

Inside the Crusader Fortress

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interviewed by
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Robert Fisk is the Middle East correspondent for The Independent. His new book is The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East (Fourth Estate, £25). In April, he was interviewed at his home in Beirut by the broadcaster and writer David Barsamian (www.alternativeradio.org). Mr Barsamian's latest books are Imperial Ambitions (with Noam Chomsky) and Speaking of Empire and Resistance (with Tariq Ali). His questions and comments are printed in italic text, and Mr Fisk's replies appear in ordinary text.

We're sitting just a few blocks from the St. George Hotel, where on February 14 former Lebanese premier, Rafik Hariri, was assassinated. What's the significance of his assassination and its aftermath?

The principal significance for Lebanon is that he never groomed a successor. He made himself Lebanon. He became the symbol, because of his enormous wealth, he was in Forbes's top 100 richest men, of Lebanon's recovery after the civil war, which ended in 1990 after 15 years of fighting. He invested 10% of the total shareholding of Solidere, the company which was to rebuild downtown Beirut. And it was principally his existence and his presence in this country which enabled constant loans to be furnished to Lebanon that brought in investors, that brought in at least a million Arab tourists every summer. Hariri was therefore the underpinning of the Lebanese economy and state.

And his departure put an immediate, tremendous blow on the economy of this country. All the tourists have run away. If you look around downtown, it's empty. People are frightened of the bombs that have been going off, the fourth, of course, last night. And this country has a \$33 billion debt. Don't ask me how they spent it, but they did. And I can't see how they're going to sustain that and, indeed, how they're even going to be able to service the interest on that huge debt after Hariri is gone. So fundamentally, his death and the bombings, though comparatively mild in terms of casualties, have struck a body blow, if not a fatal body blow, at the economy of this country. And that presumably is what the enemies of Lebanon or the enemies of Hariri wanted to do.

The immediate aftermath of Hariri's death were these huge demonstrations both by pro-Syrian groups, primarily the Hezbollah, and by the opposition, as they call themselves, which are Sunni Muslim, Druze, and Christian Maronites, who managed to get a million people

together – that’s almost a third of the population in Lebanon, in one demonstration. Very impressive. Fortunately for the opposition, they had made their alliance, Sunni, Druze and Christian, before Hariri’s assassination. I don’t know if they’ve succeeded in doing so in the aftermath of it. But Hariri was certainly seen as the key figure behind the alliance against the Syrians. And the Syrians certainly suspected that through Hariri’s personal friendship with Jacques Chirac that he primarily brought about UN Resolution 1559, which calls for a total Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon.

Hariri, when he was assassinated, did not hold political office.

He had already resigned because President Emile Lahoud, who is Syria’s most faithful friend in Lebanon, had managed to persuade the parliament, which was stacked with Syria’s friends, to go around the constitution and give him another three years in office. The relationship between Hariri and Lahoud was always pretty bad; they didn’t like each other personally. And so Hariri had deliberately left office, and planned to win these upcoming elections, if they take place. He thought he could effectively outmanoeuvre the pro-Syrians in the parliament and actually establish an independent Lebanese government.

Syria first entered Lebanon in 1976. One could say that Lebanon is Syria. In fact, before I came here, I was looking at my father’s passport, 1921, and it was stamped for Beirut, Syria.

If you go to the antiquarian bookshop up here on the hill behind my home, you will find lots of postcards showing Beirut Port, Syria. Of course, what happened is that when the French mandate was declared after the Treaty of Versailles and the French arrived in Lebanon, they decided to carve Lebanon out of Syria. This was part of the *mahafazat*, the governor of Syria. So Syrians look back and say that this is territory that was taken from them by foreigners, which is technically true. It’s also an artificial country, based as it is on the mutual love, fear, and suspicion of all the different ethnic and religious groupings here.

The French did indeed create Lebanon. But the Syrians, who came in in 1976, at the request of a Christian Maronite president (he thought the Palestinians were going to wipe out the Christians), have now stayed longer than the French did after the First World War. The Syrian mandate has lasted more than a quarter of a century, which is more than you can say for the French, who at least were pushed out eventually by the Brits.

How many Palestinians are in Lebanon, and in what circumstances did they arrive here?

Officially we’re told there are 370,000. The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the DFLP, which is a leftist organisation, has done a number of

surveys which suggest that in fact there are only about 170,000, that the other 200,000 have drifted off to Syria, Europe, they've got citizenship in America. They, or their parents or their grandparents, originally came to the camps here from what is now northern Israel. They came from Galilee. And they will all, even small children, tell you what is their home village. They were part of the great exodus of Palestinians at the time of the creation of the Israeli state. As you realise, Palestinians driven out of what became southern Israel ended up in Gaza. Those from the Jerusalem area ended up, if they didn't manage to stay in their homes, in the West Bank. And the ones in the north came into Lebanon.

When they came here they believed they were here for a few days until the war ended and they would go back to their homes in Palestine. They never were permitted to go back. They don't have that right of return. They may think they have it, but they don't actually have it. And so they fester on in the camps here, are not permitted to have work, not permitted to have Lebanese passports, they have *laisse passe*, and they live in great squalor and unhappiness. They were not even allowed to vote in the recent Palestinian elections. Iraqis abroad could vote in the Iraqi elections, but not the Palestinians. An interesting little gap there. And so they remain here.

And during the war when Lebanon fractured apart, although initially he was doing his best to keep out of it, Arafat's Fatah ended up, naturally enough, on the Muslim leftist side in the war, fighting the Christians. And then their sorry story continues with the tragedy of the Sabra-Shatila massacre by Israel's Phalangist allies in 1982; the camps war, in which even more Palestinians were killed in that massacre by Shiite Muslim militia men of Amal, run by the now speaker of parliament, Nabih Berri. And they continue to live in great squalor in the camps today. Some of them have managed to educate themselves. Some of them speak very good English and are trying to get foreign educations. I've been trying to help one young man, who saw his father murdered in the massacre, get a place at a British university, but it's pretty hard to do.

