Robert Fisk on the Imperialist War in Africa

Robert Fisk

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Algeria, Mali, and why this week has looked like an obscene remake of earlier Western interventions

We are outraged not by the massacre of the innocents, but because the hostages killed were largely white, blue-eyed chaps rather than darker, brown-eyed chaps

Odd, isn’t it, how our “collateral damage” is different from their “collateral damage”. Speaking yesterday to an old Algerian friend in the aviation business, I asked him what he thought of his country’s raid on the In Amenas gas plant. “Brilliant operation, Robert,” he shouted down the phone. “We destroyed the terrorists!” But what about their deaths, I asked? “Poor guys,” he replied. “We had thousands of women and children killed in our war [in the 1990s] – terrible tragedy – but we are fighting terrorism.”

And there you have it. Our dead men didn’t matter in the slightest to him. And he had a point, didn’t he? For we are outraged today, not by the massacre of the innocents, but because the hostages killed by the Algerian army – along with some of their captors – were largely white, blue-eyed chaps rather than darker, brown-eyed chaps. Had all the “Western” hostages – I am including the Japanese in this ridiculous, all-purpose definition – been rescued and had the innocent dead all been Algerian, there would have been no talk yesterday of a “botched raid”.

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Map of Mali where French imperialistic forces are bombing the country in several regions. The war is spreading to neighboring Algeria. A photo by Pan-African News Wire File Photos on Flickr.

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If all those slaughtered in the Algerian helicopter bombing had been Algerian, we would have mentioned the “tragic consequences” of the raid, but our headlines would have dwelt on the courage and efficiency of Algeria’s military rescuers, alongside interviews with grateful Western families.

Obscene

Racism isn’t the word for it. When George W Bush and Lord Blair of Kut al-Amara kicked off their war crimes with a full-scale invasion of Iraq, we didn’t care a damn about the Iraqis. Ten thousand dead in a year? Twenty thousand? Or as George Bush said, “Thirty thousand, more or less.” More or less what? But no problems with our precious dead. We know, for example, that since the Bush-Blair Iraqi adventure began, exactly 4,486 American military personnel died in the war.

So you know whom we care about. And whom we don’t care about. Watch carefully in the coming weeks, therefore, for the growing “Roll of Honour” of French troops in Mali, interviews in the French press with their relatives, statistics of the wounded. And don’t waste your time searching for details of dead Nigerian soldiers — or, indeed, dead Malian soldiers — because there will be no details of their sacrifice.

From the Middle East, the whole thing looks like an obscene television remake of our preposterous interventions in other parts of the world. French troops will be in Mali for only “several weeks”, Hollande and his cronies tell us. Isn’t that what we said when British troops first appeared on the streets of Northern Ireland, and then spent decades fighting there? Isn’t that what the Israelis said when they marched into Lebanon in 1982 and stayed for another 18 years? Isn’t this what we thought when we invaded Afghanistan? That our chaps might not even hear a shot fired in anger?

It was incredible to watch that old rogue Bernard Kouchner this week, mischievously demanding that British troops on the ground in Mali assist in France’s fight against Islamist “terror”. His eyes were alight with both cynicism and patriotism — a peculiarly French characteristic — as he played his 1914 entente cordiale “we’ll-be-in-Timbuktu-by-Christmas” routine. But why are “we”, the West, in Mali? How many readers — hands up, oh virtuous and honest folk, could actually name the capital of Mali two weeks ago?

I called up another friend, a French ex-legionnaire, yesterday. Why was France in Mali, I asked? “Well, they say that the Islamists would have reached Bamako and there would have been a Taliban-in-Kabul situation, a state that had fallen into extremist hands. But I myself don’t understand. Mali is an artificial state whose northern inhabitants, especially the Tuaregs, have always refused to be ruled by a black government in the south. It’s tribal, with a veil of ‘Islamism’ over the top of it — and now how do we get ourselves out of this mess?”

Disdain

Maybe we should ask Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the presumed “mastermind” — note the comic-cuts language we have to use for these vagabonds — of the Algerian raid. This is the “legendary” — again, note the adjective — “Mr
Marlboro”, whose interest in contraband and semtex explosive belts seems to outweigh his duties to Islam. North African journalists know a lot about Belmokhtar and his cross-border trade in cigarettes, weapons, 4x4s, drugs, diamonds and illegal migrants, and they are also appalled that Algeria – Belmokhtar’s own birthplace – should now be involved in the Western crusade in Mali.

France’s overflights have been bitterly criticised in the Algerian press – a fact largely ignored in London where “wars on terror” take precedence over local Algerian opinion – as a symbol of Algerian humiliation at the hands of the country’s former colonisers.

But why should we care about the Algerians when they treat our dead with the disdain we have always shown for the Muslim dead of Iraq, Afghanistan or, for that matter, Palestine? Syria, please note, is temporarily in a different category, since our desire to destroy Bashar al-Assad allows us to turn all his victims into honorary Westemers. Odd, that. For among the rebels facing the ruthless Assad are folk very similar to Mr Belmokhtar and his merry Islamists, the very men who rouse the anger of Crusader Kouchner.


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