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## Margaret Atwood duped by NGO propaganda

Thursday, 04 November 2010

Margaret Atwood is highly respected for her writing and her devotion to human rights. She's not a hard-core Israel basher and is usually careful, both in her writing and her political stands, including opposition to the immoral boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign.



Gerald Steinberg

But this wasn't the case for a recent article attacking Israel for the "suffering of Palestinian children." Atwood's authorship reflects the degree to which anti-Israel NGO propaganda has infected even the most well-meaning people.

On Sept. 17, Atwood published an article in Ha'aretz headlined "Suffering of Palestinian children is something both sides can agree on." In it, she blamed Israel for malnutrition of Palestinian children in Area C, the portion of the West Bank under Israeli control, which she said is "higher even than that in Gaza, and many kids are not only developmentally stunted, but are dying from related illnesses." It's libels like this that feed the effort to demonize Israel.

Atwood's mistake was to believe the claims in a Save the Children-UK (STC-UK) publication (Life on the Edge), published in October 2009. In June 2010, STC-UK issued a press release linked to the report, headlined, "Children in West Bank facing worse conditions than in Gaza." The text included the claim that "Areas of the West Bank under complete Israeli control have plummeted into a humanitarian crisis worse than Gaza." Such accusations – like others from political NGOs such as HRW and Amnesty international – are highly misleading, but Atwood fell victim to the "halo effect."

STC-UK has a record of using humanitarian frameworks for anti-Israel propaganda, and this is another example. The press release is completely misleading, as the statistics didn't concern the general condition of West Bank children, but focused on a very small group.

And the evidence was not even based on STC-UK's own research, but rather from the "UNRWA/UNICEF/WFP household survey: Food Security and Nutrition Survey For Herding Communities In Area C." UNRWA has been shown to be particularly unreliable and biased – many of its officials are deeply involved in the assault against Israel's legitimacy – so its statistics need to be taken with more than a grain of salt.

Even if the report's factual claims were reliable and its analysis had credibility, the condemnation of Israel would still be another example of double standards used to single out and target Israel. Such double standards are central to BDS and other campaigns that exploit human rights and other moral principles for political propaganda.

Major disparities in child nutrition can be found in pockets of many countries, including advanced western economies. There are usually cultural, economic and social factors that lead to these anomalous nutritional situations. This is clearly the case regarding the herder communities on the edges of Area C that are the basis for the UNRWA/STC-UK assault.

When these discrepancies were noted in a letter from my own organization, NGO Monitor, to STC-UK, the group said that it "did not contact Atwood directly and is not responsible for her statement."

Atwood didn't respond to NGO Monitor directly, but Ha'aretz published a response on its website. Instead of an apology and correction, she went on the offensive: "As for the notion that the bad condition of the children of Area C is a lie made up by me, or that Israel bears no responsibility for Area C conditions, please see the following, from the STC-UK press release of June 2010... If the STC-UK report is wrong, or if there are other, more accurate statistics, these should also be published."

Sadly, Atwood again relied on STC-UK's false headlines, misleading packaging and double standards. Instead of uncovering and condemning the role of these powerful

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NGOs in the cynical exploitation of human rights and humanitarian norms, she repeated their biased agendas and propaganda. Atwood isn't alone in being duped by the NGO halo effect. But given her deep commitment to these principles, instead of joining this mob, she should join those who are exposing this abuse and working to restore the moral foundations of human rights.

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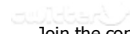
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