And referring to Sabra-Shatila, there is a connection with then General Ariel Sharon.

Very much so. Ariel Sharon, who is now the prime minister of Israel, was the defence minister. He gave the orders to send the Phalangists into the camp, allegedly to round up terrorists. Of course, they weren't terrorists; they were innocent people. And they were all, 1,700, killed. What has not had much light shed upon it is that the night before the Sabra-Shatila massacre began, before the Phalangists were sent in, Ariel Sharon made a statement saying that the Phalangist leader, Bashir Gemayel, who was president-elect and who was assassinated in a bombing, had been killed by Palestinian terrorists, which was totally untrue. So those Phalangists not only were sent into the camp on the specific orders of Ariel Sharon, where, as I say, in all they murdered up to 1,700 innocent Palestinians. They also went in with Sharon's words ringing in their ears that Palestinians had killed their leader, which was untrue.

I always shudder when I hear the word ‘complicated’ ascribed to a situation in the Middle East, but it seems that in the case of Lebanon, at least through the lens of most Americans, the situation is rather complicated with the different confessions, with the fact that certain government positions are reserved for different religious communities. That gives it an extraordinary flavour that I don’t know replicates itself anywhere in the region.

I don’t think Lebanon is complicated. That’s a myth proposed by journalists who don’t understand it at all, or by politicians who want to avoid discussing it. Look, when this country was created by the French, the largest single community were the Christian Maronites. And they pressed to have the largest possible area of Syria turned into Lebanon. But the Christians were quickly outbred by the Muslims, so the largest community now are the Shia Muslims, the second is the Sunnis, and then the Christians, and then the Druze, and then all kinds of smaller groups like the Armenians.

In order to sustain what is an artificially created state, the French decided to have a system of power sharing, where the president will always be a Christian Maronite, the prime minister will always be a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament will always be a Shiite. And throughout the main institutions of state, the ministries, for example, the central bank, they were distributed roughly in accordance with what the ethnic groups were in 1932: Christians, Muslims, and Druze. The last census was taken in 1932. No one dares to have another one in case it rocks the boat. So we have to go on pretending that the Christians are the largest group, even though they’re not.

At the end of the civil war, at the Ta’if meeting in Saudi Arabia, it was decided to try and change the sectarian system, but in fact all it did was take a little bit of power away from the Christian president and give a little bit more power to the Sunni Muslim prime minister. It didn’t affect the system of sectarianism. And the real problem, you see, when you have a country where you cannot become the president unless you’re a Christian and you cannot become the prime minister unless you’re a Sunni Muslim, and you cannot become the speaker of parliament, although I don’t know who would ever want to be the speaker of parliament in Lebanon, unless you’re a Shia Muslim, you have an intuitively artificial state which cannot be a modern state. It cannot grow up, it cannot mature. Because all of these various groups live in mutual suspicion of each other, saying, ‘Hold on a second. There are two Druze in that ministry, there are three ministers in this institution, but only two of them are Christian,’ and so on and so forth. So the system that was worked out by the French meant that Lebanon would intrinsically be a weak country, which it has always been. Invaders have been washing in and out of this country for 2,000 years.

The strange thing about Lebanon is that its people have learned from their experience. They learned to fight and die. This is a country which is very corrupt, in which people have been enjoying themselves. This is a country of fine wines and restaurants, and yet it was the only country that’s ever been able to defeat the Israelis. They drove them out eventually in 2000, Hezbollah and other groups. A

very dangerous country to meddle in. The American Marines were blown up here, 241 US personnel killed, October 23, 1983. The French were blown up here. Even the United Nations has a sorry record in southern Lebanon. A very dangerous country, very deceptive.

When you arrive here from Europe, it's the beginning of the Middle East. You smell the *nargeela*, hubble-bubble pipes, and you walk on the Corniche and see the palm trees. When you come from further east, from Iraq or from Iran or Afghanistan, it's the beginning of the West. I can buy my newspaper here, I can drink a gin and tonic before my meal in the evening. So it has this very attractive personality as a state, partly, I think, because the Lebanese have always retained their sense of humour; partly, too, because they have begun now to learn what they did to themselves in the civil war, which was an act of total folly and madness. I watched it all. And the most impressive thing at the moment, and it's a great tribute to Rafik Hariri, is that since his death, despite the provocations, there has not been any sign of an incipient civil war.

There are two reasons for this. One is, I think, the Lebanese don't want another war. They've had war. Fifteen years was a long time and a lot of death, 150,000 dead. The other reason is that during the war many Lebanese families who could afford it sent their children to be educated abroad. They went to New York, Boston, London, Geneva. And they've, many of them, come back. And they don't like the way this country is run. They think it's antique, one of them said to me the other day, but they like Lebanon and they don't want a war. They see no point at all in and they're absolutely not interested in sectarianism. And that is the greatest hope I've seen since Hariri was murdered.

We're speaking in early April 2005, and while I've been in the country, David Satterfield, a high State Department official has been visiting, as well as a congressional delegation. What kind of interference have you perceived by the United States in the domestic situation in Lebanon?

Look, the real question the opposition are asking themselves in private here, the people who are opposed to the Syrians, is, do the Americans really want a working democracy in Lebanon or is their support for freedom, democracy, liberty, you name it, in fact part of a neoconservative project which will be finalised when in a free and independent Lebanon the United States ambassador visits the president of Lebanon and says, 'Well, how about a peace treaty with Israel?' Is that what this is really about?

You see, in the run-up to the murder of Hariri, the pro-Syrian politicians, of course, including the then prime minister Omar Karami and the president, Lahoud, were openly saying to people like Walid Jumblatt, and by inference to Rafik Hariri, you're working Israel's policies for them. That is what this is about. We're talking about UN Resolution 1559 to get the Syrians out. And certainly I know in private, because I talked to all of them, the senior members of the opposition are very worried that America is much less interested in democracy than it is in shoring up another bulwark to the northern border of Israel. And

effectively, you see, by disarming the Hezbollah, which is also part of the UN resolution, there will be no active force capable of resisting any kind of interference in Lebanon's internal affairs.

