

Israel's Cult of Victimhood

'Barefoot' soldiers on the high seas

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Why are Israelis so indignant at the international outrage that has greeted their country's lethal attack last week on a flotilla of civilian ships taking aid to Gaza?

Israelis have not responded in any of the ways we might have expected. There has been little soul-searching about the morality, let alone legality, of soldiers invading ships in international waters and killing civilians. In the main, Israelis have not been interested in asking tough questions of their political and military leaders about why the incident was handled so badly. And only a few commentators appear concerned about the diplomatic fall-out.

Instead, Israelis are engaged in a Kafkaesque conversation in which the military attack on the civilian ships is characterised as a legitimate "act of self-defence", as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it, and the killing of nine aid activists is transformed into an attempted "lynching of our soldiers" by terrorists.

Benny Begin, a government minister whose famous father, Menachem, became an Israeli prime minister after being what today would be called a terrorist as the leader of the notorious Irgun militia, told BBC World TV that the commandos had been viciously assaulted after "arriving almost barefoot". Ynet, Israel's most popular news website, meanwhile, reported that the commandos had been "ambushed".

This strange discourse can only be deciphered if we understand the two apparently contradictory themes that have come to dominate the emotional landscape of Israel. The first is a trenchant belief that Israel exists to realise Jewish power; the second is an equally strong sense that Israel embodies the Jewish people's collective experience as the eternal victims of history.

Israelis are not entirely unaware of this paradoxical state of mind, sometimes referring to it as the "shooting and crying" syndrome.

It is the reason, for example, that most believe their army is the "most moral in the world". The "soldier as victim" has been given dramatic form in Gilad Shalit, the "innocent" soldier held by Hamas for the past four years who, when he was captured, was enforcing Israel's illegal occupation of Gaza.

One commentator in Israel's Haaretz newspaper summed up the feelings of Israelis brought to the fore by the flotilla episode as the "helplessness of a poor lonely victim, confronting

the rage of a lynch mob and frantically realising that these are his last moments". This "psychosis", as he called it, is not surprising: it derives from the sanctified place of the Holocaust in the Israeli education system.

The Holocaust's lesson for most Israelis is not a universal one that might inspire them to oppose racism, or fanatical dictators or the bullying herd mentality that can all too quickly grip nations, or even state-sponsored genocide.

Instead, Israelis have been taught to see in the Holocaust a different message: that the world is plagued by a unique and ineradicable hatred of Jews, and that the only safety for the Jewish people is to be found in the creation of a super-power Jewish state that answers to no one. Put bluntly, Israel's motto is: only Jewish power can prevent Jewish victimhood.

That is why Israel acquired a nuclear weapon as fast it could, and why it is now marshalling every effort to stop any other state in the region from breaking its nuclear monopoly. It is also why the Israeli programme's sole whistle-blower, Mordechai Vanunu, is a pariah 24 years after committing his "offence". Six years on from his release to a form of loose house arrest, his hounding by the authorities — he was jailed again last month for talking to foreigners — has attracted absolutely no interest or sympathy in Israel.

If Mr Vanunu's continuing abuse highlights Israel's oppressive desire for Jewish power, Israelis' self-righteousness about their navy's attack on the Gaza flotilla reveals the flipside of this psychosis.

The angry demonstrations sweeping the country against the world's denunciations; the calls to revoke the citizenship of the Israeli Arab MP on board — or worse, to execute her — for treason; and the local media's endless recycling of the soldiers' testimonies of being "bullied" by the activists demonstrate the desperate need of Israelis to justify every injustice or atrocity while clinging to the illusion of victimhood.

The lessons imbibed from this episode — like the lessons Israelis learnt from the Goldstone report last year into the war crimes committed during Israel's attack on Gaza, or the international criticisms of the massive firepower unleashed on Lebanon before that — are the same: that the world hates us, and that we are alone.

If the confrontation with the activists on the flotilla has proved to Israelis that the unarmed passengers were really terrorists, the world's refusal to stay quiet has confirmed what Israelis already knew: that, deep down, non-Jews are all really anti-Semites.

Meanwhile, the lesson the rest of us need to draw from the deadly commando raid is that the world can no longer afford to indulge these delusions.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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