



Part 1 of 2

The betrayal of the Middle East:

A postscript

Failure to distinguish between absolute evil, semi-evil, corruption, cynicism and hubris, produced strange mirages. Regimes which we favored always possessed "crack" army divisions, "elite" security units and were sustained by fatherly and much-revered ruling families. Regimes we wished to destroy were equipped only with third-rate troops, mutineers, defectors, corrupt cops and blighted by ruling families.

Egypt, with its political prisoners, its police torture and fake elections, was a tourist paradise. Syria, with its political prisoners, police torture and fake elections, would like to be a tourist paradise. Iraq, with its political prisoners, police torture and fake elections, was not—and did not wish to be—a tourist paradise.

These were the last two paragraphs that Robert wrote before his death on Oct. 30, 2020. They were part of the final chapter of this book, on the subject of the Western media's coverage of the Middle East and its relationship with the Western political elite.

The problem is that there is an osmotic relationship between journalists and power and they feed on each other. If journalists betray that osmotic relationship, they will be thrown out of the press pack. Not only by governments but by the other journalists, Robert told Eva Salinas of Open Canada on Nov. 8, 2019. One of the reasons I get an awful lot of flak for the stories I write is

that if I don't keep to the general journalistic version of what's going on, I am [seen as] betraying [others].

Robert wrote about the responsibility of journalists and the manipulation of language in reporting, that distorts the truth. He wrote of the Western media's



Insight

Nelofer Pazira-Fisk

The writer is a director, actor, journalist and author. The piece is extracted from *Night of Power: The Betrayal of the Middle East* by Robert Fisk (4th Estate, 2024). Copyright © Robert Fisk 2024; Foreword © Patrick Cockburn 2024; Postscript © Nelofer Pazira-Fisk 2024.

deliberate use of language to accommodate a double standard: when protesters in Libya, Syria and Iran are being shot at, it is a "massacre"; but when protesters are shot at in Bahrain or Saudi Arabia or Egypt under Sisi, it is a "crackdown." The mainstream media in the West dances around words, obfuscating their meaning simply to avoid controversy or offending centers of power.

In the Western context, power and the media is about words - and the use of words. It is about semantics. It is about the employment of phrases and clauses and their origins. And it is about the misuse of history; and about our ignorance of history. More and more today, we journalists have become prisoners of the language of power.

Israeli journalist Amira Hass was one of the greatest influences in Robert's life. He often quoted her as saying that the job of a journalist is to "challenge centers of power". Holding powers to account and challenging their authority, Robert argued that governments and politicians do not have a monopoly over truth, yet they act as if they do.

Robert took his readers seriously and wrote back to each and every one, spending hours replying to their letters and emails. He welcomed their criticism or divergent points of view so long as they were willing to engage in a

dialogue. But he did not waste his time on abusive attacks, which he said were designed to silence criticism of the West's powerful elite and their wrongdoings in the Middle East rather than an attempt to debate the issue. The anonymity offered by the digital online platforms made the nature of these attacks more vicious and frequent.

This has now become a feature of much hate comment on the internet. Be it anti-Semitic abuse or Islamophobia or gender hatred, slogans are displacing argument. Thus, baldly and unsubtly, accusation has replaced debate. Every politician, journalist, "activist", every prime minister, editor and clergyman (of whichever variety) now has to disprove the accusations made against them—however outlandish—in order to prove

their innocence. They are guilty until proved innocent, the latter a happy outcome but one almost impossible to achieve since their guilt is already an internet "fact", only put in doubt by responding to the contrary and thus becoming part of the hate discussion. There is no point in blaming technology for our plight... It is the use to which we allow that technology to be put which now confronts us over social media. Journalists—and we should speak up for ourselves—do not deserve, nor should we tolerate, the filth and

slander which is thrown at us for doing our job by those people who, far from being worthy of attention, need serious medical help.

