by step from archive documents in the British Public Record Office and National Archives from the Cabinet papers of 1941. And Churchill in 1941, when Britain still expected invasion by Nazi Germany, and before Hitler invaded Russia, before America was in the war after two long and profitable years of neutrality, Churchill appointed a Cabinet committee in London under Nazi bombardment to plan the post War government of Occupied Germany. Now, there's forward thinking!

There's a sign of how governments used to behave. Four years before the end of the War, when it looked as if the Germans were going to

win, Churchill and the British, alone without any American involvement in the War, he was planning post War Germany. And as British troops moved under fire into the German city of Cologne in 1945, British Civil Servants in flak jackets went with them to take over the Town Hall, because they wanted civil administration to resume immediately. To get the fuel running, get rationing, get the people fed. It worked, and people didn't die. I mean the Germans were poor and hungry, but they didn't die.

There's a classic example of how before the age of instant television, news press conferences, spin doctors, etc., people planned for the future and generally it tended to work; by and large, it was successful. That was four years before the end of WW2. Four days before the Americans occupied the center of Baghdad, they didn't have a coherent plan. They had an odd committee set up in the State Department, but no one listened to it and it had 20 people. So, you're carried along on this instant decision making: "So, whaddya' gonna' do, Mr. Bush? How do you respond to this?" And Bush has had 5 minutes before hand to bone up on what he is going to say.

We have a program in Britain called Desert Island Discs on the BBC, where basically you are allowed to choose 8 records that you play on a desert island if you were marooned. One of my records I chose was Winston Churchill's speech to the British on June 18, 1940 when Dunkirk was finished, and the British were alone in the War against Nazi Europe. And I played it, because Bush and Blair keep claiming they are Churchill, but here was the real thing. And Churchill's voice immensely tired and maybe he had a few glasses before he spoke, and you have this extraordinary feeling of power and a man who is using his knowledge of history and imbuing it into other people. What knowledge of history does Bush have? He confused Cambodia with Vietnam. He talks about Vietnam but he managed to avoid going there, as we know Cheney did.

You know another problem we have at the moment is that I don't think there's a single senior Western statesmen, which might change if McCain becomes President, who has ever been in a war. All of the Middle Eastern leaders have been in wars, I promise you. But none of the Western leaders have been in war. You see, their knowledge of wars, The Bushes and the Blairs, are from TV, Hollywood movies.

When Churchill committed people to war, he had been in the trenches in WW1. Theodore Roosevelt had direct experience. Eisenhower certainly did, I mean he was Supreme Allied Commander of WW2. So, you had in the post war years, you had Western leadership that knew what war was about: it was about death and screaming and loss and sorrow. Now, for people like Blair whose shadow lingers over the dull and boring Gordon Brown in London, war was a policy option: something you did if you couldn't get in with the United Nations. "Do we need a second revolution or not?" That wasn't the way people used to go to war (Laughs).

One of the things that is lacking today is common sense. Anybody with common sense, anybody who sat down would've said, "Don't - Attack - Iraq." Bush actually did start talking about democracy in Iraq before he invaded, despite what the lefty commentators say, he didn't say we want democracy but he said, "We want democracy in the Middle East." I remember I wrote a piece in November 2002 asking, "He wants a democracy in the Middle East, and he wants to start in Iraq!?" which is not common sense. I think a lot of the problems we have in the moment is a failure to have a long-term view of anything.

Even if you take the Israeli government who says, "We are going to root out the evil weed of terror, terror, terror," I mean they've been saying that since 1948. How many air raids have there been over Lebanon since 1948? Thousands and thousands and thousands. And they've achieved nothing, because still we're told we have to root out the evil weed of terror. Because it gets repeated ad nauseam on television it has become normal. Nobody says, "Hang on a minute, there's a problem here. If Israel's still at war 60 years after it came in existence, there is a problem there."

You have this quote, "There's this misconception that journalists can be objective." You also say, "What journalism is really about..."

I think what I said is "impartial." We should be partial on the side of justice. One of the problems we have in the Middle East in the moment, partly because of the pressure put on journalists particularly in the United States by lobby groups. I'm including the Israeli Lobby, and there is an Arab Lobby, as we know. Partly because of this awful trend of American journalism where you have to give 50% of your time to each side, you end up producing a sort of matrix, a mathematical formula which is bland, lacking in any kind of passion or realism, and is a bit like reading a mathematics problem.

