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The Israeli flotilla attack: victimhood, aggression and tribalism

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One of the primary reasons the Turkish Government has been **so angry** in **its denunciations of the Israeli attack on the flotilla** is because many of the dead were Turkish citizens. That's what governments typically do: object vociferously when their citizens are killed by foreign nations under extremely questionable circumstances. Needless to say, that principle -- as all principles are -- will be completely discarded **when it comes to the U.S. protection of Israel:**

A U.S. citizen of Turkish origin was among the nine people killed when Israeli commandos attacked a Gaza-bound aid flotilla . . . An official from the Turkish Islamic charity that spearheaded the campaign to bust the blockade on Gaza identified the **U.S. citizen as 19-year-old Furkan Dogan** Dogan, who held a U.S. passport, had **four bullet wounds to the head and one to the chest**

Will the fact that one of the dead at Israel's hands was an American teenager with four bullet wounds to his head alter the Obama administration's full-scale defense of Israel? Does that question even need to be asked? Not even American interests can undermine reflexive U.S. support for anything Israel does; even the Chief of the Mossad

acknowledged this week that "Israel is progressively becoming a burden on the United States." One dead 19-year-old American with 4 bullet holes in his head (especially one of Turkish origin with a Turkish-sounding name) surely won't have any impact.

Yesterday, newly elected British Prime Minister David Cameron became the latest world leader to unequivocally condemn Israel, saying the attack was "completely unacceptable" and demanding an end to the blockade. But last night on Charlie Rose's show, Joe Biden defended Israel with as much vigor as any Netanyahu aide or *Weekly Standard* polemicist. Biden told what can only be described as a lie when, in order to justify his rhetorical question "what's the big deal here?," he claimed that the ships could have simply delivered their aid to Israel and Israel would then have generously sent it to Gaza ("They've said, 'Here you go. You're in the Mediterranean. This ship -- if you divert slightly north you can unload it and we'll get the stuff into Gaza.'"). In fact, contrary to the Central Lie being told about the blockade, Israel prevents all sorts of humanitarian items having nothing whatsoever to do with weapons from entering Gaza, including many of the supplies carried by the flotilla.

One can express all sorts of outrage over the Obama administration's depressingly predictable defense of the Israelis, even at the cost of isolating ourselves from the rest of the world, but ultimately, on some level, wouldn't it have been even more indefensible -- or at least oozingly hypocritical -- if the U.S. had condemned Israel? After all, what did Israel do in this case that the U.S. hasn't routinely done and continues to do? As even our own military officials acknowledge, we're slaughtering an "amazing number" of innocent people at checkpoints in Afghanistan. We're routinely killing civilians in all sorts of imaginative ways in countless countries, including with drone strikes which a U.N. official just concluded are illegal. We're even targeting our own citizens for due-process-free assassination. We've been arming Israel and feeding them billions of dollars in aid and protecting them diplomatically as they (and we) have been doing things like this for decades. What's the Obama administration supposed to say about what Israel did: *we condemn the killing of unarmed civilians? We decry these violations of international law?* Even by typical standards of government hypocrisy, who in the U.S. Government could possibly say any of that with a straight face?

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What this really underscores is that the mentality driving both Israel and the U.S. is quite similar, which is why those two countries find such common cause, even when the rest of the world recoils in revulsion. One of the more amazing developments in the flotilla aftermath is how a claim that initially appeared too self-evidently ludicrous to be invoked by anyone -- *Israel was the victim here and was acting against the ship in self-defense* -- has actually become the central premise **in Israeli** and (especially) **American discourse** about the attack (and as always, **there is far more criticism of Israeli actions in Israel** than in the U.S.).

How could anyone with the slightest intellectual honesty claim that Israel and its Navy were the victims of a boat which Jon Stewart **said last night** looked like "P Diddy's St. Bart's vacation yacht"; or that armed Israeli commandos were the victims of unarmed civilian passengers; or, more generally, that a nuclear-armed Israel with the most powerful military by far in the Middle East and the world's greatest superpower acting as Protector is the persecuted victim of a wretched, deprived, imprisoned, stateless population devastated by 40 years of brutal Israeli occupation and, just a year ago, an unbelievably destructive invasion and bombing campaign? The casting of "victim" and "aggressor" is blatantly reversed with such claims -- which is exactly the central premise that has been driving, and continues to drive, U.S. foreign policy as well. In *Imperial Ambitions*, Noam Chomsky -- talking about America's post-9/11 policies -- described the central mental deception that is at the heart of all nations which dominate others with force (and if you're one of those people who hear "Noam Chomsky" and shut your mind, pretend that this comes from "John Smith"):

In one of his many speeches, to U.S. troops in Vietnam, [Lyndon] Johnson said plaintively, "There are three billion people in the world and we have only two hundred million of them. We are outnumbered fifteen to one. If might did make right they would sweep over the United States and take what we have. We have what they want." That is a constant refrain of imperialism. **You have your jackboot on someone's neck and they're about to destroy you.**