In chronicling the West's mistreatment and betrayal of the Middle East, Robert compiled an archive of documents and individual testimonies—a catalogue of the West's failures and the effect on people's lives in the lands of great history and suffering. From the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, Israel's illegal and open-ended occupation and colo-

nization of the Arab lands, Western governments' continued cozy relationship with the Gulf monarchies and the dictators in Egypt and Turkey, to the US and NATO's catastrophic campaigns in Libya, Syria and Afghanistan—they are innumerable accounts of human anguish, sorrow, hope and defeat.

The Syrian army kills civilians but claims to take every care to avoid "collateral damage". The Israelis say the same. The Brits say the same, the Americans and Russians and the French. Maybe the International Court in the Hague will one day name Syrian soldiers responsible for such crimes - be sure they won't touch the West's warriors. A German court did put two Syrian security officers on trial in 2020 for torture and sexual assault against prisoners nine years earlier. But the US had withdrawn from the International Criminal Court in 2002 lest it tried to prosecute US service members or officials.

Letting Western governments and their allies get away with war crimes set a new, dangerous precedent; the normalization of such crimes. Robert warned that this pattern and the language used to cover up the deliberate targeting and killing of civilians, and then the blaming of victims for their

own death and destruction, not only weakened the West's moral stand against tyranny, but allowed dictatorships and autocrats around the world to use it as a justification for their own war crimes.

This could not have been truer than in the case of Syria, or more accurate than in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I am often asked what Robert would have said about the latest war in Europe. His dispatches would have viewed the current crisis in the Middle East, the Balkans and Europe from the perspective of history and from a Middle Eastern point of view, pointing out Western governments' double standards and hypocritical attitude toward the suffering of people in the region.

The US' constant refusal to sign up to the International Criminal Court has compromised the West's ability to upbraid Putin for his crimes against humanity. How could the European Union, in the weakest and most uninspiring moment in its history, hold Putin to account when the language he and his foreign minister Sergey Lavrov use is matched word for word by that of Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli defense and foreign ministries, and is routinely adopted by the White House and the media?

Making a deal with the Taliban, the US and NATO hurled Afghans, especially women, under the rule of a militant group that has been killing unarmed civilians, suicide bombing hospitals and schools and kidnapping and torturing women protesters. The glaring hypocrisy of the West is impossible to hide, even behind the language of its usual cowardice.



Part 2 of 2

The betrayal of the Middle East:

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How could United States President Joe Biden have the audacity to speak about the rights of Iranian women to freedom when he presided over the snatching of the same rights from women in Afghanistan? The US' once created, then abandoned and recently rebranded new ally in Afghanistan, the Taliban, is the only government in the world that bans women and girls from attending school.

Blighted by conflict since the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the protracted proxy, civil and religious wars that followed—in part thanks to the US backing of the Afghan mujahideen and the Taliban's predecessors—Afghanistan has been forgotten by the West. Afghans cannot be blamed for thinking the real goal of the West was the break-up of the Soviet Union, not their freedom or independence.

And now they can enjoy "democracy" under the Taliban, who also indulge Putin's imagined influence and power. It is not so different from the situation in Syria, where rebel forces have been discarded to the dustbin of Idlib, and protesters' dreams of freedom and democracy have been abandoned as a Western "project". The US goal of overthrowing Assad may not have been achieved, but there are other power politics to consider.

Letting Assad remain in power, after all, is the price the US administration is prepared to pay to prevent an Israeli-Iranian war. No question could be asked about Israel's role in the Syrian war as its army randomly attacked Syrian and Iranian targets in Syria since 2013, though curiously never the Islamic State (IS) group. There is credible video and eyewitness evidence of wounded Nusra fighters being evacuated and treated in Israeli hospitals. In 2018, the Trump administration recognized



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Israel's illegal annexation of the Golan, the Syrian territory captured in the 1967 war.

In February 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that "as a practical matter, the control of the Golan [...] I think remains of real importance to Israel's security". He told CNN that "legal questions are something else and over time if the situation were to change in Syria, that's something we look at, but we are nowhere near that".