And that is one reason why the opposition is saying, 'Look, we understand what the UN resolution says, but for the moment we're going to look after the resistance movement.' That's what Bahiya Hariri, the sister of Rafik Hariri, said at this big demonstration. So once the Syrians are out, the Americans will put the spotlight on the Hezbollah, and that will then become a very dangerous situation, because most Lebanese, with a few opposition exceptions, like Amin Gemayel, who doesn't really count, are not interested in disarming the Hezbollah. They say, look, when the war is over, it's over, and that means nobody will carry weapons. At the moment, we know Hezbollah is still carrying out operations in Sheba farms, which was originally part of Lebanon but which Israel continues to occupy as part of its occupation of Syria, claiming it is part of Syria.

I just spent a few days in Syria, and people were asking me there, 'These UN resolutions. What about Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights? Why isn't that being discussed?'

We know the reason it's not being discussed. Because American foreign policy in the Middle East has never been so skewed towards Israel and against the Arabs as it is now. That's bad for the Arabs, it's actually bad for the Israelis, and it's very bad for the US. But the policy is being ruthlessly pursued by Bush and his friends. The Americans brand this the Cedar Revolution. That was a State Department phrase, by the way; it wasn't a Lebanese phrase.

But the Americans don't understand what's happening here. These were not demonstrations for democracy, though they would like quite a bit of democracy if you could give it to the Lebanese, please. This was an insurrection against the corruption of government here. It was an insurrection against the way in which there is no real freedom of speech in parliament because it's weighted down with pro-Syrian MPs. It was not a demand for democracy per se. People were saying 'Enough.' They weren't saying 'Freedom, freedom.' They would like freedom. We would all like some freedom. I would like to have more freedom in Lebanon. But it has been misinterpreted in the West as part of this great domino effect of democracy, which is allegedly bursting out all over the place. But it's not. There isn't such an effect at all. This is how the legend, the narrative, is being written. And by misreading what's happening in Lebanon, the Americans will make more mistakes here. And they're using what is happening in Lebanon for their own project, and possibly for an Israeli project. And that's the real tragedy, because people here deserve better than that.

And with respect to the US, you mentioned 1983, when 241 marines were blown up here. There was also a Marine intervention in 1958.

That was when Camille Chamoun, a Christian Maronite, who was then president

of Lebanon, decided he would try to change the constitution and stand for an extra term. And at that point a small civil war erupted. In this very area we're in, actually, there was a lot of shooting. And basically it put the Druze against the Christians. And when Chamoun announced that he thought that weapons were pouring in from Syria, which may have been true, and that this was a Communist threat because Syria was a close ally of the Soviet Union, under the Eisenhower doctrine of protecting democracies, and this was a democracy at the time, from Communism, US Marines landed on the beaches of Lebanon at the very same point that they landed again in 1982.

You mentioned the Druze several times. Who are they? Who is their leader?

Walid Jumblatt. His family originally comes from Turkey. It's a Kurdish name. It means the iron man. I've often asked him to tell me who the Druze are, and he finds it rather hard. The Druze are an offshoot of Sunni Islam. There are no mosques per se. They have holy houses and they have holy men, and they do indeed, many of them, certainly the poorer people, believe that the moment you die you are reborn, which is obviously an idea that a warrior race like the Druze would want your fighters to believe in. There were social reasons for believing that as well as religious reasons, that you come back to life the moment you're dead. At one point they were an extremely powerful group in northern Syria, around Aleppo. They had a caliphate. But their power was broken, principally by Baghdad and the Ottoman Empire, and they moved further south, so that there was a large Druze community in Syria and another comparatively large but, in terms of Lebanon, a small community in the Shouf Mountains. In fact, they have a little area of the Shouf Mountains and they are also in this little strip of road down here which I'm pointing to outside the window. This is the Druze strip of Beirut. My landlord here is Druze.

The leader of Hezbollah, the Shia political formation here, is Hassan Nasrallah. I've seen him speak several times. He's charismatic, confident, and he seems to have a strong following among the Shia population. Does it extend beyond that group?

Hassan Nasrallah is a very interesting man. Most people forget that originally he was a military commander in southern Lebanon. He's a guerrilla fighter; he's a tactician, a military man. But he is also a very learned man. He is a *sayyed*, he's said to be a descendant of the Prophet and believes he is. I think he is the unifying stability within Hezbollah.

There are factions within the Hezbollah guerrilla movement: some people who believe they should become more Lebanese politically orientated, some people who believe they should take more action against the Israelis in Sheba farms, some who believe they shouldn't remain close allies of Syria, some who believe it's time to say, 'we've got to break the Syrian connection and defend the Lebanese people only and being with the opposition.'

When Nasrallah held his demonstration demanding the truth about Hariri, the end of UN Resolution 1559, which, of course, affects Hezbollah –

Because of Syrian support for Hezbollah?

Because of Syrian support. The weapons come through Syria from Iran, and the money comes through Syria from Iran to keep Hezbollah in existence. It was principally because Nasrallah was going to speak that he got half a million Shiites in Beirut. And there were some bussed in, by the way, from Damascus; there were some Syrians in the audience. But he got half a million, basically, Lebanese Shiites. And by taking and continuing to take Syria's side, he has kept the Shiites from being part of the opposition movement, largely. If America had not demanded the disarming of Hezbollah in Resolution 1559, it's quite possible that Nasrallah would have been with the opposition and you would have a better chance at democracy that America says it wants. But the disarming of Hezbollah is something the Israelis want, and that, I suspect, is why the Americans put it in the resolution.

Israel invaded first in 1978, but then again in 1982. It remained in the country until 2000. Hezbollah is given credit for forcing Israel out of Lebanon. Do you think that's accurate?

