

Israel without clichés

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The Israeli raid on the Free Gaza flotilla has generated an outpouring of clichés from the usual suspects. It is almost impossible to discuss the Middle East without resorting to tired accusations and ritual defenses: perhaps a little house cleaning is in order.

No. 1: Israel is being/should be delegitimized

Israel is a state like any other, long-established and internationally recognized. The bad behavior of its governments does not “delegitimize” it, any more than the bad behavior of the rulers of North Korea, Sudan — or, indeed, the United States — “delegitimizes” them. When Israel breaks international law, it should be pressed to desist; but it is precisely because it is a state under international law that we have that leverage. Some critics of Israel are motivated by a wish that it did not exist — that it would just somehow go away. But this is the politics of the ostrich: Flemish nationalists feel the same way about Belgium, Basque separatists about Spain. Israel is not going away, nor should it. As for the official Israeli public relations campaign to discredit any criticism as an exercise in “de-legitimization,” it is uniquely self-defeating. Every time Jerusalem responds this way, it highlights its own isolation.

No. 2: Israel is/is not a democracy

Perhaps the most common defense of Israel outside the country is that it is “the only democracy in the Middle East.” This is largely true: the country has an independent judiciary and free elections, though it also

discriminates against non-Jews in ways that distinguish it from most other democracies today. The expression of strong dissent from official policy is increasingly discouraged.

But the point is irrelevant. “Democracy” is no guarantee of good behavior: most countries today are formally democratic — remember Eastern Europe’s “popular democracies.” Israel belies the comfortable American cliché that “democracies don’t make war.” It is a democracy dominated and often governed by former professional soldiers: this alone distinguishes it from other advanced countries. And we should not forget that Gaza is another “democracy” in the Middle East: it was precisely because Hamas won free elections there in 2005 that both the Palestinian Authority and Israel reacted with such vehemence.

No. 3: Israel is/is not to blame

Israel is not responsible for the fact that many of its near neighbors long denied its right to exist. The sense of siege should not be underestimated when we try to understand the delusional quality of many Israeli pronouncements.

Unsurprisingly, the state has acquired pathological habits. Of these, the most damaging is its habitual resort to force. Because this worked for so long — the easy victories of the country’s early years are ingrained in folk memory — Israel finds it difficult to conceive of other ways to respond. And the failure of the negotiations of 2000 at Camp David reinforced the belief that “there is no one to talk to.”

But there is. As American officials privately acknowledge, sooner or later Israel (or someone) will have to talk to Hamas. From French Algeria

through South Africa to the Provisional I.R.A., the story repeats itself: the dominant power denies the legitimacy of the “terrorists,” thereby strengthening their hand; then it secretly negotiates with them; finally, it concedes power, independence or a place at the table. Israel will negotiate with Hamas: the only question is why not now.

No. 4: The Palestinians are/are not to blame

Abba Eban, the former Israeli foreign minister, claimed that Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. He was not wholly wrong. The “negationist” stance of Palestinian resistance movements from 1948 through the early 1980s did them little good. And Hamas, firmly in that tradition though far more genuinely popular than its predecessors, will have to acknowledge Israel’s right to exist.

But since 1967 it has been Israel that has missed most opportunities: a 40-year occupation (against the advice of its own elder statesmen); three catastrophic invasions of Lebanon; an invasion and blockade of Gaza in the teeth of world opinion; and now a botched attack on civilians in international waters. Palestinians would be hard put to match such cumulative blunders.

Terrorism is the weapon of the weak — bombing civilian targets was not invented by Arabs (nor by the Jews who engaged in it before 1948). Morally indefensible, it has characterized resistance movements of all colors for at least a century. Israelis are right to insist that any talks or settlements will depend upon Hamas’s foreswearing it.

But Palestinians face the same conundrum as every other oppressed people: all they have with which to oppose an established state with a

monopoly of power is rejection and protest. If they pre-concede every Israeli demand — abjuration of violence, acceptance of Israel, acknowledgment of all their losses — what do they bring to the negotiating table? Israel has the initiative: it should exercise it.

No. 5: The Israel lobby is/is not to blame

There is an Israel lobby in Washington and it does a very good job — that’s what lobbies are for. Those who claim that the Israel lobby is unfairly painted as “too influential” (with the subtext of excessive Jewish influence behind the scenes) have a point: the gun lobby, the oil lobby and the banking lobby have all done far more damage to the health of this country.

But the Israel lobby is disproportionately influential. Why else do an overwhelming majority of congressmen roll over for every pro-Israel motion? No more than a handful show consistent interest in the subject. It is one thing to denounce the excessive leverage of a lobby, quite another to accuse Jews of “running the country.” We must not censor ourselves lest people conflate the two. In Arthur Koestler’s words, “This fear of finding oneself in bad company is not an expression of political purity; it is an expression of a lack of self-confidence.”

No. 6: Criticism of Israel is/is not linked to anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism is hatred of Jews, and Israel is a Jewish state, so of course some criticism of it is malevolently motivated. There have been occasions in the recent past (notably in the Soviet Union and its satellites) when “anti-Zionism” was a convenient surrogate for official anti-Semitism. Understandably, many Jews and Israelis have not forgotten this.

But criticism of Israel, increasingly from non-Israeli Jews, is not predominantly motivated by anti-Semitism. The same is true of contemporary anti-Zionism: Zionism itself has moved a long way from the ideology of its “founding fathers” — today it presses territorial claims, religious exclusivity and political extremism. One can acknowledge Israel’s right to exist and still be an anti-Zionist (or “post-Zionist”). Indeed, given the emphasis in Zionism on the need for the Jews to establish a “normal state” for themselves, today’s insistence on Israel’s right to act in “abnormal” ways because it is a Jewish state suggests that Zionism has failed.

We should beware the excessive invocation of “anti-Semitism.” A younger generation in the United States, not to mention worldwide, is growing skeptical. “If criticism of the Israeli blockade of Gaza is potentially ‘anti-Semitic,’ why take seriously other instances of the prejudice?” they ask, and “What if the Holocaust has become just another excuse for Israeli bad behavior?” The risks that Jews run by encouraging this conflation should not be dismissed.

Along with the oil sheikdoms, Israel is now America’s greatest strategic liability in the Middle East and Central Asia. Thanks to Israel, we are in serious danger of “losing” Turkey: a Muslim democracy, offended at its treatment by the European Union, that is the pivotal actor in Near-Eastern and Central Asian affairs. Without Turkey, the United States will achieve few of its regional objectives — whether in Iran, Afghanistan or the Arab world. The time has come to cut through the clichés surrounding it, treat Israel like a “normal” state and sever the umbilical cord.