Much of the Middle East is reported like a football match: this side did this, they kicked a goal, they replied back, the ball went through the goal post, etc. Giving equal space in your report to two antagonists is ridiculous! I mean if you were reporting the slave trade in the 18th century you wouldn't give equal time to the slave ship captain, you'd give time to the slaves. If you were present at the liberation of a Nazi extermination camp, you don't give equal time to SS spokesman, you go and talk to the survivors and talk about the victims.

If you were present as I was in 2001 in West Jerusalem when an Israeli pizzeria was blown up and most of the victims were school children. I was just down the street. I reported about the Israeli woman who had a chair leg through her, and an Israeli child who had his eyes blown out. I said in my piece, "What did this child ever do to the Palestinians?" And do you think I gave equal time to the Islamic Jihad spokesman? No, I did not. Nor when I was in Sabra Shatilla [the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon overseen by Ariel Sharon] did I give time to Israeli spokesman? If we walk as ordinary human beings out of our house and we see an atrocity, we are angry. Well, we journalists should be angry too if we feel that way about it. Not say, "Well, on the other hand, we just balance this by X,Y,Z."

Can't someone say that we readily dismiss FOX News as being biased and right wing, then can't we just as readily dismiss you since you're not an objective, unbiased voyeur?

The thing about FOX news is that they have a predetermined version. They aren't interested in justice; they are interested in the "right," aren't they? They're interested in the right wing of the Republican side, unless a Democrat happens to be right wing enough for them. They have a political slant. I'm not left wing. I've never voted in an election in my life. If I'm in the Israeli part of Jerusalem, I write with great passion and you can look up the story in my book *The Great War for Civilization* about the bombing of the Israeli pizzeria.

I was in Bosnia and wrote passionately against the murderous Serbs, I mean those Serbs who were murdering. But if you report on Serbia during the NATO bombing I report with great feeling about the Serb

civilians who were done to death by NATO and knowingly done so. NATO knew they were killing civilians in Serbia during the Kosovo war. And I also reported what was being done to Kosovo Albanians. That's not what FOX News does. FOX News has a certain agenda.

Many of your critics, specifically some Zionist critics, say that you've lived in the Middle East for so long that you've become partial and succumbed to "their" narrative.

Same old, tiresome, boring old thing, you know. This always comes up. If you arrive at a place, and you don't write satisfactory one week after arriving, they say you can't see the woods for the trees. And if you do understand enough after two weeks, they say you've gone native. I haven't risked my life in the most dangerous parts of the world to become a partial reporter politically. I'd be out of my mind if I did that.

By the way, you keep talking about my critics and what the Zionists say. I don't read blogs, because I don't use the Internet because I think it's crap. But I know there are two or three writers in the UK and I know there are three or four in America who regularly attack me, but that's about it. I mean if you see my mailbag which comes in at 250 letters a week, maybe two or three are very critical, and the rest are either nice or helping or suggesting stories. What I'm saying is that one of the problems I have is the people will exaggerate the numbers and say, "Well, your critics say..." which makes it seem there is an army out there of 600 people constantly writing articles and commentary. And, it's not true. There aren't.

I come to the States [on] average every three and half weeks for lectures and I don't come across these people. The last one who was really obnoxious was in Texas for an interview, and the second cameraman came over to me after the program and said he wanted to hit me (Laughs). I said turn back the cameras, and we'll do this live, but be careful when you do. Most people don't care a damn about the Middle East, I'm sorry to say.

In America or the world?

Pretty much everywhere, particularly in America I'm sorry to say. And also in Europe, I mean how much of my daily paper is on the Middle East? And this idea that there is an army of critics or an army of supporters is simply untrue. By and large, people read you and they move on to read something else. What percentage of people read The Independent either online or on paper? I have no idea. I probably get more mail from America than I do from Britain, which is interesting. I'm read in the Arab world as well as in Israel. I think I've had two anonymous phone calls in my life in 32 years both from Turkey objecting to what I've written about the Armenian genocide. One of them was objecting to criticism of the Turkish Army, and one of them was objecting to my coverage of the Armenian Genocide, which obviously occurred a few years before I was born to put it mildly.

