

Journalist Robert Fisk about criticising Israel

The noted journalist Robert Fisk sounds off about the abuse he's had for daring to criticise Israel in the western press

Robert Fisk: I am being vilified for telling the truth about Palestinians

'The abuse being directed at anyone who dares to criticise Israel is reaching McCarthyite proportions'

13 December 2000

In the Middle East jungle, a journalist has to expect a few sticks and stones. A Bahrain newspaper cartoonist once depicted me as a rabid dog (fit, of course, for extermination), and Cairo's most lickspittle columnist called me "a crow pecking at the corpse of Egypt". But the degree of abuse and outright threats now being directed at anyone academic, analyst, reporter who dares to criticise Israel (or dares to tell the truth about the Palestinian uprising) is fast reaching McCarthyite proportions. Take Edward Said, the brilliant Palestinian academic who is a professor at Columbia University.

He has been facing unprecedented abuse from the Zionist Organisation of America, which last year demanded that he be fired from the Modern Language Association and which now demands on an almost daily basis his dismissal from his professorship at Columbia solely because he points out, with clinical ferocity and painful accuracy, the historical tragedy of Palestinian dispossession, the brutality of Israel's continued occupation and the bankruptcy of the Oslo "peace" agreement. Columbia University has issued an unprecedented public defence of Said and "the fundamental values of a great university", quoting John Stuart Mill and adding that to give way to the Jewish lobby's demand would be "a threat to us all and to academic freedom".

Too true. Noam Chomsky himself Jewish is one of the most profound philosophers of our age, but his scathing reviews of the Israeli occupation and America's blind, unquestioning support for Israel now earn him ever more ruthless abuse. In the United States, he wrote recently, a whole population is kept in ignorance of the facts because "the economic and military programmes (of Israel) rely crucially on US support, which is domestically unpopular and would be far more so if its purposes were known." Ignorance of the Middle East is now so firmly adhered to in the US that only a few tiny newspapers report anything other than Israel's point of view. You won't find Chomsky in The New York Times. It was put very well by Charlie Reese in a recent issue of the Orlando Sentinel note the boondocks location when he wrote that "Palestinians won't get their independence until Americans get theirs".

But the attempt to force the media to obey Israel's rules is now international. We must say that Israel is under siege by Palestinians (rather than occupying Palestinian land), that Palestinians are responsible for the violence (even though Palestinians are the principal victims), that Arafat turned down a good deal at Camp David (though he was offered just over 60 per cent of his land, not 94 per cent), and that Palestinians indulge in child sacrifice (rather than question why the Israeli troops have shot so many Palestinian children).

Israeli ambassadors and Israel's lobbyists have never been such frequent visitors to European newspaper offices, to complain about reports or reporters, sometimes in a quite disgraceful manner. The Johannesburg Star a sister paper of The Independent which carries my own Middle East reports was confronted by one pro-Israeli group this year which claimed that I was in some way assisting the

right-wing historian David Irving someone I have never met and never wish to meet. They subsequently withdrew their allegation.

Then an odd thing happened in Ireland at a prize-giving ceremony in memory of a Belfast journalist. Mark Sofer, Israel's ambassador in Dublin, had been invited to talk about reporting in conflict zones to journalism students under the auspices of Co-operation Ireland, a charitable movement dedicated to North-South relations. But at one point he chose to use the opportunity to attack my own reporting of the Middle East, to suggest that it should not be read or believed. Mr Sofer is, of course, entitled to his views but not to air his prejudices in a charitable forum without allowing a right of reply. The charity has since announced that it "totally dissociates itself" from the ambassador's remarks. So it should.

And yet it goes on. In South Africa, in Europe, in Australia I still treasure the five pages of abuse in an Australian lobby group's magazine headlined "The Ignoble Scribe" and accusing me of a "stupor of self-deception". Oddly, you can now learn more from the Israeli press than the American media. The brutality of Israeli soldiers is fully covered in Ha'aretz, which also reports on the large number of US negotiators who are Jewish. Four years ago, a former Israeli soldier described in an Israeli newspaper how his men had looted a village in southern Lebanon; when the piece was reprinted in The New York Times, the looting episode was censored out of the text.

So here's just one final question. If Arab ambassadors and lobbyists behaved like their Israeli opposite numbers, would we listen to them? Would we respect them? Would we run for cover and print only one side of the story? Would we hell.