"Somewhere over the Atlantic," wrote Robert, "there is a giant glass curtain through which Americans view the Middle East, which utterly distorts their vision". Embedded in that view is an arrogant colonial attitude that only the West and Europeans truly appreciate democracy. The West offered the Middle East democracy in the form of military operations, overt or covert, either directly or with the help of its regional allies, but no one should expect the people in these coun-

tries to fully understand or value democracy because they were not Europeans.

A Syrian refugee, Dr. Hamza al-Kateab, from Aleppo, living in exile in the United Kingdom, offered advice to the Ukrainians in 2022: They "should not expect any kind of red lines to be respected. Or any humanitarian law to be respected in this invasion. Do not

expect that [this situation] is going to change in the next couple of weeks; it's a long-lasting war. Do not expect that the world is going to stand beside you for a long time. People tend to forget". The media tends to shift to the next hot point or to the next conflict area. For the 2 million refugees now, with the number to increase in the days [to come], suddenly the narrative is going to be, "You're stealing our jobs. You should have stayed to fight for your country, and what are you doing here?"

When Robert took the job of

Middle East correspondent for *The Times of London* in 1976 and made Beirut his home, he also made a decision. Conscious of Western colonial attitudes, he would never buy or own property in Lebanon or anywhere else in the Middle East because the Arab lands belonged to the Arabs, not to the Europeans. For 44 years he lived in the same rental apartment, with the same landlord. He argued that the Western armies and their self-serving governments should leave the Middle East alone.

Night of Power: The Betrayal of the Middle East is both his plea for an end to Western interference and an account of human suffering due to the folly of war and propped-up dictators. The media's inadequate representation of the people in the Middle East is an extension of the same mindset

that once colonized those lands.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, as Robert continued his research and writing of this volume, we discussed the worsening conditions in the Middle East and the need for more investigative reporting. Robert did not live to witness and write the next chapter of this great tragedy called the Middle East. But he reminded his readers of the "tarnished rays", in the words of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the great Pakistani poet we often read and admired. The dawn that Robert wished to see break across these epic lands did not arrive; the promised light between the curtains flickered and gave way to more darkness; and the night is still soaked in innocent blood:

*This is not that Dawn for which,
ravished with freedom,*

we had set out in sheer longing...

*Friends, our blood shaped its
own mysterious roads.*

*When hands tugged at our
sleeves, enticing us to stay,*

*and from wondrous chambers
Sirens cried out*

*with their beguiling arms, with
their bare bodies,*

*our eyes remained fixed on that
beckoning Dawn...*

*Now listen to the terrible ram-
pant lie:...*

*See our leaders polish their man-
ner clean of our suffering.*

*Indeed, we must confess only to
bliss;*

*we must surrender any utterance
for the Beloved –*

all yearning is outlawed.

Overlooking the Mediterra-

nean, our balcony faced the Corniche seafront, where the Crusaders once passed through; the French mandate named it "Avenue des Français", a reminder of the greed and failed military campaigns of the past. Future generations will have to struggle for freedom from their own dictators, despots, corrupt presidents, stalemate in sectarian political systems and freedom from military bases and their operations.

In 2020, there were more US and NATO military bases in the region than at any other time in history. Why? One might ask if another iron curtain is being drawn as the Russian army retreats, ghosts of the past lingering again in darker lairs. The rise of fascism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, nationalism and dogma of all varieties in Europe is yet again threatening civil liberties and tolerance, while the earth we occupy is edging toward extinction as a result of our exploitation and wars. And Syria?

I asked Robert just days before his death. He handed me one of his articles: Gulf Arabs, particularly Qatar, are said to be interested in financially rebuilding Syria. So if they would not surrender militarily, can the Idlib "rebels" be bought off? Not least by the Arab nations that supported them in the first place. These are early days. But all wars come to an end. And that is where history restarts.