

# INSIDER KNOWLEDGE: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT FISK



Robert Fisk of the London Independent.

**K**nown for his extensive coverage of the Middle East crisis, the London Independents' foreign correspondent Robert Fisk speaks exclusively to SIGNAL magazine about Lebanon, Israel and the reputation of Irish peace-keeping troops. By David Coffey.

**Could you explain how last year's open conflict in the Lebanon originated?**

"On the morning of July 12 Hezbollah members crossed the Lebanon/Israeli border. They captured two Israeli soldiers and killed three others. In the subsequent fighting, an Israeli tank was driven over the border and got blown up by a mine - it may have been an old mine, we don't know - and five more soldiers were killed. According to the best sources in Lebanon, the Israelis started firing mortar rounds into Lebanon and the Hezbollah then retaliated, having

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originally provoked this battle, by firing missiles into Israel. And that's how the war actually began.

Now the real issue is: Were the Israelis at some point going to attack the Hezbollah anyway? Did the Hezbollah realise the reaction that the Israelis would have? In other words the mass bombardment of infrastructure and people across Southern Lebanon. Sayyed Hassan, once the head of Hezbollah, said; "If we had known 1% what Israel would do, we would never have committed this operation." I don't believe that. The Hezbollah knew very well what the Israelis would do. Immediately after I heard of the capture of the two soldiers and the killing of the three others, I was on the road from Beirut to Southern Lebanon. Now if I knew what the Israelis were going to do, don't tell me Hezbollah did not."

**Is there a possibility that the attack on Hezbollah was premeditated? There are some sources that say Israel had consulted the US government about such an attack months prior to the beginning of the violence. Had Israel gone to Washington for permission to attack Hezbollah?**

"I don't think that Israel asked for permission. I think the Israelis tell the Americans what they're going to do and tell the Americans that they expect their support. You don't ask permission for anything of Washington if you're Israel. You do what you want to do and you'll

know you'll get support from the White House, from a Republican president like Mr. George W Bush. What we do know is that there are articles in the Israeli press suggesting that there was going to be a future battle with the Hezbollah. And of course all armies, including the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), will have plans for scenarios that may or may never happen, but if there was a plan, as the conspiracy theories have it, for Israel to attack Lebanon, I think they didn't know much what to do when they got attacked by the Hezbollah because their campaign against the Hezbollah was a total failure in both military and political terms. While that doesn't mean that Hezbollah won the war, it certainly means the Israelis lost the war."

**Do you think the US might have been serving their own interests by delaying the cease-fire process?**

Of course they were. What the United States wants to do is frighten Iran by allowing Hezbollah to be destroyed by Israel. But the American administration is self-delusional. It thought it was going to find weapons of mass destruction, capture Iraq, take over Iraq, and make it a democracy, the same with Afghanistan. It hasn't happened. It's complete delusion. The opposite has happened. It was extraordinary after being in Southern Lebanon under Israeli air attack and watching all this, for me to hear Bush say: "Israel won" - even the Israelis don't think they won! And he said Hezbollah have been defeated which is clearly not true. The Bush administration obviously believed that, prior to any kind of further pressures on Iran, the destruction of the Iranian 'lung' in Lebanon, if you want to describe the Hezbollah rather accurately, would teach Iran a lesson, but they didn't destroy the 'lung.' And Iran's lesson was - we won."

**The current peace keeping mission in Lebanon is set at a chapter 6 mandate. In past conflicts of similar hostility we have seen a chapter 7 mandate implemented. Is a chapter 6 mandate robust enough to handle the current situation?**

The problem with the UNIFIL force is that it is now a NATO force and we've had NATO forces before. And in one form or another, western forces, whether they be NATO, Canadian, British, American, special forces, infantry groups, helicopter groups, are now in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Iraq of course, we are spread about thirty-two times more thickly across the Muslim world than the original crusaders were in the twelfth century. If UNIFIL has become a NATO force it will be attacked. Al-Qaeda have already threatened it, it hasn't been threatened by Hezbollah, but in the end I expect UNIFIL will ask Hezbollah for protection. It will be attacked by Sunni Muslim groups. I have been to families in Lebanon whose sons have gone off and committed suicide attacks on the Americans in Iraq. The same families are not going to sit in their homes and watch another NATO force be set up in Lebanon.

**What are the objectives of the UN force in Lebanon now, in your opinion?**

It is a pro-American, pro-Israeli force. It is constantly called a buffer force. Buffer against what? Buffer for whom? It is not there to protect the Lebanese, and the Lebanese know that. If it was there to protect both sides, Israel and Lebanon, then the buffer would be deployed on both sides of the border. But it's not on the Israeli side, it's in Lebanon. UNIFIL is there to protect the Israelis from Hezbollah and Lebanon.

**So will we see a disarmament of Hezbollah in the coming months?**

No, of course not. General Pellegrini, the UNIFIL commander told me personally three weeks ago, that under the mandate he has no right

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and does not have to take weapons from Hezbollah. Hezbollah says it will not give up its weapons. The Lebanese government has no power to force it to do so. There will be no disarming of Hezbollah, absolutely not.

**The Irish Defence forces have committed 150 troops to the current peacekeeping mission. Could you summarise the contribution that Irish troops have made to peacekeeping missions in Lebanon over the years and in this current conflict?**

Over two decades, there is no doubt that many hundreds of Lebanese are alive because Irish troops risked their lives, and sometimes gave their lives, as peace-keepers of Southern Lebanon. However, back then they were participating in a force which clearly was agreed by both sides and which was not intended to be a buffer zone for Hezbollah or for South Lebanon, or for Israel. Now they have taken a political side, UNIFIL - I don't mean "they" the "Irish" - I mean UNIFIL is now on one side, they're on the side of the protection of Israel for the security council of the UN, i.e. the United States. It's called a buffer force but it's inside Lebanon so it's protecting Israel.

Any force that wants to do that becomes politically liable. I do not know the decision-making behind the sending of 150 Irish troops back to UNIFIL. There is no doubt that there is enormous good will not just in South Lebanon but in other Arab countries towards Ireland because of it's extremely courageous peacekeeping troops. I've driven with them under fire, I've been with them under fire, I've crouched in ditches with them under fire and I can tell you they are first class soldiers. But the despatch of 150 troops to a NATO lead force is a very serious matter.



**Do you think the European Union could be doing more to provide global security and diffuse international hostilities?**

Well we saw the European Union (EU) at work in Bosnia and it didn't work. There is no EU foreign policy and there is certainly no EU policy on the Middle East. It has the economic power to do enormous things but they don't have the political will and that's the problem. And the United States doesn't want it to have the political will. The United States wants to keep the EU politically and militarily weak. I mean they're happy to have them as allies in a place like Basra and Afghanistan but that's not the same thing at all.

**The successor of Kofi Annan as UN Secretary General was announced today. Do you think we will see significant changes in the UN, as an organisation, with the introduction of Mr Ban Ki-moon?**

No, nothing at all. This is a totally unknown man taking over from a very weak man. The problem is that, really, the UN is the only

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hope of bringing back some justice to the Middle East, flawed and corrupt though it is. You have to ally with that, the fact the United States wishes the UN not to be a peace-keeper but to be irrelevant. The former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, his job was to make sure it remains irrelevant - but useful, when it's necessary.

The new UN Secretary General is just another colourless bureaucrat and he'll do what he's told by the United States via the security council - he won't get a second term if he doesn't.

*Above: Beirut in the aftermath of an Israeli air campaign last summer.*