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Robert Fisk: The Age of Terror - a landmark report

With chaos stretching from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean, we have never lived in a more dangerous time. Over the next 7,000 words, our man in the Middle East looks back over a lifetime of covering war and death, and lays out a bleak future for all of us - one that even those living in the comfort of the Home Counties cannot escape

09 October 2006

A few days after Lebanon's latest war came to an end, I went through many of the reporter's notebooks I have used in my last 30 years in the Middle East. Some contained the names of dead colleagues, others the individual stories of the suffering of Arabs and Kurds and Christians and Jews. One, dated 1991, is even splashed with a dark and viscous substance, the oil that came raining down on us from the skies over the Kuwaiti desert after Saddam blew up the wells of the Emirate. It was only after a few minutes that I realised what I was looking for: some hint, back in the days of dangerous innocence, of what was going to happen on 11 September 2001.



And sure enough, in one notebook, part of a transcript of an interview I gave in Toronto in the late 1990s, I see myself trying to discourage the Middle East optimism of my host. "There is an explosion coming in the Middle East," I tell him. What was this explosion I was talking about? I find myself writing almost the same

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thing a couple of years later in The Independent - I refer to "the explosion to come" without locating it in the Middle East at all. What was I talking about? And then, most disturbingly, I re-run parts of a film series I made with the late Michael Duffield for Channel 4 and Discovery in 1993. Called From Beirut to Bosnia, it was billed as an attempt to record "Muslims growing anger towards the West."

In one sequence, I walk into a destroyed mosque in a Bosnian village called Cela. And I hear my voice on the soundtrack, saying: "When I see things like this, I think of the place I work, the Middle East... I wonder what the Muslim world has in store for us... Maybe I should end each of my reports with the words: 'Watch out!' " And when I checked back to my post-production notes, I find the dates of all our film sequences listed. I had walked into that Bosnian mosque, watched by Serb policemen, on 11 September 1993. My warning was exactly eight years too early.

I don't like journalists who, in middle age, start to pontificate morbidly about the wickedness of a world that should be full of love, or who rummage through old notebooks in search of pessimism. So I own up at once. Surely we don't have to be weighed down by the baggage of history, always looking backwards and holding up billboards with the "The End of the World is Nigh" written in black for readers too bored to look at the fine print. Yet when I sit on my seafront balcony today, I am waiting for the next explosion to come.

Beirut is a good place to reflect on the tragedy through which the Middle East is now inexorably moving. After all, the city has suffered so many horrors these past 31 years, it seems haunted by the mass graves that lie across the region, from Afghanistan to Iraq to "Palestine" and to Lebanon itself. And I look across the waters and see a German warship cruising past my home, part of Nato's contribution to stop gun-running into Lebanon under UN Security Council Resolution 1701. And then, I ask myself what the Germans could possibly be doing when no guns have ever been run to the Hizbollah guerrilla army from the sea. The weapons came through Syria, and Syria has a land frontier with the country and is to the north and east of Lebanon, not on the other side of the Mediterranean.

And then when I call on my landlord to discuss this latest, hopeless demonstration of Western power, he turns to me in some anger and says, "Yes, why is the German navy cruising off my home?" And I see his point. For we Westerners are now spreading ourselves across the entire Muslim world. In one form or another, "we" - "us", the West - are now in Khazakstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Lebanon. We are now trapped across this vast area of suffering, fiercely angry people, militarily far more deeply entrenched and entrapped than the 12th-century crusaders who faced defeat at the battle of Hittin, our massive forces fighting armies of Islamists, suicide bombers, warlords, drug barons, and militias. And losing. The



latest UN army in Lebanon, with its French and Italian troops, is moving in ever greater numbers to the south, young men and women who have already been threatened by al-Qa'ida and who will, in three or four months, be hit by al-Qa'ida. Which is one reason why the French have been pallisading themselves into their barracks in southern Lebanon. There is no shortage of suicide bombers here, although it will be the Sunni -- not the Hizbollah-Shiite variety -- which will strike at the UN.

