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Journalist Robert Fisk illuminates the Middle East

by CHARLIE SMITH on JAN 31, 2013 at 3:28 AM

STORY



Robert Fisk says the war in Syria is designed to weaken Iran.

A LEGENDARY MIDDLE East journalist offered up blunt truths about the often war-torn region

Robert Fisk, who writes for the U.K.-based independent newspaper, says the public should be wary of the media use clichés like *security*, *moderates*, *extremists*, *war on terror*, and *peace process*.

“They actually confuse people,” Fisk told the *Georgia Straight* by phone from Montreal. “There isn’t a peace process. It doesn’t work. It’s a failure. And occupation means what it says—it means that foreign soldiers are in your streets.”

Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East is sponsoring a cross-country series of lectures by Fisk, including an appearance on Saturday (February 2) at St. Andrew’s–Wesley Church in Vancouver. (It’s also sponsored by Building Bridges Vancouver.)

Fisk said that a primary issue in the region is advancing justice and human dignity, but that that has not traditionally been part of the media discourse. He noted that leaders who are disliked by western governments are usually called “dictators”, but that the term is not generally applied to authoritarian allies, such as deposed Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak or Tunisian ex-president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. He included the government of Algeria in this camp, noting that it tortures civilians as well as Islamists.

Now the West, including Canada, is supporting the Malian army, which he claimed is engaging in revenge killings in newly liberated towns.

“We know, of course, in the north there are many reports of some executions and amputations by the Islamists,” Fisk stated. “But already we’ve started allying ourselves to some very, very dodgy allies. One of my questions is ‘What is the so-called war on terror?’ ”

He pointed to the war in Syria as another example of a situation where things aren’t as they seem. He declared that this conflict is really about containing Iran, a Shiite Muslim and non-Arab country.

Fisk suggested that Sunni Arab nations—including Saudi Arabia, other Persian Gulf countries, Jordan, and, to a lesser extent, Egypt—regard Iran as a dangerous opponent. Meanwhile, he added, the West is convinced that Iran wants to manufacture nuclear weapons, even though there is, in his opinion, no convincing evidence of this.

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Iran's two major allies in the Arab world are the Lebanon-based Hezbollah and the Alawite-controlled government of Syria, led by Bashar al-Assad. The Alawites are a Shiite minority who comprise 10 percent of Syria's population.

He claimed that Israel tried without success to demolish Hezbollah, which is also Shiite, when it attacked Lebanon in 2006. And now many in the region are ganging up on Syria.

"I believe that much of the support given to the rebels to overthrow Bashar al-Assad is an attempt to destroy Iran's only Arab ally," he said.

Many in the West believe that Syria is also supported by the Shiite-controlled government of Iraq, but Fisk said it's not quite that simple.

"The fears of the Gulf States—which are Sunni—that the Iranians will just control the Baghdad government have not really been fulfilled," he maintained. "Iraqis are not Iranians. They are Arabs. And they don't want to be ruled from Tehran. Even the great Shiite teaching houses in Najaf, Karbala, Kufa, for example, inside Iraq do not necessarily have perfect relations with the large Shiite scholars housed in, for example, Qom in Iran."

Fisk predicted that the death toll will mount in Syria because Assad is not going to flee like Moammar Gadhafi did in Libya. The veteran reporter also stated that the Syrian army's morale remains high, despite the continuing carnage.

In September, Fisk spent time with Syrian soldiers on the front lines and observed how they remained united. "It wasn't an Alawite army," he said. "I was with an explosives officer who was Christian, an intelligence officer who was Druze. There were Sunni and Alawite generals together."

He claimed that Assad is highlighting the deaths of soldiers to win support for his government. In addition, Fisk said, people in the West often misunderstand Russia's interest in Syria, which lies to the southwest of Moscow, below Chechnya.

"For the Kremlin, what's happening in Syria is a repeat version of what has happened in Chechnya and, to some extent, what did happen in Bosnia," he stated.

