

# BBC World Affairs Editor John Simpson Deserves A Rest

by Hugh Fitzgerald



**John Simpson** has been World Affairs Editor of the BBC for more than 30 years. In this position, he is one of the most powerful mind-molders in the British broadcast media. He has a say on everything: assignment of correspondents abroad (who's in, who's out, and where they are to be sent), stories (what to cover, and what not, and whether to treat an event at length or lightly), and of course on how to preserve, or plausibly appear to, the BBC's stated aim of "impartiality." Simpson gets along very well with Jeremy Bowen, the Middle East correspondent for the BBC between 1995 and 2000, and since 2005, the BBC's Middle East Editor. Bowen, who is well-known for his pro-Palestinian sympathies – the BBC Trust has censured him several times for statements he has made in his coverage of the Arab-Israeli dispute – shares the same view as Simpson on Israel and the Arabs: distaste for Israel, and

sympathy for the “plight of the Palestinians,” living in wretched refugee camps in Arab countries or in “occupied Palestinian territories” where Israeli soldiers and “settlers” (always described as “armed” and often as “fanatical”) continue to oppress them. And neither Simpson nor Bowen seems particularly worried about the ideology of Islam or the observable behavior of Muslims.

I had occasion some time ago to write about Bowen’s reckless disregard of important facts. As one example of this, I noted that he has been cavalier about the numbers of terrorist attacks that Israelis have had to endure. In an interview Bowen gave to Paul Blanchard, he claimed that “...plenty of Palestinians feel very threatened by settlers, armed settlers, by soldiers, by raids in the middle of the night, by helicopters, you name it. And many Israelis have been hurt by and continue to be worried about attacks by Palestinians, though there haven’t been all that many in recent years.”

What Bowen means by “recent years” is not entirely clear, but in 2015 there were 2,398 terror attacks in Israel (of which the BBC reported 3.2%). In 2016, there were 1,415 attacks (of which the BBC covered 2.8%), in 2017 there were 1,516 attacks – less than one percent of which were reported by the BBC – and in 2018, the BBC covered at most 30.2% of the 3,006 attacks launched. During the first nine months of 2019, the BBC reported 23.6% of the 1,709 attacks which took place.

Given those figures, no fair-minded person would agree with Bowen’s dismissive remark about attacks by Palestinians against Israelis, that “there haven’t been all that many in recent years.” And it was a shock for me, and I assume for you, to find out just how many terror attacks the Israelis have endured since 2015 – more than 7,000 separate attacks – and how the BBC, on which so many around the world depend for their news, chose to report only 1370. And that number reflected a sudden, unexplained, great increase in the last two years, where someone at the BBC decided the under-

reporting of terror attacks in Israel was scandalous, leaving the organization open to severe criticism, and thus more of them had to be reported. That is why there was the astonishing upswing from reporting on less than 1% of such attacks in 2017 (15 instead of 1516), to reporting on 30% of them in 2018. Reporting on 30% of terrorist attacks is still not acceptable, but at least it's not unspeakable.

Which brings me back to Jeremy Bowen's friend and, as World Affairs Editor since 1988, his colleague and overseer, John Simpson. Simpson's own coverage, both of Israel and of Islam, like that of Bowen himself, leaves much to be desired. It was Simpson's attack on the much-maligned Aung San Suu Kyi that caught my attention two years ago, and led me to look deeper into his views.

On September 16, 2017, John Simpson, a journalist since 1966 with the BBC, and its World Affairs editor since 1988, upon whom all sorts of awards have been lavished, published in the Telegraph a more-in-sorrow article about Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese Nobel Prize winner who had been imprisoned by the Myanmar military for her opposition to their rule, and her heading a democracy movement in that country. What interested me was not Simpson's denunciation of her, or his complete disregard of how the Buddhists in Myanmar see the threat of Islam, but a statement he made about how, during World War II, the Rohingya had fought the Japanese. This, of course, puts them in a good light. But what actually happened is that the retreating British forces gave weapons to the Rohingya, on the assumption – or perhaps the promise – that they would use them only against the Japanese. They did not. Instead, they used the weapons in 1942 to massacre tens of thousands of Buddhists, members of the Rakhine ethnic group, in Northern Rakhine State. The Buddhists then retaliated, and thus began decades of inter-communal, and intermittent, violence.