When will the bombers arrive? After further massacres in Iraq? After the Israelis cross the border again? After Israel - or the US - bombs Iran's nuclear facilities in the coming months? After someone in the northern city of Tripoli, perhaps, or in the Palestinian camps outside Sidon, decides he has seen too many Western soldiers trampling the lands of southern Lebanon, too many German warships off the coast, or heard too many mendacious statements of optimism from George W Bush or Tony Blair or Condoleezza Rice. "There will be no 'new' Middle East, Miss Rice," a new Hizbollah poster says south of Sidon. And the Hizbollah is right. The entire region is sinking deeper into bloodshed and all the time, over and over again, Bush and Blair tell us it is all getting much better, that we can all be heartened by the spread of non-existent democracies, that the dawn is rising on Condi's "new" Middle East. Are they really hoping that they can distort the mirror of the world's reality with their words? There is a kind of new dawn rising in the lands from the old Indian empire to the tides of the Mediterranean. The only trouble is that it is blood red.

It is as if the Bushes and Blairs do not live on this planet any more. As my colleague Patrick Cockburn wrote recently, the enraging thing about Blair's constant optimism is that, to prove it all a pack of lies, a journalist has to have his throat cut amid the anarchy which Blair says does not exist. The Americans cannot protect themselves in Iraq, let alone the Iraqis, and the British have twice nearly been defeated in battles with the Taliban, and the Israeli army - counting it as part of the "West" for a moment -- were soundly thrashed when they crossed the border to fight the Hizbollah, losing 40 men in 36 hours. Yet still Blair delayed a ceasefire in Lebanon. And still - be certain of this - when the fire strikes us again, in London or New York or wherever, Blair and Bush will say that the attack has nothing to do with the Middle East, that Britain's enemies hate "our values" or our "way of life".

I once mourned the lack of titans in the modern world, the Roosevelts and the Churchills, blood-drenched though their century was. Blair and Bush, posing as wartime leaders, threatening the midget Hitlers around them, appear to have gone through a kind of "stasis", a psychological inability to grasp what they do not want to hear or what they do not want to be true. And they have lost the thread of history.



In the past, we - the "West" - could have post-war adventures abroad and feel safe at home. No North Korean tried to blow himself up on the London Tube in the 1950s. No Viet Cong ever arrived in Washington to assault the United States. We fought in

Kenya and Malaya and Palestine and Suez and Yemen, but we felt safe in Gloucestershire. Perhaps the change came with the Algerian War of Independence when the bombers attacked in Paris and Lyons, or perhaps it came later when the IRA arrived to bomb London.

But it is a fact that "we" cannot take our armies and warships and tanks and helicopter gunships and para battalions for foreign wars and expect to be unhurt at home. This is the inescapable logic of history that Bush and Blair will not face, will not acknowledge, will not believe - will not even let us believe. All across the Middle East, we are locked in battle in our preposterous "war on terror" because "the world changed forever" on 11 September, even though I have said many times that we should not allow 19 murderers to change our world. So we live in a darker world of phone-taps and "terror plots" and underground CIA prisoners whose interrogators set about victims in secret, tearing to pieces the Geneva Conventions so painfully constructed after the Second World War.

And in a world betrayed. Remember all those promises we made to the Arabs about creating a wonderful new functioning democracy in Iraq whose example would be followed by other Middle East states? And remember our promise to honour the fledgling democracy of Lebanon, the famous "Cedars Revolution" - a title invented by the US State Department, so the Lebanese should have been suspicious - which brought the retreat of the Syrian army. Lebanon was then held up to be a future model for the Arab world. But once the Hizbollah crossed the frontier and seized two Israeli soldiers, killing three others on 12 July, we stood back and watched the Lebanese suffer. "If there is one thing this last war has convinced me of," a young Lebanese woman put it to me this month, "it is that the Lebanese are on their own. I can never trust a foreign promise again."