Fisk noted that former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, the father of Bashar, used to worry about the Bosnian civil war because that country's sectarian makeup was very similar to Syria's. "His fear was there would be another Bosnia in Syria—and indeed there is, now."

Fisk, who's based in Beirut, said that Israeli government officials don't want an Islamist government in Damascus. "All along, they have felt that the Assad family could eventually make peace, so they will be quite happy if Assad, in some form, survives," he stated. "Only once, just once, in the past two years have the Israelis condemned the atrocities in Syria."

He also suggested that American influence in the region has declined sharply because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Obama administration's failure to persuade Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to halt a never-ending land grab in the West Bank.

"I don't think there's room for what the awful Tony Blair calls a 'viable Palestinian state'," Fisk said. "It can't exist."



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V.E. Perkins, Ph.D.

JAN 31, 2013 at 10:51 AM

What Fisk is saying is true. The Sunni states in the Gulf will do anything they can to overthrow the Iranian regime and U.S. policy has the same goal. The truth is the Iranians have every reason to hate us. The CIA overthrew the only democratic government Iran ever had in 1953, in order to get control of Iran's oil fields, and installed the Shah and his brutally repressive government (which the U.S. press went out of its way to present attractively). Iranians know the United States was at the bottom of their misery. And it still is. Within the terms of the NPT, Iran is within its rights to enrich uranium for civilian use and there is NO EVIDENCE that it intends to build nuclear weapons. Just as it did in Iraq, it is U.S. policy to claim WMD in order to build up the propaganda basis for the next war-- which will be against the long-suffering people of Iran.

19      5      Rating: +14

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Stephen Rees

JAN 31, 2013 at 12:42 PM

"the West is convinced that Iran wants to manufacture nuclear weapons, even though there is, in his opinion, no convincing evidence of this."

Hard to believe that all the activity around Isfahan with all those centrifuges is entirely peaceful "research" into nuclear energy - when Iran has plenty of other sources of energy including oil, coal and hydro power. And they could buy nuclear power plants off the shelf, if they really needed them.

And it is not hard to believe that the regime in Teheran is opposed to the existence of the state of Israel - since they are quite voluble on that subject.

9      14      Rating: -5

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mark delmege

JAN 31, 2013 at 10:15 PM

20% enrichment for medical 3% for power. Though I am anti nuclear I respect Iran's rights to reprocess and to build power stations - I can see the logic though I think it is a mistake to do so. I don't believe either the Israeli Govt or even the Americans think Iran is trying to build a bomb any more than they thought Iraq had WMD's. But it serves a purpose from their perspective and the long game is to make Iran another neoliberal puppet - just like they have every where else. In the process they drive the Iranian Govt into repression and harm its people and slow its economic development - which is all part of the plan. As for Israel the only proper solution is one country and democratic rights for all. That could make for a superb outcome where all sides could find international respect and prosperity and help the region fulfill the aspirations of its people. There is no other just outcome that I can see.

7      9      Rating: -2

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George

FEB 1, 2013 at 11:57 PM

Fisk illuminating? Hardly, he is an apologist for the brutal dictators and Islamists. Over 60,000 people have been murdered in Syria to date and Fisk says everything is ok, except for the West meddling? Israel kills one terrorist and he cries genocide. How many demonstrations have there been worldwide by the so-called peace and human rights activists against the slaughter in Syria?

None! Not even one. The Georgia Straight is a disgrace for praising this man

3 20 Rating: -17

NoEnbridge

FEB 2, 2013 at 1:27 PM

lol: "Israel kills one terrorist and he cries genocide"!!! (What a silly comment!) Correction: Israel kills innocent civilians and is occupying land illegally and violating Palestinian's human rights!

10 10 Rating: 0

John-Albert Eadie

FEB 3, 2013 at 10:37 PM

Fisk as usual tells the bald truth.

2 3 Rating: -1

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