The Israeli military officers, whom I've since met in Israel, believe that is basically accurate, yes. Hezbollah believe it's accurate. I'm not going to disagree with both the Israelis and the Hezbollah. Look, Hezbollah, like so many of the armed groups in this region, was Israel's creation, just as Israel openly encouraged Hamas in the Gaza Strip, when it thought it could destroy the PLO (this is all before Oslo, of course) by doing so. When it came here, the ferocity of the invasion in 1982 drove people who were not deeply religious into seeing Islam as the only way of leading their life if they were going to seriously oppose Israel's military force.

I remember, as the Israelis stormed up towards Beirut, being on a beach down at Khalde, about five miles south of here and suddenly seeing these young men with yellow and green bandanas running towards an Israeli tank holding Kalashnikovs and shooting, shouting Allah o akbar, Allah o akbar, God is great, God is great. And to my astonishment, they captured the tank and the armoured personnel carrier and the crew fled into a school shooting. And they then drove the vehicle into Beirut. And I said to myself, 'Who in the hell are these people?' I've never seen anything like this. I was frightened for my life at the time, but I saw what was happening. And this was actually the first Hezbollah. This was the creation of Hezbollah on the beach of Khalde. I've met many thousands of Hezbollah fighters, and they have all agreed this was indeed the first Hezbollah creation. This was the moment. So I saw the birth of it.

And from that moment onwards, Hezbollah became an organisation of great importance in Lebanon, a key player, as you would say in your American academic world. It was the only real resistance movement against the Israelis.

There was Amal, but it could often be a sandbag for the Israelis. And the Lebanese army, as usual, did nothing. They didn't fight the Israeli invasion. So Hezbollah in a sense won its spurs, to use an old cliché. The Americans say it is the most powerful terrorist movement in the world. Whether you want to use the word terrorist or not, it's certainly, I think, the most disciplined guerrilla movement in the world, much more disciplined, for example, than the insurgency in Iraq, although that, of course, is on a much bigger scale.

Needless to say, the Hezbollah are watching the insurgency in Iraq with great interest to see how the Americans respond and see how the insurgency is developing. You see, they realise, of course, that just as when they were fighting the Israelis, they had a longer-term objective, which was to play a role in Lebanese politics later, we freed the country, we have a right, so they realised, which the Americans do not, that the insurgents in the Sunni areas of Iraq have a longer-term aim than just getting rid of the Americans. It is to be able to say afterwards, 'We got rid of the Americans, so the Sunnis do have a right to power in Iraq.' And the Shias did not fight the Americans, you see. And the Hezbollah see this. They can work it out. And the Americans, again, don't do so. They won't look at the day after tomorrow, only today and tonight. Short-term, short-term, short-term. That's why they're in this mess in Iraq in the first place.

We'll talk about Iraq in just a few moments.

I feared we might.

Just a couple more questions about Lebanon. Sheikh Nasrallah, in a recent statement, said he would welcome the US military in Lebanon. Is this just some rhetorical bravura?

I think what he's doing is sending a message to the Americans that if they want to take on the Hezbollah, they will have to come back and go through what they went through in 1982-83, more bloodshed. And he knows very well that the Americans have no stomach for yet another insurgency on their hands. Iraq is quite enough. But, yes, it's rhetoric. This is the kind of language that resistance groups in the Middle East regularly use. This is the sort of thing that Arafat used to say over and over again until we fell asleep listening to it. But the fact that it's a Hezbollah leader that says it is a little bit more serious.

And in addition to having this military formation, it is providing certain services to the Shia south which has traditionally been immiserated, lives in poverty, not the recipient of a lot of government services. So they've been able to build up a real community. That's my sense of it.

There is no doubt that if you look at parliament here now, the most hard-working MPs are the Hezbollah ones. They are men from poor backgrounds, not the rich

élites, *zoamma*, the aristocratic classes, that you've got behind the feudal lords who run much of the parliament. And there is no doubt that the repair of roads, the reinstallation of phone lines, the clean water that's been laid on into many villages is the result of Hezbollah money, which is Iranian money, of course. The Iranians are looking after their Shiites in Lebanon. That's what we're talking about here. Another interesting question with Hezbollah, you see, is if they break with Syria, can they keep their links with Iran. The answer is probably yes. Certainly financially. I don't know about in terms of weapons. But there are plenty of weapons in this country anyway. This business about disarmament. No one has been disarmed. Every house here has a Kalashnikov just in case the war re-starts.

I was talking to a representative of Hezbollah, and he spoke of a Shia oil belt in the region.

Was this a guy named Nabulsi?

I'm not naming names.

Because that's what I told him, and I think it's coming back to me. It is a fact that God has so positioned the Shiites that with the exception of the Kurds in northern Iraq, the Shiites live on the oil. In Saudi Arabia, it's in the eastern provinces, which are largely Shia. Kuwait, the same thing applies. Bahrain, it's a Shia majority, but a Sunni monarchy. Iran, obviously. The Alawis are an offshoot of Shia Islam, so they run Syria, where there is oil, but not enough. And, of course, they're here, where they don't have any oil, which is why they're poor. But they would probably be poor anyway, because they've always been the oppressed group within Islam. The Sunnis have been the merchants and the commerce men, and the Shias have been the hewers of wood and drawers of water.

Let's move, then, geographically, to Iraq, which, along with Iran, is a Shia-majority state. You've been to the country many times. Let me ask you as a journalist, how do you get in and out? How do you operate there?

I go to Beirut airport, and I climb on a little airplane which has two propellers and 20 passengers, and it's run by a company called Magic Carpet, whose owner is a pharmacist in Corniche Mazra, near here. And this airplane takes 2 1/2 hours climbing up over the snow-covered mountains. You see the cedars of Lebanon as you go over. And very quickly it's over Syria, and you have the start of the great desert that lasts all the way to the Tigris River. You realize how beautiful Lebanon is and how harsh the rest of the Middle East is on this plane.