And this is true. For the direct result of the disastrous Israeli campaign has been to turn the Hizbollah into heroes of the Arab - indeed the Muslim - world, to break apart the fragile political stability established by the Lebanese prime minister, Fouad Siniora, and to have Hizbollah's leader, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, declare a "divine victory" and demand a "national unity" government which, if it comes about, will be pro-Syrian. The language now being used in Lebanon by the country's political leaders is approaching the incendiary, lethal

grammar of pre-civil war Lebanon.

Samir Geagea, the Christian ex-militia commander, brought out tens of thousands of supporters to jeer at Nasrallah. "They demand a strong state but how can a strong state be built with a statelet in its midst?" Geagea demanded to know after the Hizbollah suddenly announced that it has no intention of handing over its weapons. Indeed, Nasrallah is now boasting that he still has 20,000 missiles in southern Lebanon, a claim which led the Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, to abuse Nasrallah as a creature of Syria - there is speculation over the depth of his relationship with Damascus but his arms certainly come from Iran - and to say to him: "Sayed Nasrallah, rest your mind, I will not reach an agreement with you. When you separate yourself from the Syrian leadership, I will possibly hold a dialogue with you." Thus two more paper-thin links - between Lebanon's Druze community and the Christians and the larger population of Shiite Muslims - have been broken. And that is how civil wars start.

Had Bush - indeed Blair -- denounced Israel's claim that it held the Lebanese government responsible for the kidnapping and killing of its soldiers, and demanded an immediate ceasefire, then the disaster that is destroying Lebanon's democracy would not have happened. But no, Bush and Blair let the bloodshed go on and postponed hopes of a ceasefire for the Lebanese upon whom they had lavished so much praise a year ago. Just last week, the Lebanese recovered the bodies of five more children under the rubble of the Sidon Vocational Training Centre in Tyre. Ali Alawiah identified his children Aya, Zeinab and Hussein and his nephews Battoul and Abbas. All would have been alive if even Blair and Margaret Beckett had demanded a ceasefire. But they are dead. And Blair and Beckett and Bush should have this on their conscience.

The fact they don't speaks sorrowfully of our double standard of morality. Almost all Lebanon's 1,300 dead - which comes close to half the total of the World Trade Centre murders - were civilians. But we don't care for them as we do our own "kith and kin". This is the same sickness that pervades our policies in Iraq where we never counted the number of civilians killed, only the tally of our precious soldiers who died there.

How did we come to be infected by this virus of negligence and betrayal? Does it really go back to the Crusades or the ramblings of Spanish Christians of the 15th century - whose portrayals of the Prophet Mohamed were infinitely more obscene than Denmark's third-rate cartoonist - or to the vicious anti-Muslim ravings of long-forgotten Popes who seem to obsess the present incumbent of the Vatican? I am still uncertain what Benedict meant by his quotation of the old man of Byzantium - while I am equally suspicious of his almost equally insulting remarks at Auschwitz where he blamed Nazi Germany's cruelty on a mere "gang of criminals". But then again, this is a Pope - anti-divorce, anti-homosexual and, once, anti-aircraft -

who has signally failed to follow John Paul II's devotions on the need for the seed of Abraham to acknowledge the love they should show to each other.

This failure to see the Other as the same as "us" is now evident across the Middle East. Some months ago, I received letters originally written to his family by a young Marine officer in Iraq who was trying - eloquently, I have to add - to explain how frustrating his work with Iraqis had become. "There is something culturally childish in their understanding of Western governance and management that will require immeasurable education and probably several generations to overcome if they find it of any interest," he wrote. "Our understanding of their tribal governance and its relationship to formal civil management is equally naïve and charges our frustration... The reality is that they cannot, culturally, comprehend our altruism or believe our stated intentions... Liberation will compete with invasion as our legacy but locally we are ideologically irrelevant... I share the American fascination with action and it has consistently betrayed us in our foreign policy."

