



Assassinated al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden "is a bit of an albatross around my neck," Robert Fisk tells me at Edmonton's Union Bank Inn, about the man he famously interview three times. "Long after he's been murdered [and I] want to talk about the Arab Awakening, which started just before he was murdered, and it's back to bin Laden again. I hope in 20 years' time that bin Laden would have faded from my memory as well as other people's."

In the world of journalism, Fisk is a rock star, not just for the "songs" he's written, but for the people he's shared the stage with, including bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini. Based in Beirut since 1976, Fisk writes for

London's *Independent*, and for over four decades he's covered the Iranian Revolution, the Lebanese Civil War, the USSR's occupation of Afghanistan and virtually every war or conflict in West and Central Asia. Having authored five books, including his classic *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, and received more British and international awards than any other journalist, Fisk frequently defines his role not to "write the first draft of history," but, by quoting Israeli journalist Amira Hass, "to monitor the centres of power."

Currently on tour across Canada with the Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, Fisk was in Edmonton on January 31 for the University of Alberta's International Week, delivering a talk called "Arab Awakening, But Are We Hearing the Truth?" The day before he arrived, Russia and Iran claimed that Israel had bombed Syria, with CBC claiming the target was an arms convoy headed to Lebanon. When I ask him how Western press would have treated the story if Syria had bombed a military target inside Israel, instead of the reverse, he laughs.

"Had Syria bombed some military site in Israel which it said was a threat to it, or if it thought Israel was going to arm the rebels so it wanted to stop a convoy of missiles, this would be regarded as virtually an attack on the United States," Fisk says. "Although Mr Obama is in no mood to be involved in yet another war. The Americans have lost Iraq. They're losing Afghanistan. The French, be sure, will lose Mali. I think Mr Obama, whatever he does in the other four years, he would like to have a quieter time."

According to Fisk, the claim from some Americans that Obama simply needed a second term to accomplish a progressive international agenda is—given history and political expediency—blatantly false as Obama made no comment about the Middle East during the inaugural address.

"If he even thinks about dealing with the Middle East, the next presidential contender in the Democrats will say, 'Oh, please, Obama! Don't bring up Israel and Palestine!' It'll be the same thing."

As to the effects of the alleged Israeli attack on Syria, Fisk argues that had the attack gone the other direction, "one [effect] would be the beginning of World War Three," but the attack as executed is reported as "just [another] part of the civil war, and we all know why. ... When bodies are found, the rebels say it's the government, the government says it's the rebels, and both sides have committed pretty awful atrocities, so we don't know."

What Fisk says is hardest to believe about the current Western take on the attack is the existence of Syria's motive. "There's a line coming now that the Syrians were sending ground-to-air missiles to [Lebanese political party and militia] Hezbollah in a convoy, that this is what the Israelis hit. This is Western diplomats, anonymous, usual suspects, the mountebanks and so on [who are saying this]. I find this a bit strange given the fact that I know quite a lot about Hezbollah's weapons, that Syria, when it needs weapons desperately in order to go on fighting, should actually be generously donating missiles, of all things, to the Hezbollah when they've got a lot of their own."

That being said, Fisk argues Israel's motives for allegedly attacking Syria are also difficult to understand. "The Israelis have remained silent about Syria," he says. "They've only made one condemnation of the slaughter of 60 000 people. ... There's no doubt that prior to the Arab Awakening, Israel was very happy to deal with the Arab dictators."

Just before former US-backed Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak fell from power, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu as well as King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia "called Obama desperately pleading with him to keep Mubarak. The [Syrian dictatorial] Assad family had been there a long time. For the Israelis, these were people they knew, they could 'do business with,' as the old cliché goes. And I think Israel would far rather have Assad running a stable Syria than a Syria that may be falling apart and produce another," he adds in a spooky voice, "Islamist state, or Caliphate, whatever you like to call it. I don't see why Israel would want to put its foot in there."

Fisk adds that the Arab and Iranian reactions to the attack are laughable. "When we hear there'll be retaliation, every Arab state that's bombed by Israel announces there'll be retaliation 'in their own time,' i.e., probably not [laughs], you

see? I watch the TV networks with my usual skepticism and horror and cynicism, and that's what happened this morning: 'We've just had word that Iran is threatening retaliation!' Hold on. Excuse me. Give me a break."

As for bin Laden, Fisk is clear that al-Qaeda's late murderer-in-chief knew in his final years that his own influence had plummeted. Bin Laden, says Fisk, saw the birth of the Arab Awakening "in which not a single al-Qaeda flag and not a photograph of bin Laden was ever seen—I was in the streets of Cairo. He must have realized the young people had not followed him. And you had [Egyptian doctor and current al-Qaeda leader Ayman] al-Zawahiri saying, 'Oh, we support the Egyptian people!' Pff. Nobody cared."

Bin Laden may have despaired the collapse of his network into a band of Muslims who spent most of their time slaughtering other Muslims instead of occupation forces. Fisk himself said as much in print, and according to bin Laden emails that were released, bin Laden requested that his American deputy in Yemen send him a translation of Fisk's article accusing al-Qaeda of having become the most sectarian organization in the world.

"I have no idea what bin Laden's reaction to [the translation] was," says Fisk. "But he did read it. It got sent to him in Abbottabad. He referred to me a couple of times in one of his audio tapes, presumably made in Abbottabad. He said that if the White House wants to know what al-Qaeda thinks," he says grimly, knowing the grotesquerie of such a commendation, "they have only to ask Robert Fisk."

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