Despite fifty years as journalist specializing in foreign affairs, apparently John Simpson could not be bothered to find this out, though a minute's Internet searching would have produced that information. He was determined to denounce Aung San Suu Kyi, taking her to task for her refusal to say exactly what the U.N., and the O.I.C., and the BBC, and John Simpson himself, thought she should say. Her failure to condemn her fellow Buddhists outright, because she knew their complicated – not one-sided – history of conflict with the Rohingya, including that 1942 massacre, and the repeated attempts of the Rohingya to join the Northern Rakhine State to Pakistan, beginning in 1946 with an approach made to Mohammed Ali Jinnah even before Partition, and because she understood the Buddhists' fears, which in part were prompted by the seemingly unstoppable Muslim presence in Europe, and their long memories of how Islam effaced Buddhism in India – all this was beyond Simpson's knowledge or understanding or sympathy. His mind was made up: Aung San Suu Kyi could only be either a prisoner of the Burmese military or a "monster." Nuance is not John Simpson's strong suit.

Had Simpson an inquiring mind, instead of one that was perennially made up early on, and never against the BBC grain, he might have tried to understand, rather than to simply berate, Aung San Suu Kyi. But he could not be bothered. Besides, just because Islam led to the demise of Buddhism long ago, and 75 years ago the Rohingya were on the warpath, why should Buddhists today in Myanmar be so alarmed?

John Simpson once proclaimed at his website that he was "doing my best to make sense of a crazy world." On the subject of Islam, he has been among its stoutest apologists. When he interviewed Pim Fortuyn, he infuriated that supremely intelligent man with his absurd charges about Fortuyn's

“racism,” and his obstinate refusal to accept Fortuyn’s statement of the obvious, that Islam is not a race; the courtly Fortuyn ordered Simpson and his BBC crew to leave his home after accusing the newsman of “failing to show him any respect.” You can read Simpson’s report on the man he called “Holland’s anti-Islam dandy.” Notice the sneer in his description of Fortuyn’s “high-camp charm” and how the Dutchman “sat in his garden bower like an 18th century dandy whose wig had fallen off.” There’s a lot of this dismissive stuff, and hardly anything about what it was that made Fortuyn so apprehensive about Islam. Fortuyn is only quoted as saying that the Netherlands was already “too crowded,” but he had much more to say about Islam, which didn’t appear to interest John Simpson. Of course, even knowing exactly nothing about Fortuyn’s views on anything other than Islam, Simpson goes right ahead and pastes on Fortuyn that all-purpose epithet “right-wing.” He doesn’t pick up on Fortuyn’s remarks about the treatment of women and homosexuals in Islam; apparently that wasn’t worth Simpson’s while. He was too busy describing Fortuyn – quite unfairly – as a supercilious and dandiacal coxcomb.

Four days after their meeting, Fortuyn was murdered by a man who resented his views on Muslims. John Simpson felt no need to stop and express dismay. Instead, he described Fortuyn as the “archetypical right-winger” (there was nothing to support this assertion unless you think that Fortuyn’s opposition to Islam is enough to make him “right-wing,” and all kinds of well-known left-wingers, including the late Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci and Oxford professor Richard Dawkins, have been just as, or even more, anti-Islam than Pim Fortuyn) and ended with this bit of nastiness, very much in the John Simpson vein: Fortuyn, he concludes his “tribute,” is more likely to be remembered for “the hatred he gave rise to than for his own achievements.”

We have had a look at John Simpson's critical reporting on the Burmese Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the Dutch intellectual Pim Fortuyn, whose anxieties about Islam Simpson clearly does not share. Though soft on Islam, Simpson is very hard on Israel.