You land at Baghdad airport. The airport road from the city of Baghdad up to the airport itself, no diplomats will now travel on it, only armed men and with escorts. The British don't even travel at all. They've got a helicopter from the airport to their embassy and this sort of Crusader-like fortress around the

Republican Palace. I'm met by my driver, and I drive the airport road on my own with my driver every time. I don't go in helicopters at all. And I either stay with Iraqi friends or at a small hotel near the Tigris River. And from there I do travel around every day in the city of Baghdad, and sometimes outside.

But it is extremely dangerous now. I don't blame them. Many of my colleagues won't go to Iraq. And many of them who do, they just sit in their hotel rooms. I don't object to that. What I do object to is they don't tell their readers that they sit in the hotel room. So they give the impression that they can check out stories or, for example, people shot by the Americans, when in fact they can't or don't or won't. So they take the line from a telephone call from an American officer and that becomes the story, which is one reason why the reporting on Iraq has become so skewed. But it is very dangerous. And certainly there are really only two of us on *The Independent* going in and out of Iraq at the moment. And we're trying to keep the numbers down, because not only do we not want to be kidnapped, we don't want to have a kidnap victim from *The Independent*. But it's certainly the most dangerous assignment I've been on for a long time.

It's comparable to the worst days of the recent civil war in Algeria, when the GIA (the Islamic organisation) were taking the heads off every foreigner they could find. And that was pretty frightening. In those days we reckoned that we could spend three minutes in a shop and get out before anyone could make a phone call and bring someone to kill you. I reckon it's down to five minutes in Baghdad at the moment. But I do still go out and interview people in the street, and I go see refugees, and I'll travel outside Baghdad, but only with great preparation. One trip down to Najaf, which is right down Highway 18, where foreigners have been abducted and had their throats cut, it took me two weeks to plan, with the help of Shiite clerics. I travelled with a Shiite cleric in the car.

Does it help being an independent British journalist?

It doesn't help being British, but I don't think it matters anymore. They kidnap Irish people, they kidnap British people, they kidnap Turks, they kidnap Saudis, they kidnap their own people. I think we've gone past the point of being anti-Western. It's become anti-anything.

With the exception of Kurdistan, you have to realise Iraq is in a state of total anarchy. There is no government control, despite the lies that Iyad Allawi and the other American-appointed people have said. The Americans can't travel freely. It's that bad. The fact that every helicopter flies only a few feet above the ground for fear that if they fly higher they will be hit by a ground-to-air missile tells you pretty much all you need to know.

What have you been able to learn about the Shiite cleric Ayatollah Sistani? He seems to be the driving force in Iraq. He's an elusive man who doesn't give interviews.

He doesn't, does he? I feared for his life when I read Tom Friedman recommending

him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Look, Sistani is an interesting character, because he has an enormous emotional pull. Had Hakim and others survived, we would have seen a much looser control over the Shiites. The interesting thing is that Sistani basically does not want an Islamic republic, he does not want an Iranian-style Islam imposed upon Iraq. And that is the great saving grace for the Shiites, in that they were able to say effectively to the Americans, we will join the insurrection unless we have elections, and we're going to win.

The danger, of course, is that having won, they're not going to get what they voted for. I went into the polling stations on that day with the Shiites. They arrived. Very moving. You could hear the first suicide bombers blowing themselves up, whoom, whoom, across the city. And there they were, the Shiites walking with their children, babies in arms, to vote. But when I got inside the polling station and talked to them, there were three reasons why they were voting: one, because our *marja*, our religious leader, told us to, Sistani; two, because it's time that the Shiites were represented in power because we are the largest group; three, to end the American occupation.

And they are not going to end the American occupation. And at some point, and this is the great danger, the Shiites may turn around and say, 'Well, we've enjoyed the democracy, but we haven't got what we wanted. Get the Americans out.' And they won't be interested in voting for that anymore. That's the danger now.

The US is building permanent military bases in Iraq. Their intention seems to be to stay for many years.

I think so. Look, the great equation which causes so much bloodshed in Iraq is this: the Americans must leave, and the Americans will leave, and the Americans can't leave. They can't leave for a whole series of reasons, which we know. Because if they leave behind them chaos, so what did you achieve by invading Iraq? That's the question. There must be many Americans in the State Department, at least, now who think that maybe they should have just let Saddam stay. That's not what the Shiites would tell you, but that's what some must think.

It comes back always to the same question I ask myself more and more, which is, why did we invade Iraq? We didn't invade for weapons of mass destruction, because there weren't any. We didn't want to help the Shiites, because we had asked them to rise up in 1991 and sat back while they were all massacred. Clearly, we wouldn't have invaded Iraq if its chief export was cauliflower or carrots. So the oil dimension has to be there.

But I think there is something else, too. I was down that horrible Highway 18 again. I was actually interviewing some people after a Red Cross man had been murdered. And I was standing by the roadside, and the road started to move. And I thought, my God, it's an earthquake. And around the corner and coming up the highway was an American infantry division. Thousands and thousands and thousands of soldiers. Abrams tanks, Bradley armoured vehicles, truck after truck with the infantry, all wearing shades, rifles pointing out the side like porcupines,

transporters, mobile-tracked armoured vehicles, anti-aircraft guns, heavy artillery. It took almost an hour to pass, and all the time the ground shook.

And I remember thinking that 2,000 years ago a little bit to the west of where I was standing we would have been feeling the vibration of centurions' feet, tromp, tromp, tromp. And I began to wonder, then, when I saw this massive armoured centipede, giant, whether it didn't also represent the visceral need to project power, which is a characteristic of a superpower. The Russians showed it all the time, Hungary, Afghanistan. Often they showed it in fear, of course, but they did need to project power. We can go to Baghdad, so we will go to Baghdad. We can go to Tehran. We can go to Damascus. We will, because we can. And I think that is part of the way in which a neoconservative thinks. You know, it's very easy to sneer at the Cheneys and the Wolfowitzes and the Feiths and the Perles. But I think we should spend a lot more time examining what their motives are and what makes them tick, because I think this projection of power is much more important than we realise. Possibly it's almost as important as oil.

