

Tape 2  
00:18:47

Question: I'd like for you to talk a little about the shortcomings in the American media in covering the Middle East. Could you tell me a little about this?

Robert Fisk: Well um it needs a lot of time cause there are an awful lot of shortcomings but basically I think that American journalism is very much to use Shakespeare's phrase "Cabin cribbed confined" by the traditions of old style journalism where you have to give fifty percent of your reporting to one side fifty percent to the other side. Uh my belief is that's ok if your reporting a football match or a public inquiry into getting a new turnpike through farmland, but when you're dealing with a massive tragedy like the Middle East a journalist has a duty as well as a right to talk and concentrate on the victims... those who suffer.

Um this is not a football game in the Middle East. When we see an atrocity anywhere in the world we feel angry... all human beings do. Journalists have the right to be angry too... I believe we do. And if I was covering the slave trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> century I wouldn't give equal time to the slave ship captain... if I was present at the liberation of a Nazi extermination camp I wouldn't give equal time to the SS... we'd talk to the victims.

The pizzeria Palestinian suicide bombing August of 2001 in Jerusalem I was quite close and I saw an Israeli woman with a chair leg through her, a kid with no eyes, I didn't give equal time to Palestinian excuses for the suicide bomber. At the Sabashtir (sp?) massacre up to 1,700 Palestinians were killed by Israel's allies... I didn't give equal time to the Israeli army.

I think on top of this is the fear among American journalists... that they will – and its not an idle fear it's a real one – that the moment they make serious criticism of Israel they will be accused of being anti-Semitic... which when used against honest and decent people is an outrage... it's a slander and a libel. I always say that people who use it in that way will make anti-Semitism respectable when it shouldn't be made respectable. It's outrageous. But it shouldn't be used as a political weapon against those people who criticize Israel. Unfortunately, many journalists, not just American but principally American are so frightened of being given that label – even though they know they're innocent – that they emirate their reporting on the Middle East. They refer to the Israeli wall as a fence of a security barrier. They talk about occupation as a disputed territories instead of as occupied territories. They talk about neighborhoods instead of colonies for Jews and Jews only on Arab land. And in this way we dessemanticize the conflict, which is a terrible tragedy for both peoples, but primarily for the Palestinians because they're the people who are being occupied and they're losing more human beings than the Israelis are. And on top of that it also makes the Palestinians generically violent cause if you say "oh this is just about a fence or a dispute, something you could solve over a cup of tea then anyone who throws a stone becomes a generically violent person and is therefore incapable of negotiation. So journalists participate in this. And I think that this osmotic parasitic relationship between power - the president – and the journalists huddling up to get some of that power, embedding themselves in the military, is a very dangerous um development, its not a new development at all, I mean you could see this ever since the second world war. But today in the Middle East with this incendiary

situation it needs better... better moral standing, better ethical work by journalists than we're seeing.

Question: Could you talk a little about the difference between journalism in the Middle East in America versus Great Britain... How the British media such as the BBC or anything on Reuters differs in covering the Middle East than American, New York Times, AP Wire, Washington Post.

Fisk: Well it's a sign of the times that the BBC, which is generally pretty bland and dull should be so outstandingly good compared to CNN or Fox News. It tells you a lot about American coverage that the BBC own coverage, which is pretty third rate, should look so wonderful. Um but at least it has a certain element of fairness about it, it does not adopt the narrative and the policies of the US administration, which certainly Fox News does, and is known to and that is why it is favored by the Bush administration. Once a television channel becomes the voice of the government its no longer journalism, it's just a spokesman. Up to a point the BBC is not a spokesman for the British government. Although there were times in the Iraq invasion of 2003 when they started talking about the "Allies", the word we used about the winners of the Second World War, as being the armies, which were invading Iraq, "the Allies". Just as we portrayed of course in our newspapers Saddam as the Hitler of the Tigris river. Um but no I think generally European papers, not just British papers are much less afraid of lobby groups. You know if we get a letter writing campaign to my newspaper against me or anyone else over Middle East coverage... and all letters are coming in the same, they're obviously a campaign, unlike the New York Times and the Washington Post, we don't reply to each one and send off emails and invite them to send delegations to discuss it. We get all the letters and we put them in a big bin marked rubbish and that's the end of the problem.

Question: Could you give a little advice to younger journalists who are coming up and want to cover the Middle East. How they should start covering it, what they should do.

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Fisk: Challenge authority, always, especially when it goes to war. Especially when it uses lies to do it and it's going to kill people. To quote that very fine Israeli journalist Amir Ahas of Harrett's Newspaper "Monitor the centers of power, that's what our job is." If a journalist find that the editor doesn't want to print what he's writing as a result of this challenge then he should find another newspaper and if that means he has to be out of work for a bit or accept a lower paid job, that's what he should do. I could earn a lot more money myself, I'm not earning that huge amount of salary by working for newspapers, which would not give me the freedom to write which I have. But I prefer the freedom and less money. If you're going to take the money otherwise and just say "well I have to change this bit of the report and soften that bit and leave this bit out then you might as well go drive a bus or work in a bank or run a shopping mall.

Question: Tell me about your book.

00:25:00

Fisk: Well, my book is not a chronology of Middle East history, it goes backwards and forwards and it's very much my own eyewitness of events, wars, torture, suffering, the dead in war, air

raids. I take the reader right up in the Iranian front lines under shell fire and the Iraqi front lines. And you see Saddam, you see me shaking hands with Saddam, you see me meet Osama Bin Laden and the reader follows me there. And I try to sort of take the reader on my shoulder and say “you won’t believe what you’re going to see over there look at that. Look at that aircraft that’s bomber there” and I describe the scene of the bombing, what happens to the people underneath. It was a very distressing book to write. Very depressing because after about page 140 it’s a pretty powerful epic of suffering, torture and police states, dictatorship and secret policemen and betrayal and foreign invasion. When I got to the end of it I was surprised I could make it. And I was surprised I had survived the last thirty years. I got in a taxi in Beirut the other day and I was talking to a friend of mine about the book. The driver turned around and said, “Mr. Robert do you remember me I used to take you around Beirut during the war.” And I said, “My god you’re lucky to be alive.” And he turned around and said, “So are you! You’re lucky to be alive”