
Book Review

Lebanon: Who is 'biting' whom?

by Susan Welsh

Pity the Nation: the Abduction of Lebanon

by Robert Fisk

Atheneum, New York, 1990

678 pages, hardbound, \$24.95

Robert Fisk has been a reporter based in Lebanon for two British newspapers, the *Times* and then the *Independent*, since 1976—fifteen years in which that nation has been plunged into unspeakable barbarism. A journalist has to be either very brave or very foolish to stay in such a place—or perhaps both.

Fisk makes clear from the outset that his is a journalistic account, not a comprehensive history. "I suggest no answers and offer no solutions," he writes, adding that he sees the job of journalists as "watching and witnessing history and then . . . recording it as honestly as we can."

He reports ably, and the book is rich in vignettes and stories of the tragedy which he has witnessed. For any who think the war in Lebanon can be understood in simplistic terms, the book is a useful antidote. Fisk does not hold back from describing—for those with the stomach strong enough to keep reading—the Israel-backed Phalangist massacres of Palestinians at Sabra and Chatila, or the Palestinian atrocities against Christians in Damour, or the butchery by Syrian President Hafez al-Assad at Hama. For Americans in particular, who like things in black and white ("who are the good guys?"), there are lessons to be learned.

But is the account truthful, as a whole? For historical accuracy and objectivity, it is not enough to have "been there"; you have to have an analysis that makes sense. Despite Fisk's claim that he is leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions, it is impossible to write a book such as this one without expressing one's own evaluation.

Take one example, Fisk's treatment of Gen. Michel Aoun, the man who provoked the most recent act in the Lebanese tragedy by closing down some of the ports through which Syria was running a brisk drug trade out of Lebanon. Aoun, according to Fisk, was creating a "small military dictatorship," and when Fisk interviewed him in 1989, the general

was "surrounded by loyal 'apparatchiks.'" He is, portrayed in sum, as an authoritarian personality, seeking Maronite Christian hegemony in Lebanon, at the expense of everybody else. Fisk ridicules the general's desire to "liberate" his country from the Syrians, and calls "implausible" Aoun's call for a U.N. inquiry into the assassination of President René Moawad, after the Taif Agreement of 1989. Why "implausible"? We are not told; we are left with impressionistic anecdotes about the general's personality, like the report that, during their interview, Aoun's daughter sat with "a look of adoration on her face as she fumbled with a tape recorder. The Napoleon of Lebanon was about to speak from his underground garage."

EIR presented quite a different view of General Aoun, and of Lebanon, in our issue of Nov. 16, 1990 ("Kissinger Destroyed the Nation of Lebanon," by Prof. Bassam El Hashem). Professor El Hashem, a scholar who is one of Aoun's close associates (and by no means a "loyal apparatchik"), gives a compelling argument that there has been *no civil war* in Lebanon, but that the crisis there has been deliberately fostered and manipulated by outside powers, each for its own strategic objectives.

It is impossible to understand anything about Lebanon "from the ground up." Indeed, a glaring omission in Fisk's book, is that Henry Kissinger is nowhere mentioned in the compendious 678 pages of text. Yet it is Kissinger's plan for destruction and partition of Lebanon that is now being implemented.

The beautiful dragonfly

Fisk vehemently rejects any such standpoint of reference, derisively calling it "The Plot," and substituting for it a kind of romantic existentialism:

"The Plot, the *mo'amera*, the *complot*, undefinable and ubiquitous, a conspiracy of treachery in which a foreign hand—Syrian, Palestinian, Israeli, American, French, Libyan, Iranian—was always involved. Edward Cody of the AP and I once came to the conclusion that in every interview we conducted in Lebanon, a special chair should be set aside for The Plot—since The Plot invariably played a leading role in all discussions we ever had with politicians, diplomats or gunmen."

Rejecting this view (but not refuting it), Fisk's thesis is that there is some chthonic quality that makes Lebanon inherently destined to corrupt and destroy both itself and anyone who sets foot there.

Thus, when a leading hashish-grower in the Bekaa Valley tried to get the author to buy dope in 1977, with the sales pitch, "We'll put as much as you need out through Damascus International Airport—to the country of your choice," Fisk draws the following conclusion:

"And that, of course, was the clue. Syria had come to Lebanon and Syria was now being corrupted by Lebanon, as surely as another great army would soon be corrupted. Lebanon's revenge was to welcome all her invaders and then

kiss them to death. The longer they stayed, the longer they needed to stay; and each day, every hour, their presence would be imperceptibly debased and perverted and poisoned.

