
Books in Review

Baghdad Bob

The Great War for
Civilisation:
The Conquest of
the Middle East

by Robert Fisk

Knopf, 1,107 pp. \$40.00

Reviewed by
Efraim Karsh

NO FOREIGN journalist is more closely identified with the Middle East than the British writer Robert Fisk. Through 30 years of reporting from his base in Beirut, first for the London *Times* and now for the London *Independent*, Fisk has built a reputation not only as an intrepid war correspondent but as a foremost commentator on the volatile region. His eye for sensational detail and his readiness to cover the hottest flashpoints have won him worldwide publicity and numerous professional awards.

None of this has made Fisk no-

EFRAIM KARSH's *Islamic Imperialism: A History* will be published by Yale University Press in April.

tably modest, as the thousand-page heft of his latest book suggests. The ostensible subject of *The Great War for Civilisation* is the turbulent period during which Fisk has been stationed in the Middle East, from the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970's to the two U.S.-led wars in Iraq and, above all, the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. But the grand unifying theme is Fisk himself. As he writes in his preface, reminiscing about his initial posting with the *Times* in 1976: "I was twenty-nine, and I was being offered the Middle East. I wondered how King Faisal felt when he was 'offered' Iraq or how his brother Abdullah reacted to Winston Churchill's 'offer' of Transjordan."

That Fisk would so readily identify himself with the region's Arab autocrats is no accident. It is an apt if inadvertent metaphor, suggesting at once not only his manner as a writer but the opinions that have long infected his all-too-influential work.

THE ROLE of journalists, Fisk writes in his opening pages, is to be "the first impartial witnesses to history." "If we have any reason for our exist-

tence, the least must be our ability to report history as it happens so that no one can say: 'We didn't know—no one told us.'"

For Fisk, this burden of "impartiality" has led in a distinctive direction. His book, like his journalism, draws on the broad historical narrative that has now become standard in Western universities. In this view, culpability for the Middle East's endemic malaise rests squarely on the West itself, beginning with the European powers that, after World War I, carved from the remains of the Ottoman empire a series of makeshift states. As Fisk puts it:

[I]t was to take my father's generation just 23 months to create these artificial borders. . . . We victors promised independence to the Arabs and support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Promises are meant to be kept. And so those promises . . . were betrayed, and the millions of Arabs and Jews of the Middle East are now condemned to live with the results.

Having been duped by the Europeans into a revolt against their Ottoman suzerain, Arab nationalists, in

Fisk's telling, could never accept the distorted political order that arose in the aftermath of the Great War.

Still less could they accept its most dire eventual consequence: the establishment in 1948 of the state of Israel. As Fisk writes, "Why did the Palestinians have to bear the fate of Britain's World War I promise to a people whose ancestors lived on their land two thousand years before?" As for the defeat of the Palestinian and Arab attempt to destroy the Jewish state at its birth, that, Fisk argues, was little more than a reverse exercise in ethnic cleansing, at the Arabs' expense.

The passage of time has only magnified this injustice, the story of which occupies a lion's share of the pages and constitutes the true emotional core of *The Great War for Civilisation*. The Palestinians, as Fisk tells it, now suffer not only from the Jews but from a mercenary

indigenous leadership willing to sign away their historic claims. Typical of his reporting in this regard is his account of the Palestinian response to the "declaration of principles" (DOP) that marked the formal beginning of the Oslo negotiations in 1993. As dignitaries congregated on the White House lawn for the historic signing ceremony, Fisk traveled to the West Bank, where he found that "No one . . . spoke in favor of Arafat's acceptance of an 'interim' solution." As one Palestinian told him, "If you are a small collaborator, the Israelis will help you in a little way. . . . But if you are a big collaborator like Arafat, they may let you visit Jerusalem."

When it comes to the Israelis themselves, Fisk finds it difficult to catalog the full range of their purported crimes—but he tries. One episode dwelled upon in painstaking detail is the 1994 murder of 29

Palestinians in Hebron by the Jewish zealot Baruch Goldstein. What others at the time saw as the act of a deranged individual emerges in his account as a terrorist attack instigated by Israel itself. For him, to describe the event as a "terrible tragedy" and a "gross act of murder," as did former President Bill Clinton, is to resort to "weasel phrases."

Nor can Fisk resist rehearsing the particulars of another favorite episode of supposed Israeli perfidy, the Israel Defense Forces' anti-terror campaign in the towns and refugee camps of the West Bank in April 2002, at the height of the second *intifada*. Dedicating four full pages to events in Jenin, where 38 Palestinian combatants and 14 civilians were killed during heavy fighting (fighting that also took the lives of 23 Israeli soldiers), Fisk struggles to find the correct terms for the alleged horrors: "How big does a massacre have to be before it qualifies as a genocide? How many dead before a genocide becomes a holocaust?"