You will not be surprised to learn that John Simpson's reports on Israel have been consistently, almost comically, unfair. This decades-long anti-Israel bias, with Israel being presented as an aggressive little Sparta, always hell-bent on making trouble for innocent Palestinians, is a staple of BBC reporting, usually on the lines of "the Israeli tail seems to wag the American dog." In 2001, he described Ariel Sharon as "the architect of the massacre at Sabra and Chatila in 1982." As everyone knows, it was not the Israelis, but the Christian Phalange, settling scores because of the PLO massacres of Christians in northern Lebanon, who were responsible for Sabra and Chatila. But twenty years after the massacre, John Simpson was still blaming the Israelis. You can find out much more about Simpson's coverage here. Let it be noted that this anti-Israel bias makes him no different from most of his colleagues at the BBC, such as Jeremy Bowen, or Barbara Plett, who wept openly when she heard that Arafat died, or Lyse Doucet, whose presentation of the Arab-Israeli conflict makes one wonder if she is merely taking dictation in Ramallah. All in all, it's a hair-raising spectacle, and no matter how well-reasoned and soberly fact-based the torrent of complaints about its Middle East coverage may be, the BBC continues to largely ignore such criticism.

John Simpson has also been greatly impressed with one of the most insidious charges brought against Israel, one that is a favorite of antisemitic websites. This is the claim that in the middle of the Six-Day War, in all the confusion, anxiety, alarm, misidentification, miscommunication, exhaustion, contributing to the well-known "fog of war," Israeli planes deliberately attacked the ship, the U.S.S. Liberty, knowing it

was American, and killed 34 Americans and wounded more than 100, and did so at the urging of the American government. Exactly why Israel would have wanted to attack a ship belonging to its closest ally no one has ever made clear, though that has not stopped conspiracy theorists from conspiracy-theorizing. The most detailed account of the whole affair, including material newly released, is that by the historian Michael Oren, which is well worth a careful read.

John Simpson, however, of the BBC, was so enamored of the story of a conspiracy, so convinced that Israel was guilty of deliberately attacking an American vessel, though he was no better at offering a plausible reason for such an attack than anyone else, that he chose to write an enthusiastic introduction to one of those books about a supposed U.S.-Israel conspiracy to “hush up” the real reason for the attack on the U.S.S. Liberty. John Simpson’s respectful treatment of one of the favorite fantasies of antisemites apparently does not disqualify him from running the BBC World Services. The book for which he wrote the introduction, *Operation Cyanide*, is by Peter Hounam, a journalist who specializes in many sorts of conspiracy theories, as in his *Who Killed Diana*, which purported to prove that she was “murdered” by shadowy figures. Here is the summary of this preposterous book, *Operation Cyanide*: “This hard-hitting investigation shows that on that day in 1967, the world came closer to all-out nuclear war than ever before – this incident made the Cuban Missile Crisis seem tame by comparison. Peter Hounam reveals that the attack was part of a clandestine plan between the US and Israel known as ‘Operation Cyanide,’ designed to ensure victory for Israel in the Middle East. By blaming the attack on the Arab world, retaliation on a grand scale would be justified.”

“This book will shock any reader interested in Middle-East affairs, as it shows that the U.S. was prepared to sacrifice its men and risk nuclear war to ensure victory for Israel.”

This is the kind of thing John Simpson apparently takes

seriously. But it's not his palpable antipathy to Israel that is now most disturbing. Even more alarming is his coverage of Islam or, rather, his failure to have the BBC cover the subject adequately. He is the man who mocked Pim Fortuyn, both before and after his death, and refused to engage with Fortuyn's justified anxieties about the future of Europe. He is the man who called Aung San Suu Kyi a "monster," because she doesn't share his one-sided views on the situation in Myanmar. He is the man who a few days after the bombings in the London Underground and on buses wrote that "Thursday was a terrible day for London; yet we mustn't forget that much the same number of people died that day in Iraq, and no one dedicated acres of newsprint to them." And he was all for minimizing the reaction to such attacks, belonging, as he does, to the "that's-what-the-terrorists-want" school of idiocy, insisting that "If there is journalistic over-kill, there is also security over-kill." A decade later, he was still at it, attacking the British press for paying too much attention to Muslim terrorism in Europe; "It's [the press] grotesquely selective actually. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I think the [Paris attacks] don't matter, it matters hugely what happened in Paris. It's one of the most important things of this decade. It's just that you know, 130 people die in other countries and we shouldn't let ourselves be blinded. If you think the Western media is giving too much attention to Muslim terrorism, John Simpson is the man for you.

John Simpson has been misinforming people now for more than fifty years, on matters big and little, doing his best "to make sense of a crazy world." His best is not nearly good enough. It's time for a change. He deserves a rest. And more importantly, so do we.

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