The same is true with any form of oppression. And it's psychologically understandable. If you're crushing and destroying someone, you have to have a reason for it, and it can't be, "I'm a murderous monster." It has to be self-defense. "I'm protecting myself against them. Look what they're doing to me." **Oppression gets psychologically inverted; the oppressor is the victim who is defending himself.**

Thus, nuclear-armed Israel is bullied and victimized by starving Gazans with stones. The Israel Navy is threatened by a flotilla filled with wheelchairs and medicine. And the greatest superpower the Earth has ever known faces a grave and existential threat from a handful of religious fanatics hiding in caves. An American condemnation of Israel, as welcomed as it would have been, would be an act of senseless insincerity, because the two countries (along with many others) operate with this same "we-are-the-victim" mindset.

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A prime cause of this inversion is the distortion in perception brought about by rank tribalism. Those whose worldview is shaped by their identification as members of a particular religious, nationalistic, or ethnic group invariably over-value the wrongs done to them and greatly under-value the wrongs their group perpetrates. Those whose world view is shaped by tribalism are typically plagued by an extreme persecution complex (*the whole world is against us!!!; everyone who criticizes us is hateful and biased!!!*). *Haaretz* today reports that "Jewish Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. gave a rare demonstration of unity on Wednesday when they backed Israel's raid of a Gaza-bound humanitarian aid flotilla." Gee, whatever could account for that "rare demonstration of unity" between these left-wing Jewish progressives and hard-core, Jewish right-wing war cheerleaders who agree on virtually nothing else? My, it's such a mystery.

I can't express how many emails I've received over the last week, from self-identified Jewish readers (almost exclusively), along the lines of: *I'm a true progressive, agree with you on virtually every issue, but hate your views on Israel*. When it comes to Israel, we see the same mindset from otherwise admirable Jewish progressives such as Anthony Weiner, Jerry Nadler, Eliot Spitzer, Alan Grayson, and (after a brief stint of deviation) *Barney Frank*. On this one issue, they magically abandon their opposition to military attacks on civilians, their defense of weaker groups being bullied and occupied by far stronger factions, their belief that unilateral military attacks are unjustified, and suddenly find common cause with Charles Krauthammer, *The Weekly Standard*, and the Bush administration in justifying even the most heinous Israeli crimes of aggression.

It will never cease to be mystifying (at least to me) that they never question why they suddenly view the world so differently when it comes to Israel. They never wonder to themselves:

I had it continuously drummed into my head from the time I was a small child, from every direction, that Israel was special and was to be cherished, that it's fundamentally good but persecuted and victimized by Evil Arab forces surrounding it, that I am a part of that group and should see the world accordingly. Is this tribal identity which was pummeled into me from childhood -- rather than some independent, dispassionate analysis -- the reason I find myself perpetually sympathizing with and defending Israel?

Doesn't the most minimal level of intellectual awareness -- indeed, the concept of adulthood itself -- require that re-analysis? And, of course, the "self-hating" epithet -- with which I've naturally been bombarded relentlessly over the last week -- is explicitly grounded in the premise that one should automatically defend one's "own group" rather than endeavor to objectively assess facts and determine what is right and true.

This tribalism is hardly unique to Israel and Jews; it's instead universal. As the Bush years illustrated, there is no shortage of Americans who "reason" the same way:

I was taught from childhood that America is right and thus, even in adulthood, defend America no matter what it does; my duty as an American is to defend and justify what America does and any American who criticizes the U.S. is "self-hating" and anti-American; the wrongs perpetrated by Us to Them pale in comparison to the wrongs perpetrated by Them on Us.

Or listen to Fox News fear-mongers declare how Christians in the U.S. and/or white males -- comprising the vast majority of the population and every power structure in the country -- are the Real Persecuted Victims, from the War on Christmas to affirmative action evils. Ronald Reagan even managed to convince much of the country that the true economic injustices in America were caused by rich black women driving their Cadillacs to collect their welfare checks. This kind of blinding, all-consuming tribalism leads members of even the most powerful group to convince themselves that they are deeply victimized by those who are far weaker, whose necks have been under the boots of the stronger group for decades, if not longer.

That's just the standard symptom of the disease of tribalism and it finds expression everywhere, in every group. It's just far more significant -- and far more destructive -- when the groups convincing themselves that they are the Weak and Bullied Victims are actually the strongest forces by far on the planet, with the greatest amount of weaponry

and aggression, who have been finding justifications for so long for their slaughtering of civilians that, as Israeli Amos Oz suggested this week about his country, there are virtually no limits left on the naked aggression that will be justified. Thus, even when Israel attacks a ship full of civilians and wheelchairs in international waters and kills at least 9 human beings, this is depicted by its tribal loyalists as an act of justified self-defense against the Real Aggressors.