At every turn, according to Fisk, and whether it is the Palestinians or other Arab and Muslim populations at issue, the West applies to the Middle East a gross double standard. Stigmatizing Palestinians and others as terrorists, we explain away the far more barbaric acts of Israel and the United States. The word "terrorism," he writes, "has become a plague on our vocabulary." It is "the excuse and reason and moral permit for state-sponsored violence—*our* violence—which is now used on the innocent of the Middle East ever more outrageously and promiscuously."

FISK'S INDICTMENT is a familiar one, at least for anyone who has attended to Arab propaganda over the years or, more recently, to the sloganeering of the anti-Israel Left. But he does not wish to be seen as just another partisan in the debate. As the ostentatious bulk of his current book attests, Fisk wants to be

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taken seriously, both as a journalist and as a writer with wider intellectual and historiographical ambitions. In this, he falls dismally—if predictably—short.

First there is the problem of simple accuracy. It is difficult to turn a page of *The Great War for Civilization* without encountering some basic error. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not, as Fisk has it, in Jerusalem. The Caliph Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, was murdered in the year 661, not in the 8th century. Emir Abdallah became king of Transjordan in 1946, not 1921, and both he and his younger brother, King Faisal I of Iraq, hailed not from a "Gulf tribe" but rather from the Hashemites on the other side of the Arabian peninsula. The Iraqi monarchy was overthrown in 1958, not 1962; Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, was appointed by the British authorities, not elected; Ayatollah Khomeini transferred his exile from Turkey to the holy Shiite city of Najaf not during Saddam Hussein's rule but fourteen years before Saddam seized power. Security Council resolution 242 was passed in November 1967, not 1968; Anwar Sadat of Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, not 1977, and was assassinated in October 1981, not 1979. Yitzhak Rabin was minister of defense, not prime minister, during the first Palestinian *intifada*, and al Qaeda was established not in 1998 but a decade earlier. And so on and so forth.

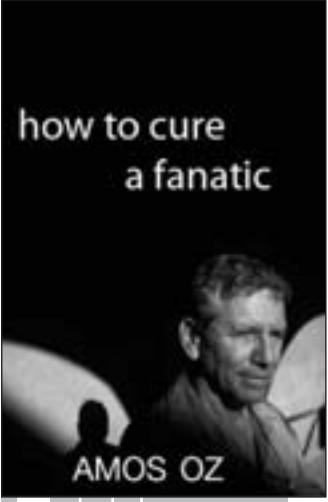
The deeper problem with Fisk's work is not the sort of thing that can be fixed by acquiring a better research assistant or fact-checking apparatus. Facts must be placed in their proper context, after all, and this demands a degree of good faith that Fisk utterly lacks. Indeed, so blatant and thoroughgoing are his ideological prejudices that his very name has entered the lexicon of the Internet as a synonym for systematic bias. Among the online commentators known as bloggers, the

verb "to fisk" has come to mean a point-by-point rebuttal of an egregiously slanted piece of writing—like, classically, a Fisk dispatch from the Middle East.

The precise angle of his tilt has been confirmed by Osama bin Laden himself, who, in a videotaped message on the eve of the 2004 presidential election in the U.S., commended Fisk by name for his incisive and "neutral" reporting. On Planet Fisk, there are bad guys and there are victims, and the victims—the Arabs—can do no wrong, at least none for which they are ultimately responsible. Thus, one comes away from his current book hardly realizing that Lebanon was under a repressive Syrian occupation for most of the 30 years that Fisk has made his home there. The only hint arrives three pages before book's end, when he notes the prompt withdrawal of Syrian forces

following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a crime in which Damascus was deeply complicit.

Even positive news from the Arab world gets twisted to fit the needs of Fisk's grand narrative. Consider the "declaration of principles" that launched the Oslo process. Fisk, who considered the negotiations an act of betrayal by Arafat, pretends that this was also the view among average Palestinians, as we have seen. But in the West Bank and Gaza, the DOP generated a huge wave of euphoria. According to public-opinion polls in September 1993, 65 percent of the residents of the territories supported the peace process, with 57 percent amenable to revising the Palestinian Covenant's call for the destruction of Israel. Even a few years later, after the turbulent Netanyahu era, support for the peace



Internationally acclaimed, award-winning novelist Amos Oz offers unique insight into the true nature of fanaticism and proposes a reasoned and respectful approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Oz argues that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a war of religion or cultures or traditions, but rather a real estate dispute—one that will be resolved not by greater understanding, but by painful compromise. In an extended interview at the end of the book, Oz comments on contemporary issues. Fresh, insightful, and inspiring, *How to Cure a Fanatic* brings a new voice of sanity to the cacophony on Israeli-Palestinian relations—a voice no one can afford to ignore.