The reality in Iraq is summed up by the same American Marine officer's description of the building of the Ramadi glass factory, a story that shows just how vacuous all the stories of our "success" there are. "The Division has poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into a glass factory. It does not work. It will take millions of dollars to rehabilitate and modernise. There are supposed to be 2,500 Iraqis employed there but they have nothing to do and no more than 100 arrive on any given day to sit in their offices as new computers and furniture are delivered with our compliments... It is like walking through a fictional business that physically exists. It may be Kafka's revenge. Most rooms are empty but are still preserved as they had been under a layer of dust. Some areas hold a man at a desk in a stark room too large for him. It is like Pompeii being slowly reoccupied, as if nothing had happened. I stood on a tall mound of broken glass outside. Shards of window panes shattered in the process of manufacturing them. The windows of the city were poured and cut here once... This glass was made from sand, desert made invisible until exposed by reflection. The bright sunlight makes little impression on the pile due to a dull coating of dust but the fragments fracture further and slide beneath my feet with the sound of ruin. Walking on windows and unable to see the ground." Could there be a more Conradian description of the failure of the American empire in Iraq?

And does it not echo a remark that TE Lawrence - Lawrence of Arabia - made of Iraq in the 1920s: "Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly... Actually, also, under the very odd conditions of Arabia, your practical work may not be as good as, perhaps, you think."



A different kind of alienation, of course, is reflected in our



dispute with Iran. "We" think that its government wants to make nuclear weapons - in six months, according to the Israelis; in 10 years, according to some nuclear analysts. But no one asks if "we" didn't help to cause this "nuclear" crisis. For it was the Shah who commenced Iran's nuclear power programme in 1973 and Western companies were shoulder-hopping each other in their desire to sell him nuclear reactors and enrichment technology. Siemens, for example, started to build the Bushehr reactor. And the Shah

was regularly interviewed on Western television stations where he said that he didn't see why Iran shouldn't have nuclear weapons when America and the Soviets had them. And we had no objection to the ambitions of "our" Policeman of the Gulf.

And when Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution engulfed Iran, what did he do? He called the nuclear programme "the work of the devil" and closed it down. It was only when Saddam Hussein invaded Iran the following year and began showering Iran with missiles and chemical weapons - an invasion supported by "us" - that the clerical regime decided they may have to use nuclear weapons against Iraq and reopened the complex. In other words, it was the West which supported Iran's original nuclear programme and it was closed by the chief divine of George Bush's "axis of evil" and then reopened when the West stood behind Saddam (in the days when he was "our strongman" rather than our caged prisoner in a dying state).

The greater irony, of course, is that if we were really concerned about the spread of nuclear technology among Muslim states, we would be condemning Pakistan, most of whose cities are in a state of almost Iraqi anarchy and whose jolly dictator now says he was threatened with being "bombed back to the Stone Age" by the Americans if he didn't sign up to the "war on terror". Now it happens that Pakistan is infinitely more violent than Iran and it also happens that it was a close Pakistani friend of the Pakistani President-General Pervez Musharraf - a certain scientist called Abdul Qadeer Khan - who actually gave solid centrifuge components to Iran. But all that has been taken out of the story. And so they will remain out of the narrative because Pakistan already has a bomb and may use it if someone decided to create a new Stone Age in that former corner of the British empire.

But all this raises a more complex question. Are we really going to

carry on arguing for years - for generation after generation of crisis - over who has or doesn't have nuclear technology or the capacity to build a bomb? Are "we" forever going to decide who may have a bomb on the basis of his obedience to us - Mr Musharraf now being a loyal Pakistani shah - or his religion or how many turbans are worn by ministers in the government. Are we still going to be doing this in 2007 or 2107 or 3006?

