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Ellie Kirzner on lessons from Robert Fisk

By ELLIE KIRZNER

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Crowds filled the Bloor Street United Church the night of Monday, January 21, right up to the second balcony's Gothic arches, to hear Middle East oracle Robert Fisk do a job on Western foreign policy obfuscations.

The multiple-award-winning reporter for The Independent in England, who has covered everything from the Iranian revolution in the 70s and the Lebanese civil conflict to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and counts Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden among his interview subjects, is easily the world's most famous foreign correspondent – which means he's earned the right to make caustic comments about how foreign affairs departments chronically get the Muslim world dead wrong.

"We think we know their history better than they do," he complains. Or put another way: "If Tony Blair has such a close relationship with God, why didn't God give him any advice [on Iraq]?"

Sitting a little nearer to God myself, way up in the rafters, I look down at the globe-trotting icon in his sedate grey crewneck sweater and feel a titch envious – a stay-at-home journo's quiet reflection on Fisk's brilliant ease in international hot spots.

This is a world-class raconteur, I think, maybe what comes from four decades of meeting interesting players in dramatic circumstances. It certainly offers him licence to say with gravitas what might sound self-righteous in other mouths: journalism is about being "neutral and impartial on behalf of those who suffer."

So here are some of the Beirut-based Brit's kaleidoscopic insights.

Mali: "It's not part of the war on terror; it's a civil war." Syria: "We have a habit of saying if someone is evil, they are going to lose. Seventy per cent of Aleppo, which is bigger than Damascus, is with Bashar." Palestine: "There will not be a Palestine state– there is no room." Egypt: "Give Morsi a chance. He's only had 100 days."

"We must stop sending our M1A1 tanks, Apache helicopters and M16s," he says. "The Arab world doesn't belong to us."

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