"Those great hot, balmy fields across the Bekaa concealed from all who went there the dangerous, moist centre of this garden of earthly delights. It was like being bitten by a beautiful dragonfly whose wings were of such splendour that the victim did not even feel the nip in the flesh. Later, the skin would itch and the stranger would scratch at the irritation, trying to remember where he had acquired so strange a mark. Much later, the flesh would swell up and give pain and, very often, it would prove fatal."

It is not only the poor Syrians who are "corrupted" by their occupation of Lebanon. In another location, Fisk describes how, after some particularly nasty Israeli bombing of the south of Lebanon—in which *everyone* was classed as a "terrorist" and could therefore be murdered—he came upon an Israeli roadblock, manned by a blond Russian-born soldier. "Nearly all the terrorists escaped," the soldier told the carload of journalists.

Fisk continues:

"He gazed around at the gentle hills of southern Lebanon, and the distant hulk of Beaufort [castle] through the heat haze. Then he added something quite extraordinary. 'This sure is a beautiful country,' he said.

"He had been bitten by the dragonfly. And he had not even felt its sting."

But who invited that Israeli soldier to cross the border and bombard the villages of Lebanon?

Lebanon in global geopolitics

Fisk himself presents, in passing, plenty of pieces of evidence against his own argument. One of the most striking is his description of the great powers' destruction of Lebanon earlier in this century. During the First World War, the Ottomans and a locust plague produced a ghastly famine in Lebanon; this was followed by an Allied blockade of the Levant, intended to starve the Turkish troops there. The Turks, as could be expected, commandeered the food they needed and left the civilian population to starve, killing at least 300,000 people in Syria and Mount Lebanon—some 120,000 in Lebanon alone.

Was this somehow Lebanon's "fault"?

Yet the author sees his "dragonfly" reaching back even into the 19th century. Fisk finds a British newspaper of 1840 which complained that in Beirut, "Anarchy is now the order of the day, our properties and personal safety are endangered, no satisfaction can be obtained, and crimes are committed with impunity." Fisk, noting that he had just written a similar article himself, concludes: "It was as if there were something in the *nature* of Lebanon that made these phenomena occur."

Among the more interesting hints of the role played by outside players in the current Lebanon crisis, is Fisk's description of his acquaintance Konstantin Kapitanov, a journalist from the Soviet weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, based

in Beirut. In 1986, while Americans and Europeans were being kidnaped and murdered right and left, Kapitanov meets Fisk in Libya, ascertains that the Briton intends to return to Beirut, and makes him a friendly offer: "If you need my help, call me. I can come to the airport to pick you up. Nobody is going to kidnap Soviet citizens in Lebanon."

Why are Soviet citizens so safe in Lebanon? We are never told, and speculation is left to those of us who think "conspiracies" sometimes reflect reality.

Similarly, the unfolding drama of the Iran-Contra affair, involving the exchange of U.S. hostages kidnaped in Lebanon by Iranian-backed militias, for arms to the Ayatollah Khomeini and arms-for-drugs deals with the Nicaraguan Contras, is a crucial part of the story of Lebanon, yet is only mentioned in passing.

Presumably, to delve into it more deeply would be to give credence to The Plot.

What makes a nation?

Author Robert Fisk quotes, as the frontispiece of his book, a remarkable passage from the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran (The Garden of the Prophet, London, Heinemann, 1934). The reader may find that it applies also to nations other than Lebanon.

Pity the nation that is full of beliefs and empty of religion.

Pity the nation that wears a cloth it does not weave, eats a bread it does not harvest, and drinks a wine that flows not from its own wine-press.

Pity the nation that acclaims the bully as hero, and that deems the glittering conqueror bountiful.

Pity the nation that despises a passion in its dream, yet submits in its awakening.

Pity the nation that raises not its voice save when it walks in a funeral, boasts not except among its ruins, and will rebel not save when its neck is laid between the sword and the block.

Pity the nation whose statesman is a fox, whose philosopher is a juggler, and whose art is the art of patching and mimicking.

Pity the nation that welcomes its new ruler with trumpetings, and farewells him with hootings, only to welcome another with trumpetings again.

Pity the nation whose sages are dumb with years and whose strong men are yet in the cradle.

Pity the nation divided into fragments, each fragment deeming itself a nation.