What I suspect lies behind much of our hypocrisy in the Middle East is that Muslims have not lost their faith and we have. It's not just that religion governs their lives, it is the fact that they have kept the faith - and that is why we try to hide that we have lost it by talking about Islam's "difficulty with secularism". We are the good liberals who wish to bestow the pleasures of our Enlightenment upon the rest of the world, although, to the Muslim nations, this sounds more like our desire to invade them with different cultures and traditions and - in some cases - different religions.

And Muslims have learnt to remember. I still recall an Iraqi friend, shaking his head at my naivety when I asked if there was not any cup of generosity to be bestowed on the West for ridding Iraqis of Saddam's presence. "You supported him," he replied. "You



supported him when he invaded Iran and we died in our tens of thousands. Then, after the invasion of Kuwait, you imposed sanctions that killed tens of thousands of our children. And now you reduce Iraq to anarchy. And you want us to be grateful?"

And I recalled seeing a train load of gassed Iranian soldiers on the way to Tehran, coughing up mucus and blood into stained handkerchiefs and coughing up the gas too because I suddenly smelled a kind of dirty perfume and walked down the train opening all the windows. I saw their vast wobbling blisters upon which ever-smaller blisters would form, one on top of the other. And where did this filthy stuff come from, this real weapon of mass destruction Saddam was using? Components came from Germany and from the US. No wonder US Lieutenant Rick Francona noted indifferently in a report to the Pentagon that the Iraqis had drenched Fao in gas when he visited the battlefield during the war. So do we expect the Iranians to be grateful that we eventually toppled Saddam?

Needless to say, the division between Shias and Sunnis - especially in Iraq - can reach stages of cruelty not seen since the European Protestant-Catholic wars; nor, in this context, should we forget the conflict we are still trying to control in Northern Ireland. Islam as a society, rather than a religion, does have to face the "West"; it must find, in the words of that fine former Iranian president Mohamad Khatami, a "civil society". And it is outrageous that Muslims have not

condemned the slaughter in Darfur or, indeed, in Iraq and, one might add, on the battlefields of the Iran-Iraq war where one and a half million Muslims killed each other over almost eight years. Self-criticism is not in great supply across the Muslim world where, of course, our spirited Western political conflicts and elections sometimes look like self-flagellation.

As for our desire to award the Muslim Middle East with "our" democratic systems, it's not just in Lebanon that we have proved to be much less enthusiastic about its existence in the Arab world. The former US ambassador to Iraq - once he realised the Shiites would join the Sunni resistance if they did not have elections, for democracy was originally not going to be America's gift there - accepted a dominant role for Muslim clerics in the government, thus ensuring discrimination against women in marriage, divorce and inheritance.

When Daniel Fried, the US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs visited Paris last year, he lectured European and Arab diplomats on what he called "the US-European imperative to support democratic reform and democratic reformers in the Middle East" - forgetting, it seems, that just such a man, Khatami,



existed in Iran but had been snubbed by the US. His failure as a genuinely elected president produced his somewhat cracked successor. Fried, however, insisted that bringing democracy to the Middle East "is not for us a question of political theory, but of central strategic importance", something that clearly didn't matter less than a year later in Lebanon and certainly not when the Palestinians participated in genuine elections, of which more later.

Fried took the risky step of quoting the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville to back his claim that democracy, far from being a fragile flower, was "robust, and its applicability is potentially universal". The former French foreign minister, Hubert Védrine, was invited to reply to respond to Fried's words and he cynically spoke of "people who have historical experience, who have seen how past experiences turned out", the subtext of which was: "You Americans have no sense of history." Védrine spoke of meeting with Madeleine Albright when she was the US Foreign Secretary. "I told her we had no problem regarding the objective of democracy, but I asked whether it was a process, or a religious conversion, like Saint Paul on the road to Damascus." And he quoted the Mexican writer, Octavio Paz: "Democracy is not like Nescafé, you don't just add water." For historical reasons, Védrine told Fried, "Because of colonialism, the Middle East is the region of the world where external intervention is most at risk of being rejected."