That need to project power. You have to be on this side of the world to realise that the Americans have a steel line right across the region. They're in Britain, they're in Germany, they're in Italy, they're in Greece, they're in Turkey. They tried to come here and failed. They won't get to Syria yet, but they're in Iraq, they're in Saudi Arabia on a lesser scale, they're in Qatar on a big scale, they're in Bahrain, they're in Kuwait, special forces are operating in Yemen. They tried Somalia and it didn't work. There is a whole steel line that runs down from the Arctic to right down below the equator. Lily pads is what Donald Rumsfeld calls them, these zones where the Americans live. But in fact they are not lily pads; they are armed fortresses. They are the fortresses which have been positioned, as I say, from the Arctic to the equator which represent American power. And, of course, the other side is Russia. Although they are already in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as well as Afghanistan. They're not in Iran, which is why they're threatening Iran. They're not in Syria, which is why they're now threatening Syria, of course. They're not in North Korea, but that's a different story, because they've got weapons of mass destruction so we'll be nice to the North Koreans.

The other day I was taking some friends of mine to see Crusader castles in northern Lebanon including the one at Chateau de Saint Gilles in Tripoli, a massive stronghold. I've been to them many times. But my friend, an Irish friend of mine, is a builder, and I wanted him to tell me what he thought of the building of the Crusaders. And he had actually done a lot of work on it. He knew how the Crusaders fought.

And he said that the problem for the Crusaders was that their enemies were so ferocious that they had to build this massive keep to impress people. And it is. It looks beautiful from the outside. A Crusader castle is lovely. But when you're inside and it's cold and damp and you can't see out, you just have to peer through these loopholes, arrow slits, which I was doing in Tripoli. I could only see a mosque and a little bit of a river. That's all. And that's all the Crusaders saw of the land they were occupying.

And that's now happening to the Americans in Iraq. They sit in this little Green Zone, which is where the Republican Palace was, where the American and British embassies are and where all their American-appointed Iraqis are, surrounded by palisades of pre-stressed concrete, the nearest we've got to the Crusader castle. And they peer out through the machine gun openings and they see a street outside. That is Baghdad. That is their contact with the land they occupy. And all these new positions, Kandahar airport in Afghanistan, the huge American base outside Falluja, the Green Zone inside Baghdad, are massive Crusader compounds. When I was in Tripoli, I actually began to understand why perhaps Osama bin Laden calls Americans the Crusaders. They do live in fortresses and peer out through their loopholes at the land they occupy.

There is a lot to learn from the Crusaders. In the later parts of the period of the Crusades, they were attacked by *hashashin*. Assassins is our word. The Crusaders brought that word back to Europe. And these were actually Shiite Muslims, very extreme, who believed they had to kill their enemies, all of them, including their Muslim enemies. They tried twice to kill Saladin, and they came, allegedly, heavily drugged, hence the *hashashin*, hashish, but with the idea of martyrdom. They would kill themselves as they killed their enemies. And they came in the first place from Persia and then from Syria. So the foreign fighters is something that Crusaders were also familiar with. And in the end they helped to finish the Crusaders, as well as, of course, the forces of Saladin, who was a Kurd. A lot of historical parallels.

If you go back, and in some ways it's even more interesting than the Crusaders, to the British invasion of Iraq in 1917, I have an actual document that was put up on the wall by General Stanley Maude, when he arrived in Baghdad. 'To the people of Baghdad: we come here not as conquerors but as liberators, to free you from generations of tyranny.' We were saying the same things then. What happened when the insurgency started against the British? It started in Falluja, And we shelled Falluja and half destroyed the town. We surrounded Najaf and claimed we wanted a Shiite prelate who was an insurrectionist to be handed over to us. Badr, not Sadr, but the name is similar. In the House of Commons, Lloyd George stood up and said, 'If the British Army leaves Iraq, there will be civil war.' And British military intelligence in Baghdad told London that foreign fighters were crossing the border from Syria, which of course was then controlled by the French. It's like a fingerprint identification pass for insurgency. And, again, for some reason the Americans didn't read the history books.

Talk about the impact of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, Afghanistan, Guantanamo, the sexual humiliation, the use of dogs, and the resonance that has in Islamic culture.

People misunderstand how Muslims react to this. You know, Muslims always believed that's how Americans behaved. They believed that they would be set upon with dogs, they believed they would be sexually humiliated. They believed

this is how the Westerner behaves, the immoral West. The shock of Abu Ghraib was much greater on us than it was on the Iraqis. They knew about it. Their relatives were telling them about it. It had been going on for a long time. This was not some sudden appearance. This is a system. It was happening in Afghanistan. I was talking to people in Afghanistan who had been badly beaten and tortured by some soldiers. We knew the exact location and the dates. And we would write in the paper and nothing would happen. So the people of this region, they expect the Americans to behave like Abu Ghraib. It wasn't a shock here. It was a shock in New York and Washington and Boston and San Diego and Berkeley. That's where it was a shock.

And in terms of chain of command that Seymour Hersh has written about, he has a book by that very same title, it's been very limited. It hasn't reached the higher-ups. Replicating, I think, previous colonial occupations, where the lower ranks were punished and the officers and the civilians, most crucially, who give the orders, get a free pass.

Except for Clive of India, I think, but anyway, yes, by and large. Seymour Hersh, with the possible exception of John Burns, is about the only American journalist doing his job on Iraq. He doesn't have to go there, but by God, we're learning what's happening from him. If you read the banalities in the main American mainstream press, they're certainly not worth reading. We do not fully understand, for example, that there are 20,000 to 30,000 armed mercenaries, armed civilians, from South Africa and from Kenya and from Ireland and Britain and America, a law unto themselves, driving around Iraq. And they shoot and they don't care. There is no law, no justice, nothing.

