

Is Canada Funding "Human Insecurity"?

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"Human security" is one of those politically correct, new-age terms that sound good, but are often without content and readily exploited to promote conflict. And in at least one important case, this is the result of Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs fellowship program with this title, run out of the University of British Columbia's Centre of International Relations.

Its March 2008 newsletter features Charmaine Stanley, a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Toronto working under the supervision of Prof. Paul Kingston. Her research, we are told, "lies at the nexus of information and communication technology (ICT), civil society and peacebuilding."

With her fellowship, Stanley, who has worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Cairo and has received the Bronfman Award in Israeli studies, went to "Israel/Palestine" for her field research. Actually, she went to Bil'in, the site of the ongoing propaganda war against the Israeli separation barrier. Weekly violent protests, organized by Palestinians and a few Israeli anarchists, seek to provoke confrontation in order to provide the media with more clichéd images of Israeli "brutality" and Palestinian "victims." The apparent academic content of this activism is based on studying the use of e-mails and mobile phones in these staged confrontations.

In her essay describing this experience (posted at humansecurity.moonfruit.com), and justifying the use of a government-funded fellowship for so-called "participant observation," there is no mention of Palestinian incitement and terrorism. There are also no Israeli victims of suicide bombings, no grieving families, no Hamas or Al Aqsa Brigades, no rockets or snipers, and no morality. Therefore, according to Stanley's personal concept of "human security," there is no justification for building a barrier to prevent such attacks against Israelis – either Israelis are not human, or they aren't entitled to security.

Like other propaganda, this article erases context, providing only a brief mention at the beginning of the basis for the conflict and the need for "peacebuilding." The violent Arab rejection of the 1947 UN Partition Plan is presented simply as "the first Arab-Israeli war" which, as she notes, resulted in "Israeli independence, the Palestinian naqba (catastrophe) and the dispersal of the Palestinian refugees." The deaths of 6,000 Israelis in that war, and more than 26,000 in the past 60 years, is not part of her "human security" agenda. And from 1948, she jumps to "the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip by Israel in 1967" – as if this took place in a vacuum.

In a cursory acknowledgement of academic norms requiring balance and emotional neutrality, Stanley acknowledges that there may be two sides to this story. (She used this ploy in a 2002 article promoting the anti-Israel "boycott Caterpillar" campaign, citing Human Rights Watch and other biased NGOs.) She asks, rhetorically, "Who was responding to whose violence at Bil'in? I know that I saw the [Israel Defence Forces] use force before any stones were thrown, but is that what the IDF saw? Did things look different from the other side of the fence?"

But she doesn't show evidence of any inclination to actually investigate these questions, to spend equal time and emotional commitment on the Israeli side of the barrier. If she had, she might have seen the violent provocations at Bil'in or acknowledged that in preventing Palestinian terror attacks, the barrier has saved hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of lives.

Instead, she invokes post-modern jargon, claiming that "reality is not always balanced, and balance cannot be equated with a faithful portrayal of events." And in any case, she says that

“from a human security perspective,” attacks by Palestinians are merely a response “to structural violence” in the form of “the dispossession of their lands and livelihood.”

Pending a comparison of the activities of the other human security fellows, I am reserving judgment on the extent of the abuse. Among this year’s fellowship recipients, Nevin Aiken’s report on Northern Ireland seems to be free of double-talk and post-colonial ideology.

But even if Stanley’s case is unique, those responsible for approving this “research” should be held accountable.

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