And when it is imposed, as America says it would like to do in Damascus, what will happen? A nice, flourishing electoral process to put Syrians in power or another descent into Iraqi-style horrors with a Sunni-Muslim regime in place in Damascus?



And so to "Palestine" - the inverted commas are more important than ever today - and its own act of democracy. Of course, the Palestinians elected the wrong people, Hamas, and had to suffer for it. Democratic Israel would not accept the results of Palestine's democratic

elections and the Europeans joined with America in placing sanctions against the newly elected government unless it recognised Israel and all agreements signed with Israel since the Camp David accords of the 1970s. Even when Ariel Sharon was staging his withdrawal of 8,500 settlers from Gaza last year, he was shifting 12,000 more settlers into the West Bank, and George W Bush had effectively accepted this illegality by talking of the "realities" of the Jewish settlements still being enlarged there. And that was the end of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 upon which the "peace process" was supposed to be based - Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in the 1967 Middle East war, in return for the security of all states in the area.

One of the few honourable American statesmen to grasp what this portends is ex-President Jimmy Carter, who wrote after the Palestinian elections in May this year that "innocent Palestinian people are being treated like animals, with the presumption that they are guilty of some crime. Because they voted for candidates who are members of Hamas, the US government has become the driving force behind an apparently effective scheme of depriving the general public of income, access to the outside world and the necessities of life... The additional restraints imposed on the new government are a planned and deliberate catastrophe for the citizens of the occupied territories, in hopes that Hamas will yield to the economic pressure." Oh, for the years of the Carter administration...

And now we have the wall - or the "fence" as too many journalists gutlessly call it. The Palestinians went to the International Court in the Hague to have it declared illegal because much of its course runs through their land. The court said it was illegal. And Israel ignored the court's decision and, once more, the US supported Israel. Here was another lesson for the Palestinians. They went peacefully - without violence or "terrorism" - to our Western institutions to get justice. And we were powerless to help them because Israel rejected this symbol of Western freedoms.

Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister whose Lebanese

bombardment was such a catastrophe, still says that the wall is only temporary, as if it might be shifted back to the original frontiers of Israel. But if it is only temporary, it can also be moved forward to take in more Jewish settlements on Arab land, colonies which, it must be noted, are illegal under international law. Olmert says he wants to draw "permanent borders" unilaterally - which is against the spirit of Camp David which Hamas is now supposed to abide by.

And how does US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice respond to this? Well, try this for wriggle room. "I wouldn't on the face of it just say absolutely we don't think there's any value in what the Israelis are talking about." And if the US does recognise - which it will - unilaterally fixed borders of the kind proposed by Olmert, it will sanction the permanent annexation of up to 10 per cent of the Arab territory seized in 1967, contrary to all previous US policy and to the International Court. All this, of course, is part of the new flouting of international laws which the US - and increasingly Israel - now regards as its right since the world "changed forever" on 11 September, 2001.

Remarkably, however, the US still believes that it is increasingly loathed in the Arab world not because of its policies but because its policies are not being presented fairly. It's not a political problem, it's a public-relations problem. Curiously, that is what Israel thought when accused of killing too many Lebanese during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. What we do is right. We're just not selling it right. Hence, the appointment of Karen Hughes as US "Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy". Her line is straight to the point. "I try to portray the facts in the best light for our country," she said after her appointment. "Because I believe we're a wonderful country and that we are doing things across the world."

The columnist Roger Cohen placed her problem in a nutshell. The problem are the facts. And they include the fact that, in the 65-year period between 1941 and 2006, the US has been at war in some form or another for all but 14 of them. And people around the world have got tired of this. They got tired of America's insatiable need for an enemy - and suspicious of all the talk of democracy, freedom and morality in which every war was cast. They stopped buying the US narrative. Hughes says that the vision followed by bin Laden's followers "is a mission of destruction and death; ours a message of life and opportunity." Well, yes. "If only it were that simple," Cohen wrote.