These are the so-called security contractors.

Security contractors. Those are the soft words. It's another of these like disputed territory for occupied territory in the West Bank, and so on and so forth.

Might mercenary be a more descriptive term?

They're mercenaries. They're hired armed men. Yes, of course they are. And I call them mercenaries. I don't call them security contractors. I leave that to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. We don't realise, because of this effective cover-up, that torture is common in Iraqi police stations again, just as it was under Saddam. That torture has always been common in Abu Ghraib under the Americans, not as bad as it was under Saddam, but that's not really the kind of scoreboard you want to set yourself against. These mercenaries are flooded around the country. That most of Iraq is in a state of anarchy. And that is the reality. I don't know how far self-delusion can go before something happens to prove the truth, but with the connivance of journalists, lethal connivance, in my view, the world

has been told that Iraq is the newest democracy and everything is going to be okay. Just a bit of a problem with these insurgents for the moment, who number in the tens of thousands, of course.

You say the Americans are kind of in this bind: they really can't leave the country because chaos might ensue. But hasn't that always been the prescription for continued occupation? And could it possibly be worse than it is now? It's totally speculative.

Look, there will not be a civil war in Iraq. The first people ever to mention civil war were the spokesmen for the occupying authorities, the Americans. They constantly talked about the dangers of civil war. The Sunnis are trying to start a civil war, Osama bin Laden is trying to start a civil war. There has never been a civil war in Iraq, and there will not be a civil war. Again, the Americans do not understand. It is not an ethnically divided society; it is a tribal society. And the tribes have intermarried.

I went to the funeral of a Sunni doctor who was killed. I think he was certainly murdered by Shiites, and the reason was that he had objected to the building of a *Husseiniya*, a Shiite mosque, at the end of his street. Armed men came in, shot him in his doctor's surgery, walked out and drove away in a car. And I was sitting with his brother after the funeral in the street in a tent surrounded by cars to prevent a car bomb from driving into us. And I said to him, 'Is there going to be a civil war?' He said, 'Why do you want a civil war? Why do all you Westerners want us to have a civil war? We're all intermarried. My wife is a Shiite. Do you want me to kill her? Is that what you want, Mr. Fisk?' And he's telling the truth, of course. The only people who talk about civil war is us, Westerners, although I have to say that the extraordinary forbearance and patience of the Shiites of Iraq is wondrous to behold, because every possible provocation has been made with car bombs at religious festivals to try and stir them to attack their fellow Sunni Muslims, and they will not do so. And I think the reason is that they've all intermarried. They're not going to kill each other. We might hold that fear over them so that they will obey us, but there is not going to be a civil war in Iraq.

You've been to Afghanistan. What's going on there?

In large parts of Afghanistan, Kandahar and Helmand provinces, it is anarchy. Westerners cannot travel freely in the country. They could do that under the Taliban, ironically enough, but not now. Drug production is up and beyond pre-Taliban level. The Taliban, after all, were wiping drugs out. Democracy has been postponed again. Elections can't be held now until the autumn. Most of the warlords, the gangsters, and the rapists of the big civil war period in Afghanistan, are now holding senior positions in the Karzai administration, if not in ministries, then as governors of local towns, like Karzai's own relative, who runs Kandahar. Rashid Dostum, for example, a mass murderer and a drug baron, is a senior man

in the new democratic Afghanistan. And since these warlords have no interest in real democracy, there isn't going to be a real democracy.

And we, the West, or the Americans, pay them. They're our men, just as they were when we wanted to fight the Taliban. Let the Afghans die instead of us. The whole point of war now is that the other guy dies, but you don't suffer casualties anymore. Iraq is proving that that doesn't work, but that was the idea. We bomb from the air and we send our local surrogates to do the fighting. That doesn't work in Iraq, because the local surrogates have been totally, in many cases, taken over by the insurgents. They've been infiltrated.

There is a low-level insurgency going on. Every few days an American is killed. And many Afghans are killed. But that's not given as much attention.

Look at the Iraqi casualties. The Americans are not interested; they don't want to know. The authorities won't tell us, the health ministry, run by American appointees, won't tell us. Almost every day I go to the mortuary in Baghdad and find 20 or 30 people, men, women, children, dead of gunshot wounds, shot at American checkpoints, shot in family feuds, shot by insurgents for alleged collaboration. And this is just Baghdad I'm talking about, not Mosul, not Najaf, not Basra. The Iraqis are paying a terrible price every day for our adventure in Iraq.

And when you hear Iraqis say it was better under Saddam, it's time we listen to them. They don't mean that they were freer under Saddam, although there was torture. They know what Saddam was like. They don't want Saddam. But they mean that there was security. Do you want freedom and anarchy or do you want dictatorship and security? If you have a family, it's a big choice to make.

The problem that we don't understand is that what we're offering the Iraqis is not what they asked for. One of the things that the Americans again didn't realise, they thought if they could get Saddam, the insurgency would end. But many people told me they wanted to join the insurgency but, as long as Saddam was on the loose, they didn't in case he came back to power again. But once the Americans got him, the insurgency took off. It was the opposite of what they thought.

And bin Laden. You've met with him. You're one of the few Western journalists who was able to get to bin Laden. Have you seen him lately?

No, I haven't. I haven't tried. I've never tried to see him. The first time I was introduced by a mutual friend, and the second time he asked to see me, and the third time he asked to see me. I've never asked to see him. And when he did do that, I didn't rush off on the next plane. I was busy. It took me a week or two. I said, 'I have other things to do.' I'm not going to have people snap their fingers and *The Independent* rushes off.

