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After the flotilla attack, it's time for a new, kinder Israeli narrative

By Daniel Kurtzer
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Of the many confounding aspects of Monday's flotilla fiasco, one of the most curious is the monotone quality of Israel's response. Within hours of the Israeli assault on an aid ship bound for Gaza, while the dead and wounded were still being evacuated from the scene, Israel's deputy foreign minister delivered a verbal broadside that became his nation's public line: The flotilla organizers are terrorist sympathizers, they ambushed Israeli forces, and they are responsible for what followed.

Even so adept a communicator as Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, in a prepared statement Wednesday that attacked Israel's critics as much as it defended Israel's actions, could manage only one sentence of regret for civilian casualties.

Why, even to its friends, has Israel sounded so shrill, even tone deaf? Where are the grief and sadness that Israelis ought to feel about a military operation gone awry? The French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy expressed anger with the tendency of some Israeli leaders to believe that "they are alone in the world and will always be blamed, and to act accordingly."

Israel's friends know that the country has a case to make. But by hunkering down in self-justification, Israel has confused that case. And now the jury of world public opinion, comprising at least as many friends as foes, has stopped listening. At the United Nations, speaker after speaker condemned Israel's action, and even the United States joined in a harsh statement of condemnation. Normally pro-Israel editorial writers added to the chorus of ostracism.

Israel has long seen itself as the Alamo, a fortress under siege. Decades ago, a song titled "The Entire World is Against Us" hit the Israeli pop charts. At the time, there was some truth to the words: Arab states rejected Israel's existence. An Arab economic boycott persuaded major companies in Europe and Asia to decline to do business in Israel. Trade with many countries had to be conducted through third parties.

Indeed, Israel has faced recurring threats to its security and existence, a reality reflected in a maxim I heard often during my time as U.S. ambassador there early this decade: Israel goes to sleep with memories of the Holocaust and wakes up to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this context, the nation's military power was seen as a necessary response. And in turn, Israel's narrative portrayed the country as a David facing an Arab Goliath.

Although the 1967 war changed this reality, Israel's narrative never really caught up. Newly demonstrated military superiority and deepening ties with the United States provided a measure of security the country had not enjoyed before. Egypt's President Anwar Sadat was the first Arab leader to recognize this new strategic reality, and in 1979, he made peace with Israel.

But even as the outdated David vs. Goliath theme lingered in the minds of many Israelis, among other segments of the population a new, religious-national narrative that centered on settling and holding all of Eretz Israel was taking hold. Even though settlements complicated Israel's relations with the Palestinians, and even though Israel had evacuated the Sinai settlements to make peace with Egypt -- a move that vitiated the argument that settlements were required for security -- activists such as Ariel Sharon continued to argue that they enhanced security.

For a while, conditions allowed this new narrative to take root: The Palestine Liberation Organization was busy attacking Israel from Jordan, Lebanon and the United Nations and pursuing a tactical moderation designed to lull Israel into complacency.

But soon this reality, too, began to change. The PLO decided in 1988 to officially support a two-state solution to the conflict and entered into dialogue with the United States. In 1991, Arab states participated in multilateral negotiations with Israel on water, the environment, economic development and regional security. Arab and Israeli business leaders met at international conferences. Israel's diplomatic isolation eased as China, India and others established formal ties, and Israeli liaison offices opened in Morocco and Arab states in the Persian Gulf. In 1994, Jordan made peace, removing the security justification for Israeli settlements in the West Bank. And in 2002, Arab states announced an "Arab peace initiative" offering peace and security in return for Israel's withdrawal from lands taken in the 1967 war.

But the Palestinian intifada put a brake on these developments, ushering in a decade of violence. As Palestinian terrorists attacked not only soldiers and settlers in the occupied territories, but also civilians in Israeli cities, the Israeli storyline of the 1950s -- David vs. Goliath -- revived.

I arrived in Israel as the U.S. ambassador in 2001, right after the first Palestinian suicide bombing, and discussed these issues often with then-Prime Minister Sharon, usually in the context of the choices Israel made in dealing with terrorism. Sharon believed that a strong and unyielding military response was all that was needed to persuade Palestinians to stop the intifada. A terrorist attack in Tel Aviv would often lead him to impose a closure on Gaza, preventing the movement of people and goods.

A typical conversation with Sharon on this subject went something as follows: I would suggest that the closure on Gaza would be seen by the media and even friendly governments as collective punishment, would shift the media's story line from Palestinian violence to Israel's reaction and could even drive Palestinians hurt by the closure into the terrorist camp. Sharon would reply that his responsibility was to protect Israelis, that the Gaza closure was designed to prevent further attacks and that the media were to blame for distorting reality.

His underlying point was clear: Any impact on Israel's image and on the long-term possibility of a widened conflict was outweighed by the need to prevent the next suicide bombing. Whatever the consequences of its actions, Israel would not apologize for defending itself.

Netanyahu would echo this refrain almost a decade later, after years marked not only by the intifada but by an Israeli decision to build a security barrier. The decade saw a brutal war in Lebanon in 2006, sparked by Hezbollah's kidnapping and killing of Israeli soldiers and ended by Israel's destruction of Lebanese civilian infrastructure and significant civilian casualties. The decade saw Hamas's election victory in 2006, its violent takeover of Gaza in 2007, its unrelenting rocket attacks against Israel in 2008 and Israel's massive response, again involving great numbers of civilian casualties and the destruction of infrastructure. By decade's end, a frustrated Israel had sealed off and blockaded Gaza to try to stem the flow of arms to Hamas, but because of the worsening humanitarian situation there, it was losing the battle for international legitimacy.

Narratives, as self-justifications, do little to explain the complexities, ironies and paradoxes of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the early 1980s, while I was assigned to the American Embassy in Tel Aviv, I met a Palestinian nationalist figure in Gaza who was unrelentingly opposed to the Israeli occupation. He shocked me one day when he said he also admired Israel. After a near-fatal car accident in Gaza, his son had been evacuated to one of Israel's leading hospitals, where doctors saved his life. My Palestinian contact hated the Israel of the occupation, but he admired the Israel that was blind to the nationality of a boy in need of care.

When an Israeli military plan goes awry and civilians are killed -- as happened last week off the shores of Gaza -- should Israel's narrative take in the human dimension? Should it express empathy for those affected by the conflict and by Israeli military actions? Marla Braverman, an editor of Azure, an Israeli neoconservative journal, thinks not. In the current issue, she writes that despite a longtime tendency toward self-effacement, "Israel must learn to adopt a clear, unapologetic stance befitting a sovereign state."

The fact is, however, that sovereign states make mistakes, and they apologize. Sovereign states rely not only on military might and insistent rhetoric to defend their people, but also on diplomacy and values of empathy and understanding. Sovereign states can be strong while fostering a narrative of caring about the consequences of their policies.

In the aftermath of the flotilla fiasco, it is not just Israel's military tactics and its blockade of Gaza that need a thorough reexamination. Its narrative does, too. A dose of empathy might be a place to start. Israel will not break by military force and tough rhetoric alone the political and moral double standards by which the world judges its actions. But it can make its case better by tempering force with diplomacy, by caring as much about the humanitarian distress among Palestinians as it does about humanitarian causes elsewhere in the world, and by developing a storyline infused with the moral and ethical standards by which Israelis judge their own behavior.

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