At that Paris meeting with Fried, Védérine won almost all the arguments, not that Fried realised it. Védérine pleaded with the Americans to exercise caution in the Middle East. "We don't know how things are going to turn out in Afghanistan, Iraq or Egypt," he said presciently. "This is a high-risk process, like transporting nitroglycerine. You talk about an alliance; if there is an alliance, it must not be an ideological alliance, but an alliance of surgeons, of professionals, of chemists specialised in explosive substances. If we

set out to do this, it will take 20 or 30 years, far longer than the second Bush administration."

But the US Marines and the 82 Airborne are not surgeons or chemists. They are losing control of lands they thought they had conquered or "liberated". Iraq is already out of control. So is much of Afghanistan. Palestine looks set to go the same way and Lebanon is in danger of freefall. A series of letters in The New York Times in April this year suggested that ordinary US citizens grasp the "democratic" argument better than their leaders. "Democracy cannot be easily imposed on people who are not prepared to accept it," one wrote. "Democracy cannot be exported," wrote another. "Changing a political culture happens only if the people embrace it. Iraqi society is too traumatised by the history of Saddam Hussein and the war to do more than survive both at this point." Spot on.

It may well be that journalists in the "West" should feel a burden of guilt for much that has happened because they have, with their gullibility, helped to sell US actions much more effectively than Karen Hughes. Their constant references to a "fence" instead of a wall, to "settlements" or "neighbourhoods" instead of colonies, their description of the West Bank as "disputed" rather than occupied, has bred a kind of slackness in reporting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Just as it did in Iraq when so many reporters from the great Western newspapers and TV stations used US ambassador Bremer's laughable description of the ferocious insurgents as "dead-enders" or "remnants" - the same phrase still being used by our colleagues in Kabul in reference to a distinctly resurgent Taliban which is being helped - despite General Musharraf's denials - by the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI.

Much worse, however, is the failure to enquire into the real policies of governments. Why, for example, was there no front-page treatment of this year's Herzliya conference, Israel's most important policy-making jamboree? Most of the important figures in the Israeli government - they had yet to be elected - were in attendance. The conference was the place where Ehud Olmert first suggested handing over slices of the West Bank: "The choice between allowing Jews to live in all parts of the land of Israel" - the "land of Israel" in this context included the West Bank - "and living in a state with a Jewish majority mandate giving up part of the land of Israel. We cannot continue to control parts of the territories where most of the Palestinians live."

However, most speakers agreed that the Palestinians would be given a state on whatever is left after the huge settlements had been included behind the wall. Benjamin Netanyahu even suggested the wall should be moved deeper into the West Bank. But the implications were obvious. A Palestinian state will be allowed, but it will not have a capital in east Jerusalem nor any connection between Gaza and the bits of the West Bank that are handed over. So there will be no peace, and the words "Palestinian" and "terrorist" will,

again, be inextricably linked by Israel and the US.

There were articles in the Israeli press about Herzliya, including one by Sergio Della Pergola in which he warned of the "menace" to Israel of Palestinian birth rates and advised that "if the demographic tie doesn't come in 2010, it will come in 2020." Earlier conferences have discussed the possible need for the revoking of the citizenship rights of some Israeli Arabs. Already this year, Haaretz has reported an opinion poll in which 68 per cent of Israeli Jews said they would refuse to live in the same building as an Arab - 26 per cent would agree to do so - and 46 per cent of Israeli Jews said they would refuse to allow an Arab to visit their home. The inclination toward segregation rose as the income level of the respondents dropped - as might be expected - and there was no poll of Palestinian opinion, though the Palestinians might be able to point out that tens of thousands of Israelis already do live on their land in the huge colonies across the West Bank, most of which will remain, illegally, in Israeli hands.

