

Paltry Humanitarian Priorities

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“Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882.

Canada’s contribution to Afghanistan’s death toll, in the ironically named: “Operation Enduring Freedom” (7th October 2001-3rd June 2003) resulted in eternity’s “enduring freedom” for up to 23,600 fellow beings, young, old. Even the unborn in their mothers’ wombs. The “Coalition” mass murders, at checkpoints, in vehicles, schools, homes, markets, communities, continue unabated. US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, recently stated that General Stanley McChrystal believes that continued “casualties” (translation: dead) at the hands of US and NATO troops imperil the entire war effort in the country. You couldn’t fault Gates and McChrystal for critical perception (clarity that took nearly nine years to figure.)

Professor Marc Herold at the University of New Hampshire has attempted to keep an accurate, careful, dogged, woeful toll of the decimation of Afghanistan’s population. He deserves a medal, for service to humanity and for upholding the vow that: “To the dead, we own only the truth.” (<http://globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=18718>)

The levellers in their war for oil (Iraq) and for a gas pipeline (Afghanistan) have destroyed all integral to a civil society: educational establishments, government buildings, clinics, hospitals, electricity stations, roads, drainage, farms, fruit groves, livestock. Many water sources have been poisoned at worst or polluted at best. The simplest travel has become a death defying experience, with random, unaccounted loss of life by occupying forces guns, and bombs transforming a farmer and his family, going to his flock or fields, to the dismembered deaths of “insurgents”, “terrorists” - and that ultimate bogeyman : “Al Qaeda operatives.”

It should be heartening to know, then, that there is a part of Canada which cares about the health and safety of travellers in hazardous urban environments, and is fighting back. Students at the University of British Columbia’s School of Community and Regional Planning are indeed concerned about the hazard to life and limb by venturing out. They have this week named Amman, capitol of Iraq’s western neighbour, Jordan, second amongst the five most unwalkable cities in the world - for the state of its sidewalks. (Jordan Times, 20th April 2010.)

Ancient Amman - formerly named Philadelphia after Ptolemy 11 Philadelphus (309-246 BC) Hellenic ruler of Egypt - is one of the most ancient, continuously inhabited cities. It thrived under the Romans; the remains of the Roman Temple to Hercules can still be seen, as the spectacular Roman theatre, with its acoustics to equal any modern recording studio.

Jordan's Byzantine period (632-661 AD) was followed by the Umayyads (661-750 AD) The Abbasids, the Crusaders, the Zengids and Ayyubids, the Memelukes, the Ottomans, the British. The all, followed the Sumerians of the 5th C BC., the Akkadians, the Iron Age and the Persians (539-333 BC.) Just to skim, a vast, panoramic history.

Amman, originally built on seven hills (jabal) after which each area is named, for the hill or mountain on which they lie, with its climbing, winding streets, from level to upper level, or the "short cut" : the countless dozen stone steps, worn and polished by the feet of the ages, reaching level to higher level of neighbourhoods. Those with less stable physiology, watch in awe, as those born to them, leap down their near perpendicular architechtonics, in jeans, or work-day garb, with litheness of gazelles.

The city has taken in its own population again, with great generosity, in refugees from Iraq and Kuwait in 1991, throughout the Iraq embargo years (1990-2003) from the 2003 Iraq invasion and - ongoing. Prior to that, Jordan has, and continues to host, Palestinians displaced from the formation of the State of Israel on Palestinian and Jordanian lands, in 1948; from the Six Day War of 1967, from Palestinian uprisings over the decades, against further Israeli land grabs. Amman is, resultantly, now a city on nineteen hills. Civic and State finances and jobs have paid a huge price for being a good neighbour. Yet the University of British Columbia is concerned about the state of the city's pavements.

A really worthwhile project for the University's School of Community and Regional Planning, might be to check the state of the sidewalks in next door Gaza, since the Christmas and New Year blitzkreig by Israel in December-January 2008-2009. Whilst there, they could check on what remains of the schools, homes, UN stores of essentials, hospitals, clinics, mortuaries, cemetaries, threatened and destroyed Mosques; essential infrastructure. They might also note that, with or without sidewalks, Palestinians are prisoners , walled in, hostage to checkpoints, in their own land.

Then they could re-run this survey in Iraq, Jordan's eastern neighbour, equally destroyed for seven years, with the aid of their country's troops. Baghdad, the "Paris of the ninth century", roads and bridges destroyed, this formerly great, sparkling city nurtured by the Tigris, now, as Palestine, walled, much in ruins, its history, buildings, statues, largely erased.

From there, they they might hop over a couple of countries to Afghanistan and check their compatriots handywork, aided by their coaliton friends, with the sidewalks - and all of the above - there. They might find the travel to, from and these countries a little hazardous, but that, after all, is seemingly their academic expertise. Their raison d'etre, so to speak.

Arrogance married to paucity of contextual fact does neither individuals, or institutions any favours. Perhaps the University might consider a change of tack and invite, or establish a link, with some architectural, post graduate students including of Community and Regional Planning disciplines, from Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan, for further studies, in order to assist them in rebuilding their countries. The latter two, which, as Canadian troops have helped destroy, would (minimally) redress some of the balance. The architecture and culture of the country would need to take priority, not trivia such as sidewalks - though given the number of limbless, courtesy , liberators (and in Palestine's case, "the only democracy in the Middle East") attention might indeed be paid to crutch and wheel-chair friendly, ramped pavements.

Last word on Amman's sidewalks: a quick straw poll among several delegations taken to

Jordan by the Iraq Solidarity Campaign. Asked: "What did you think of the pavements in Amman?" there was incomprehension. They had been bowled over by the history, the genuine warm welcome, whether in the soukh, street, taxi, bus, restaurant. By the scents as they walked the city: the kebabs, chicken and numerous, salivating-making culinary wonders, cooked in the open, on spits in little side streets; by the herb and spice stalls, the crafts, the gold market and by a memorable, generous, most ancient little capitol city, that is always a joy to visit.

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