Bin Laden, well... I first met him in 1993, and in the years that followed he

changed. He became a wiser man and in some ways a less wise man. When I last saw him, which was in 1997, I spent the night in one of his camps, a camp that of course was built by the CIA during the Russian war in Afghanistan. And he said to me there that his fighters had been fighting in Mogadishu. It was the first time he had ever revealed this, as he pointed out to me. He didn't want me to miss that point. And they saw how poor American morale was in Somalia. And his view of the United States was formed around the eyewitness description of his fighters in Somalia. Paper tiger. I remember saying to him, 'I'm not sure that you're right. I wouldn't be so certain that the Americans have poor morale. The Russians, maybe.'

It was very, very cold, and there was this huge air-raid shelter built into the living rock of the mountain. He had built it. He said, 'Mr. Robert, from this mountain upon which you are sitting we defeated the Russian army and destroyed the Soviet Union.' The first thing, probably he's right about defeating the Russian army. He would have had a certain role in destroying the Soviet Union, but not quite as big as he thought it was.

And then he said, 'And I pray to God that he permits us to turn America into a shadow of itself.' And on September 11, 2001, I was crossing the Atlantic. I was on my way to America. And I remember when we turned around and went back to Europe, I turned on the television, and I saw the Twin Towers coming down in that sort of biblical crash of smoke and fire, I thought to myself, well, New York now looks like a shadow of itself, doesn't it? So who did that?

I was still in the airplane, still flying back to Europe again across the Atlantic, when I dictated two stories to the paper. One of them, the lesser story, was basically saying, it looks like bin Laden. We can't point the finger, but when we have this scale of crime against humanity, we are entitled to ask who has declared war on the United States, and bin Laden had. And the second article I wrote said that in the coming days and weeks we will be told who did it and how, but we will be told that we must not ask the question why. Ask who did it but don't ask why, because that would involve discussing America's relationships with the Middle East and, in particular, Israel.

And the moment I started, that evening, to ask the question why, on an Irish radio show with Alan Dershowitz, he started shouting at me down the telephone that I was irresponsible, that I was pro-terrorist, that I was anti-American, which was the same as being anti-Semitic. This was a new twist. If you criticise America, you were now a Jew hater, a racist, you see, which is rubbish, complete rubbish. And I quickly learned from the e-mails which flooded into the paper, which, of course, were written by people who had obviously been encouraged to write them, people in Houston, Texas, saying, 'I will not take your magazine anymore or your newspaper', I wish we did sell in Texas, but we don't, saying that I was as bad as bin Laden, I represented evil itself. That was the degree to which that question why had to be turned off.

Why did we invade Iraq? Why did we bomb Afghanistan? Why did 19 suicide killers destroy all those lives in New York? Why, why, why? And still we don't

ask this question seriously enough. All of us have allowed the American president to say that September 11, 2001, changed the world forever. It did not. I'm not going to let 19 Arab murderers change my world, and we shouldn't let Bush change our world by saying that.

Tell me about your new book.

It's called *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*. I'm not trying to steal something off Huntington's Clash of Civilisations. The reason is that my father, who was much older than my mother, was a soldier in the First World War. He was sent to the Somme in 1918, age 19. And when he died at the age of 93 in 1992, I inherited his First World War campaign medal, 1914-18, on the back of which was written 'The great war for civilisation.' And in the 17 months that followed The Great War, the victorious powers created the borders of Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, and most of the Middle East. And I've spent my entire professional career watching the people in those borders burn – in Belfast, in Sarajevo, Baghdad, Beirut, across the Middle East.

And I wanted to explore if it was possible to escape from history, to be able to say 'Enough.' Because the people here and in Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland, they live with history every day. They live with the creation of the Northern Ireland border. The Palestinians live with the existence of Balfour's declaration that Britain would support a Jewish homeland in Palestine, because they're living in squalor here because of these decisions. So I've been trying to work out in my mind, having spent well over a quarter of a century in the Middle East, whether you can escape from history, whether you can say, 'Enough. We draw a line on Balfour. We start again.' And part of this, I think, is the need to refuse the narrative which we're given by others, the narrative of Bush, for example, that September 11 changed the world forever. One thousand seven hundred Palestinians died at Sabra-Shatila. We don't light candles for them. That's more than half the total dead of the World Trade Centre. Murdered in 1982, in front of me. I was in the camps.

My father, in the First World War, refused to execute a fellow soldier, an Australian soldier, actually, who had been charged with murder. He refused to command the firing party. So my father himself was put on court martial. His punishment in the end was to clear up the bodies lying around in the muck of the Western Front after the war was over. I actually have investigated and got the last appeal for clemency from the young man who was, of course, shot in northern France. He appealed to the judges, 'I'm only 19. Please let me have a new life.' But he was shot at 3:15 in the morning. And I did go and investigate the name of the execution party's officer, and it was not my father. He did refuse. There was a bit of a chilling moment when the papers arrived and through the computer, the Public Record Office in London, or the National Archives, as they now call them. And my father refused, you see.

And the book is also about refusing to believe what we're told and refusing to

take orders. A very depressing experience, because I go backwards and forwards in time. We start off with me talking to bin Laden in Afghanistan. Then we go back to the Russian invasion, which I reported and was present in. Then we go forward to the Iran-Iraq war. Then we go back to the First World War and we see my father marching off to fight on the last night of the war. Very depressing experience. I was going to bed very distressed in the evenings after writing all day and all evening and early in the morning. A good friend of mine said, I'm not surprised. You're just writing about pain and betrayal and injustice and death, which is true.

The Iran-Iraq war was a terrible war to write about. I don't think any Westerner has been into quite such detail as to what happened on the battlefield as my book does. For example, the section on the Iran-Iraq war ends with an interview between me and the senior newsreel camera man for the Iraqi army under Saddam, who describes how he had to watch the execution of soldiers for desertion, how they cried for their wives and children and pleaded for mercy and were shot down as the soldiers said 'Long live Saddam!' And that chapter ends with the executions on the Iran-Iraq war front and moves straight to my father, who is told to execute a soldier and says no.

(Due to time constraints some portions of the interview were not included in the national broadcast in the United States. Those portions are included in this transcript.)

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