All these details are available in the Arab press - and of course, the Israeli press, but are largely absent from our own. Why? Even when Norman Finkelstein wrote a damning academic report on the way Israel's High Court of Justice "proved" the wall - deemed illegal by the Hague -- was legal, it was virtually ignored in the West. So, for that matter, was the US academics' report on the power of the Israeli lobby, until the usual taunts of "anti-Semitism" forced the American mainstream to write about it, albeit in a shifty, frightened way.

There are so many other examples of our fear of Middle Eastern truth. Our soft handling of Hosni Mubarak's increasingly autocratic regime in Egypt is typical. So is reporting of Algeria now that British governments are prepared to deport refugees home on the grounds that they no longer face arrest and torture. But arrest and torture continue in Algeria. Its recent amnesty poll effectively immunises all members of the security services involved in torture and makes it a crime to oppose the amnesty.

Is this really the best that we journalists can do? Save for the indefatigable Seymour Hersh, there are still no truly investigative correspondents in the US press. But challenging authority should not be that difficult. No one is being asked to end the straightforward reporting of Arab tyrannies. We are still invited to ask - and should ask - why the Muslim world has produced so many dictatorships, most of them supported by "us". But there are too many dark corners into which we will not look. Where, for example, are the CIA's secret torture prisons? I know two reporters who are aware of the locations. But they are silent, no doubt in the interests of "national security".

This reluctance to confront unpleasant truths diminishes the reader or viewer for whom Middle East reporting in the US media is almost incomprehensible to anyone who does not know the region. It also has its trickle-down effects even in theatres, universities and schools

in America. The case of the play about Rachel Corrie - the young US activist twice run over by an Israeli bulldozer while trying to prevent the demolition of Palestinian homes - taken off the New York stage was one of the more deplorable of these. I was also surprised in the Bronx to find that Fieldston, a private school in Riverdale - was forced to cancel a college meeting with two Palestinian lecturers when parents objected to the absence of an Israeli on the panel. The fact that Israeli speakers were to be invited later made no difference. The school's principal later announced that the meeting would "not be appropriate given the sensitivity and complexity of the issue". Complex problems are supposed to be explained. But this could not be explained because, well, it was too complex and - the truth - would upset the usual Israeli lobbyists.

So there we go again. Freedom of speech is a precious commodity but just how precious I found out for myself when I addressed the American University of Beirut after receiving an honorary degree there this summer. I made my usual points about the Bush administration and the growing dangers of the Middle East only to find that a US diplomat in Beirut was condemning me in front of Lebanese friends for being allowed to criticise the Bush administration in a college which receives US government money.

And so on we go with the Middle East tragedy, telling the world that things are getting better when they are getting worse, that democracy is flourishing when it is swamped in blood, that freedom is not without "birth pangs" when the midwife is killing the baby.

It's always been my view that the people of this part of the Earth would like some of our democracy. They would like a few packets of human rights off our supermarket shelves. They want freedom. But they want another kind of freedom - freedom from us. And this we do not intend to give them. Which is why our Middle East presence is heading into further darkness. Which is why I sit on my balcony and wonder where the next explosion is going to be. For, be sure, it will happen. Bin Laden doesn't matter any more, alive or dead. Because, like nuclear scientists, he has invented the bomb. You can arrest all of the world's nuclear scientists but the bomb has been made. Bin Laden created al-Qa'ida amid the matchwood of the Middle East. It exists. His presence is no longer necessary.

And all around these lands are a legion of young men preparing to strike again, at us, at our symbols, at our history. And yes, maybe I should end all my reports with the words: Watch out!

Robert Fisk's book 'The Great War for Civilisation' is published by Fourth Estate at £9.99. His speaking tour runs until 12 October. Visit www.seminars.ie for details.

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