There are campaigns occasionally for accuracy, some outfit that operates somewhere in Boston, and you get city postcards from people writing to the editors, "I will never buy you magazine again" signed so and so from Houston, Texas. Firstly, we are not a magazine. Secondly, alas, we do not circulate in Houston, Texas, so this person hasn't been buying it anywhere, but he's just been encouraged to write this silly postcard which goes in the bin. But when you have a campaign organized by a lobby group, you tend to take it seriously in America, we don't. We put it in the rubbish bin. We

are interested in individual, serious letters by people. So am I. I encourage them in the paper. If the letters, especially if they are critical or have a certain mischief about them, I insist we run them, and I think it's good. I think it makes people think and stirs up their idea of questioning about what's going on in the Middle East.

The honest truth is I don't use the internet, so I don't see all the blogs or Googles or whatever they are. I can tell by, obviously, traveling and people coming up to me in airplanes, but I don't pay any attention to it. I'm a journalist and a reporter and one of the great advantages I have on the paper is that my editor likes me to write opinion columns and also wants me to be a street reporter. So, when there's a bombing explosion in Beirut or a war in Iraq, I'm there. Which is in a unique position to be in, because most reporters might be on a story but they don't have an opinion column. And most of the people who write columns don't go out on the beat.

You call them "hotel journalists," correct?

No, that's not true. What I said was that journalists, who worked in Baghdad and who, for perfectly good reasons, were unable to leave their hotels, i.e. security concerns, insurance companies hired by the papers to insure their lives, all their special security detail like the ex-military people who guard them. They find themselves effectively using their mobile phone from their hotel room, a guarded hotel, right? The problem is they don't tell their readers, their listeners, their viewers that they're reporting from the hotel. They give the impression when they give a "Baghdad Dateline" that they're driving around the streets. You find articles written by someone who is sitting in an office with sandbags around the walls and aren't let out.

The much more serious side is that readers are entitled to believe, if they see it, "Dateline: Baghdad" or Basra or whatever - that the reporter has movement. That he can go around and check out stories. But in fact if you read it, it's just a police source that says, "American military says...American government says" and end of story. And it becomes echo chamber for what anyone in the Green Zone says. I mean I can live in the West of Ireland with a mobile phone and ring the Green Zone and produce the same report (Laughs).

They're touted as experts in the American media.

I don't know. Look, I have American colleagues, one of them in the New York Times, who goes out and gets good stories. So, I'm not pasting my criticism on all journalists. There's lots of people trying to do what I'm trying to do. But, I do object to reporters who do not leave their hotels, but do not tell their readers that they do not leave their hotels. That's what I call "hotel journalism." I'm not talking about any reporter on the beat anywhere as being a hotel journalist.

What's happening now as stories get more dangerous in the Middle East - and The Middle East is getting more lethal for reporting - as stories get more dangerous, more and more the Western correspondents are sending the local people out to do the story. In other words, Iraqis are on the streets in Baghdad reporting back to the New York Times reporter what they see. I noticed last year you will remember there was an Al Qaeda type organization that started an uprising in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli and took over apartment blocks. And I jumped in a car, and they had taken over an apartment block in Tripoli and were shooting at the Army, and I raced up to Tripoli. I know Lebanon very well, I mean I've been living there for

almost 32 years. And I got into center Tripoli, which is very Sunni Muslim city, very pro-Saddam I might add with [his] pictures outside the window. And there were bullets whizzing around the streets, and there were dead bodies, the armies were about to storm inside this building.

By pure good luck or bad luck, depending on your point of view, I knew the Lebanese Colonel who was going to take the army unit into this apartment block and storm into it and take it back. I'd been to his wedding, actually, which means I'm his friend (Laughs). "Robert, do you want to come with us?" I didn't use a flak jacket because it is too bloody hot. So, I suddenly found the ridiculous Robert Fisk storming into this building with these soldiers, and I never carry a weapon or flak jacket or anything, and seeing the most incredible things.