"The special nature of these two lucid, thoughtful essays lies in their compelling argumentation backed by the singular authority of the writer."

—Ira Katznelson, Columbia University

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process among Palestinians remained as high as 60 percent.

As for the long record of Palestinian terrorism, Fisk has his own bag of “weasel phrases” to avoid calling it by its proper name. He describes as mere “deaths” the cold-blooded murder of eleven Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, as if they died of physical overexertion. The massacre of 26 passengers at Tel Aviv airport that same year comes into view as “a Palestinian-inspired shooting.” Like the extremists with whom he sympathizes, Fisk equates the intentional targeting of civilians by Palestinian terrorists with the inadvertent deaths caused by Israeli acts of self-defense or, in the case of Baruch Goldstein, with the rampage of a lone fanatic. In point of fact, Israel treated the Hebron massacre as an act of terrorism, and, though Goldstein acted without any organizational or operational support, banned the far-Right Kach group of which he was a member.

Such is the general standard Fisk applies as an “impartial witness to history.” Massacres of innocent civilians by Arab and Islamic militants throughout the world—from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv to Manhattan, Bali, and Baghdad—are for him not acts of terrorism but rather the understandable and altogether patriotic response of people brutalized by colonial occupation. The curious effect of this effort to absolve Middle Easterners of any blame or responsibility for their region’s problems, or their own deeds, is to make Fisk guilty of the sin for which he endlessly berates the West; he patronizes his subjects in the worst tradition of the “white man’s burden.”

Though Fisk compares himself to Arab kings at the start of his book, he emerges, ultimately, much more like Lawrence of Arabia, who concluded that the Arabs were “a limited, narrow-minded people,” incapable of decent behavior because their “inert intellect lay fallow in incurious resignation.” As the emi-

nent Orientalist Bernard Lewis likes to joke, possessing such fundamentally racist attitudes is what it means today to be “pro-Arab.”

Back in the USSR

The Cold War: A New History

by John Lewis Gaddis

Penguin. 352 pp. \$27.95

Reviewed by
Richard Pipes

THE CONFLICT known since 1945 as the “cold war” was one of those titanic struggles between two great powers striving for hegemony that date back to the Greek-Persian confrontation in the 5th century B.C.E. and that recurred periodically thereafter. Notable instances included the Peloponnesian war, Rome’s struggles with Carthage three centuries later, the clashes of Christian Europe with Islam, the Hundred-Years war between England and France, and so on until modern times. Invariably, these conflicts took the form of armed clashes that, thanks to advances in weapons technology, claimed ever more victims.

The invention of nuclear weapons in the mid-20th century threatened to escalate the number of such victims exponentially and possibly extinguish all life on earth. Paradoxically, however, it had the opposite effect, eliminating armed conflict as a way of resolving global conflicts. For this, the only such occurrence in human history, a great deal of credit must go to the leadership of the United States,

RICHARD PIPES is *Baird professor of history, emeritus, at Harvard and the author, most recently, of Russian Conservatism and Its Rivals (Yale).*

which for a long time enjoyed an actual or virtual monopoly on these weapons but refrained from using them. (In 1959, on the eve of the Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet Union had only six operational strategic missiles in its arsenal.)

This fact is one among many to be found in *The Cold War: A New History*. John Lewis Gaddis, a professor at Yale, has made an academic specialty of the U.S.-Soviet conflict. Among his half-dozen books on the subject, the most recent before this latest title, and the most ambitious, was *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (1997), which brought the story down to 1962 and, along the way, deflated the revisionist *idée fixe* that the U.S. was as much to blame for the conflict as the Soviet Union. The present book, which seems to have originated in a course given by Gaddis at Yale, carries the narrative to the end—that is, to the dissolution of the USSR that brought to a close the contest the USSR had itself started.

FOR THE cold war really began with the founding of the Soviet state in late 1917. In seizing power in Russia, Lenin and his associates aimed not at transforming their country into a model Communist state but at using it as a springboard for unleashing a global revolution: a social revolution in the West, an anti-colonialist one elsewhere. The Bolsheviks (with the exception of Stalin) were convinced that “revolution in one country” was unsustainable—in part because the Russian “proletariat,” of which they fancied themselves the representatives, would drown in the sea of a hostile “petty bourgeois” peasantry and in part because the “capitalist” states, then at war with each other in Europe, would almost certainly bury their differences and attack the Soviet homeland.

Thus, from their first day in power, the Russian Communists issued calls to the world’s “masses” to rise against their exploiters. These appeals evoked little response, and