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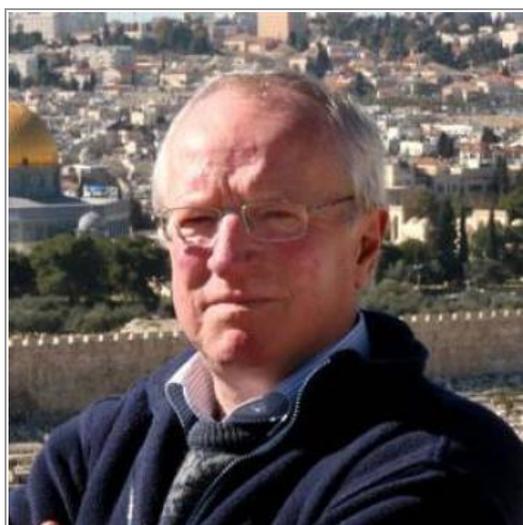
PROFILE

## Covering the 'war on terror': In conversation with Robert Fisk

BY PAUL WEINBERG | JANUARY 22, 2013

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It is Monday morning January 21 and here I am sitting in downtown Toronto on a comfy white CBC couch with Robert Fisk, the most famous foreign correspondent in the world.

This veteran Beirut-based reporter for the UK newspaper, *the Independent*, has just provided among other things a spirited commentary on the latest bound-to-fail military interventions into Muslim lands by the west, this one in

Mali, on the morning radio, The Current.

Then, it is my turn to chat with Fisk, courtesy of the Montreal based Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, which sponsors these cross-Canada tours on a regular basis. It aims to provide different perspectives from various experts on the raging conflicts in that region and where Canadian foreign policy may fit in, positively or negatively.

In appearance, Fisk releases the information at a furious pace to get every bit out before our time is up. This is an easy interview, I tell myself. And the seriousness is leavened by a sense of humour that reminds me of John Cleese in Monty Python at times.

But being in his 60s, the man looks a bit weary. Too polite to ask, I just let it go. But I wonder afterward if Fisk has spent too many long days interviewing tyrants, military officers, dissident intellectuals and just ordinary citizens. How long can he keep up this pace? "These trips [away from Beirut] are very short, three or four days, and then I'm back," he states, almost to assure me.

Fisk's beat, when it comes down to it, is the collateral damage of what he calls "the unnecessary" war on terror, waged in Washington, Ottawa, London, Paris, Moscow, etc.

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Mali, Fisk notes, is the latest manifestation of how a toxic brew of lingering internal ethnic and regional disputes and lucrative mining and oil resources in a developing country can get conflated by powerful elites in the west to fit a simple narrative of virtuous versus evil narrative— the later being a small group of maniacal Islamists. "We have this solution in the west that if we identify the bad guys, the good guys are going to win."

The problem happens when our supposed allies turn nasty and are just as capable of performing awful acts, the journalist points out, be it the ethnic cleansing by the French assisted local army in Mali or the no negotiations with hostage takers approach, the Algerian army displayed in the massacre at the Amenas gas plant. "In the fighting against terror, everybody gets killed," says Fisk.

"It is all Hollywood," says the British born journalist, speaking of the war on terror story that gets "reinforced" night after night in the daily news and major broadcast outlets and in the end, he notes, justified disastrous military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan -- where countless lives have been lost.

"We are not manufacturing consent -- as Noam Chomsky says. It is continuing consent, we are part of it; it is part of what we do. We breathe in this language from authority and we put it out again."

Fisk is not casting aspersions on all media organizations. He is a reporter for a major newspaper, after all. No, he is referring to the powerful opinion shaping outlets like CNN and the *New York Times*.

"If you go into a television newsroom everyone is reading a newspaper, if you go into a newspaper, everybody is watching television."

Another observation he makes is that none of the leading politicians in the west -- presumably he is including Stephen Harper, Barack Obama, David Cameron and Francois Hollande -- have personally experienced war and so, he tells me, have "no concept of war; no concept of things that always go wrong."

Fisk, whose father was a military man, notes that aside from Korea and Vietnam, the Cold War between the U.S. and Soviet dominated blocs represented in retrospect a relatively peaceful period, compared to the war on terror, which U.S. president George Bush maintained while in office would last "forever."

"For years after the second World War we had leaders [like U.S. president Dwight Eisenhower] who knew that lives depended on their decisions and the consequences."

The French government's assertion that its military will be in and out Mali in an expeditious period of time reminds Fisk of similar mistaken and foolish promises made in earlier wars turned quagmires -- for example by the British in North Ireland in 1969 and later by the Israelis in Lebanon in 1982.

Fisk has spent time covering the activities of some of the most brutal militaries -- including Syrian President Bashar al-Assad soldiers as well as rebel opposition forces in Syria who are also liable to do dastardly things in terms of war crimes and human rights violations.

But despite predictions of his demise, the Assad government has staying power because it continues to surprisingly receive support from both majority Sunnis, as well as the minority Christian and Alawite community and is now seeking to entice some of the rebel fighters back into its fold.

And the minorities, perhaps fearful of the Islamist nature of some of the Syrian

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opposition, are sticking with the Assad regime, says Fisk.

"Just as we say we won't go in and help the rebels [in Syria] are we going in to help rescue the Christians when they are not with us -- and the Christians know that."

Fisk is loath, as someone with considerable profile, to pretend that he can provide advice to the powerful to mend their ways.

"I never give advice; I am just a journalist," he maintains. "The British have been giving advice to the Irish for 800 years, to the Americans for 300 years, we spend our lives giving advice to people, which [is] very often completely wrong."

But Fisk has engendered controversy for his provocative statements. "Remember that people will pore through what you quote me saying," he warns upon leaving the room for another interview gig.

*Paul Weinberg is a Toronto-based freelance writer.*

*Photo: The Independent*

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