Afterwards, I was out there in the street with all these dead bodies on the street. What astounded me was that I was the only Western reporter there. Most of the other reporters were either from Lebanese newspapers or Lebanese working for Western news organizations. I was the only blue eyed, Anglo Saxon guy there. My Western colleagues were there and they were in the hotel, and I'm not criticizing them. What was interesting is that on the very first, critical day of the Al Qaeda take over, I looked around the street and I didn't see another Westerner. There were lots of Lebanese soldiers, policeman, people standing by, other journalists, camera crew, they were all Lebanese. Now, twenty years ago that wouldn't be the case.

You just gave a really good microcosm example of how you're on "the scene." You're one of the very few people who is "lucky" - well, I don't think that is the proper word, I don't even what the proper word is - to meet Osama Bin Laden and have an interview with him.

It's definitely not lucky (Laughs). No, it's not. I'll tell you this guy will follow me for the rest of my life. It's more and more unlucky I'll let you know.

You interviewed him three times in total, and he made some very interesting comments about you. I don't know how you feel about that, but he was quite reverential. In America, we see Osama as the horned devil himself, and in certain parts of the Muslim world...

He sees Mr. Bush pretty much the same way, of course.

Well, certain parts see him as a halo-wearing messiah. Steve Coll has a new book out on Bin Laden, and in my interview with him he told me one of the main reasons for his charismatic leadership is his ability to be multicultural, to understand the ability to look beyond ethnicity and race in his global jihad.

No, that's not - that's a very trendy explanation. It's very simple why Bin Laden is popular in the Arab world; it's because he says things that local presidents and kings won't say.

What does he say?

He speaks about the injustice to Muslim people in a way that Mubarak or King Abdullah would never say. Because of course they're basically run by us, aren't they? He presents what millions of Arabs think. I'm not implying a million of Egyptians and Gulfies want to actually fly airplanes into tall buildings - they don't. But when he describes the collapse of the Caliphate, which was the Ottoman Empire, when he talks

about the immorality of the Gulf princes and kings, when he talks of the political or military or psychological occupation of the Muslim world by the West, he's saying things which millions and millions of Muslims agree with. But they don't hear their own leadership: the Khaddafis, the Mubaraks, or the King Abdullahs, or the Assads saying.

This doesn't mean Bin Laden is particularly intuitively brilliant. I mean Ahmadinejad says a lot of things which are absolutely bullshit, but they probably catch somebody's eye. I mean Ahmadinejad is outrageous, I mean he's a crackpot. When he starts questioning the Jewish Holocaust, it's similar to the Turks questioning the Armenian Holocaust, or the Israelis saying that they never drove the Palestinians out of Palestine, they left on their own accord because they were going to wait until the Jews were driven to the sea and they obeyed all the radio instructions. You know the story.

But, you know, Bin Laden has a voice, because the leadership of the Arab world doesn't have a voice. Or if it does, it's a weak one supporting the United States in general. I mean, the Mubaraks and the Abdullahs are allowed to say, "If the war continues in Gaza, there will be an explosion in the Middle East." That's all right, that's part of the course. They said it 70 times and it doesn't even get reported very often. But the moment they start to talk seriously about the fact that people feel they are under the thumb of the West, which they do, then they are in trouble. I mean the fact we only express our criticism of Mubarak is when the police lock up the wrong person who has a PhD from Boston or Harvard or whatever.

By and large, you see there is no Arab representative. Nor has there been for decades. It's very interesting after the First World War, the Egyptians kept wanting democracy, and they kept saying they wanted the King out. So, the British locked them up. And the same thing happened in Iraq in the 1920's, you know the British arrived after they invaded in 1917 and the Iraqis said, "You encouraged us to want independence, and when we say we want independence, you put us in prison!" Which is true of course.

Naturally, if you go back to the 20's and 30's, where I think a lot of the history also belongs, anyone who wanted a real freedom was imprisoned. So, the only way the Arabs learned you can have a change was through a revolution. Which meant no democracy of course. Meant you did everything in secret, whether you did it in office or clubs or a basement of a mosque is irrelevant. So, the failure of the Arab world to have a democracy is partially our fault.

You have to remember before the First World War, Egyptian academics and thinkers and philosophers were returning from France with the most extraordinary sort of Republican - which I'm using in the French Republic sense - views of liberation, freedom and equality. This is the decade where women didn't want to wear the scarf in Cairo and other cities in Egypt. Where they had willingly embraced the West. You have to go back to the Ottoman Empire, and the biggest, industrial construction in the world was the Suez Canal. It was built by the French but under the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans imported state of the art steam locomotives from Switzerland to Lebanon. In Constantinople, the pashas were learning to paint and play the piano - they wanted to be like us. So we destroyed them. You see? We like it the way it is now. We don't have to have too many occupation armies, but they all do what they're told, and if they don't, then we bomb them.

If Bin Laden's grievances against the U.S. and the West are removed,

and maybe you can tell us his major grievances since you've met him, then...

The world doesn't work like this. Bin Laden justifies his actions on certain grounds. Whether it be the corruption of the Saudi Royal Family, the "Crusaders" to use his phrase, he says "Western forces" in the Muslim World. And remember, one of his achievements is that he's brought Western forces into two more Muslim countries that they weren't in before - Afghanistan and Iraq. And I used the word "achievement" ironically when I said that.

His *raison d'etre* will change, like we all do. To suggest that Bin Laden is out there as a negotiable figure is ridiculous. He doesn't want to negotiate. One of the main problems with Al Qaeda is that there is no negotiation. We still haven't learned that Bin Laden isn't important anymore. He's created Al Qaeda. That's it. It's over. It doesn't matter if he dies of kidney failure, or whether he's bombed or dies of old age or gets bored or gets assassinated or anything else, it's over. Al Qaeda exists. And unless we deal with the injustice in the Middle East, there will always be an Al Qaeda. It might not be called Al Qaeda, it could be called "Al Qaeda Al Ummah," "Al Qaeda Saudia," "Al Qaeda in Iraq." The very word is intrinsically rather boring, its foundation doesn't set me off on a romantic thought. But, I always use the phrase "Al Qaeda-like", which is inspirational but not card membership type connections.

Still we think, "If we capture Bin Laden and Mullah Omar, then we'll be ok." And it's not true. There was a very fine French historian of the First World War, and he did a very good interview in *Le Pointe* some months ago, and he said you know we haven't realized the world has changed militarily. But in the past, after the first and second World Wars, we thought we could have foreign adventures and be free. We could go to Vietnam. No North Vietnamese ever blew themselves up in front of the White House. We went and fought in Korea, but no North Korean soldier came and blew himself up in the London Underground. But today we can't do this anymore, if we send our soldiers into Iraq, we are not saving Gloucester or Denver. That's not going to change. We're not going to back to nice, friendly left wing nationalists who wouldn't dream of setting off bombs in our cities anymore. That's gone.

Whether you regard this as increasing immorality of our opponents that is entirely up to you. But factually, we're not safe at home anymore.

So, this is the future? We have to face the future and this is how it's going to be?

Well, you've got to think of the years to come, not just about the next press conference. We're going back to the same point I made to you earlier.

I had an interview with Seymour Hersh and asked him about Iran's activity in the Middle East. He said Iran is doing what it's always been doing in supporting the Shias. That's what it's doing in Lebanon and in Iraq. Now, you mention Ahmadinejad as being a "crackpot" and...

I think he's a crackpot, yeah.

People say Iran has its fingers in the cookie jar in helping Hezbollah and helping the Iraqi insurgents. Is Iran completely innocent? Should it be attacked? And what would...

You're doing what CNN and FOX do. You're producing a sustained government narrative and then asking a question about it. Yes, they do support Hezbollah financially, militarily, and in training, we know that. Do they support the Iraqi insurgency? Morally perhaps. I mean, mentally they might, but they don't need to teach the insurgents how to blow up vehicles. I mean Iraqi insurgents, many of them in the Army, fought Iranians for 8 years. They know how to blow up vehicles and put bombs together. They don't need help from the Iranians. So, from the start you have to disentangle this conventional wisdom on how Iran is this big, dark nation that is manipulating the Shias through out the Middle East.

I don't think the Shias of Iraq need military help from Iran. I don't think they need money actually. And besides when you have a situation when most of the Iraqi government is beholden to Iran, what the hell are you worried about the insurgents for? When Ahmedinejad took the car from the airport like any normal human being, instead of being flown in armored helicopter, which was quite impressive, the American press didn't make a lot of it, but it's there.

You have to go back again. When the Shah was in power, the West wanted Iran to be nuclear power. He was our policeman in the Gulf, wasn't he? The Shah went to New York and gave an interview saying he wanted Iran to have nuclear weapons, because after all Russia and America had them. And there wasn't a complaint from the White House. In fact, shortly after he met Carter in the White House. And we in Europe, in particular, climbed over each other's shoulders to supply the nuclear hardware to produce nuclear power stations.

When Khomeini came to power and the Islamic Revolution, before the Iran-Iraq War, and I actually was present as he said this in Tehran. He said nuclear weapons are gifts of the devil and we will close them down. And all nuclear installations, and they weren't nuclear weapon installations, they were just nuclear installations for power generation, were closed down under Khomeini's orders. At the height of the Iran-Iraq War in 1986, when Saddam was supported by Britain and the United States, and was using gas, a weapons of mass destruction, against the Iranians, the Iranian High Command came to the conclusion that he was using these weapons, then Khomeini reluctantly reopened the nuclear establishment in Iran as a direct result of our friend Saddam using gas and chemicals. Which in some cases were supplied by companies on the East Coast of the United States. That's what put the Iranians in the nuclear game.

Now, when you see it from this historical perspective, they're getting a bit of the raw deal, aren't they? All the mullahs want their hands on weapons (Laughs.) That wasn't the case originally. I don't see any particular reason why the Iranians want to make nuclear weapons at the moment. Because if they fire a weapon at Tel Aviv, they know Tehran will be destroyed. On the other hand, if you look at North Korea, quite clearly you will not be invaded if you have a nuclear weapon. Then again, you have to stand back and look at the long term and ask, are we, or our children or our grandchildren, our future generations always going to around saying, "Well, he can have nuclear weapons, because he is nice and is on our side on the War on Terror and his name is Musharaff. And they can't have nuclear weapons because they have turbans on."

I mean are we going to do this A-B-C joke every year deciding who may or may not have these things. If we deal with a world that deals about justice, and this can apply to Eastern Europe, the Far East, Latin America, or the Middle East, the whole institute of worrying about

nuclear weapons begins to diminish. After the rising of 1798 in Ireland, where I am now, every Irishman who was found even to have a pitchfork that could be used as a weapon was hanged. But, in pubs you can see them on the walls. Because it's become irrelevant. There's this peace here. If you go to England, you can find swords from the English Civil War. Well, if in the aftermath of that war and we're talking about the 17th century, if you had been found with that sword, you would've been executed. But now it's in a pub on the wall of a bar.

You know, I'm not trying to be naïve when I say this, but with the whole issue of nuclear weapons, once the purpose of the weapon has disappeared, the weapon is pointless. If Iran didn't feel itself surrounded by the Americans, which it is because the Americans are in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Gulf, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, I mean I don't think they'd worry so much about defending Iran. Although, of course, you realize getting rid of the Taliban and Saddam, both enemies of Iran, means Iran basically won the American war in Iraq. You've got to start your questions not with a narrative: "Are they supporting the Iraqi insurgency?" Probably not. "Are they supporting Hezbollah?" Definitely. But, then again who is supporting the Israelis? The Americans.

There's no doubt that the missile which the Hezbollah fired at that Israeli gunboat in the 2006 war, which almost sank it by the way, was from Iran. But don't tell me that the bombs dropped on Hezbollah weren't from the United States, they were of course. With all these questions you're asking me, and I'm not trying to be critical of you, you need to go three steps back where you start asking the questions.

And there's nothing worse than the immortal phrase, 'I never said that.' Because people say, 'Ah, that's what he says now.' And you'll be surprised at the number of people, who might be quite sympathetic to what you're saying, who manage to blunder into one single quote which they [an interviewer] slightly touch up or forget something quite innocently, and I am fighting off the problems that creates for the next 6 months long after you've forgotten ever talking to me. So, please, please be careful and make sure you're very accurate in what I say, and it's balanced out.

I'll keep it very fair. I'll quote you, and I won't delete a word.

Fine. That's all I need to hear.

http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/04/fisk_talks_abou.php
