

Is Gideon Levy the most hated man in Israel or just the most heroic?

For three decades, the writer and journalist Gideon Levy has been a lone voice, telling his readers the truth about what goes on in the Occupied Territories.

Interview by Johann Hari

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Gideon Levy is the most hated man in Israel – and perhaps the most heroic. This “good Tel Aviv boy” – a sober, serious child of the Jewish state – has been shot at repeatedly by the Israeli Defence Force, been threatened with being “beaten to a pulp” on the country’s streets, and faced demands from government ministers that he be tightly monitored as “a security risk.” This is because he has done something very simple, and something that almost no other Israeli has done. Nearly every week for three decades, he has travelled to the Occupied Territories and described what he sees, plainly and without propaganda. “My modest mission,” he says, “is to prevent a situation in which many Israelis will be able to say, ‘We didn’t know.’” And for that, many people want him silenced.

The story of Gideon Levy – and the attempt to deride, suppress or deny his words – is the story of Israel distilled. If he loses, Israel itself is lost.

I meet him in a hotel bar in Scotland, as part of his European tour to promote his new book, ‘The Punishment of Gaza’. The 57 year-old looks like an Eastern European intellectual on a day off – tall and broad and dressed in black, speaking accented English in a lyrical baritone. He seems so at home in the world of book festivals and black coffee that it is hard, at first, to picture him on the last occasion he was in Gaza – in November, 2006, before the Israeli government changed the law to stop him going.

He reported that day on a killing, another of the hundreds he has documented over the years. As twenty little children pulled up in their school bus at the Indira Gandhi kindergarten, their 20 year-old teacher, Najawa Khalif, waved to them – and an Israel shell hit her and she was blasted to pieces in front of them. He arrived a day later, to find the shaking children drawing pictures of the chunks of her corpse. The children were “astonished to see a Jew without weapons. All they had ever seen were soldiers and settlers.”

“My biggest struggle,” he says, “is to rehumanize the Palestinians. There’s a whole machinery of brainwashing in Israel which really accompanies each of us from early childhood, and I’m a product of this machinery as much as anyone else. [We are taught] a few narratives that it’s very hard to break. That we Israelis are the ultimate and only victims. That the Palestinians are born to kill, and their hatred is irrational. That the Palestinians are not human beings like us... So you get a society without any moral doubts, without any questions marks, with hardly public debate. To raise your voice against all this is very hard.”

So he describes the lives of ordinary Palestinians like Najawa and her pupils in the pages of Ha’aretz, Israel’s establishment newspaper. The tales read like Chekopian short stories of trapped people, in which nothing happens, and everything happens, and the only escape is death. One article was entitled “The last meal of the Wahbas family.” He wrote: “They’d all sat down to have lunch at home: the mother Fatma, three months pregnant; her daughter Farah, two; her son Khaled, one; Fatma’s brother, Dr Zakariya Ahmed; his daughter in law Shayma, nine months pregnant; and the seventy-eight year old grandmother. A Wahba family gathering in Khan Yunis in honour of Dr Ahmed, who’d arrived home six days earlier from Saudi Arabia. A big boom is heard outside. Fatma hurriedly scoops up the littlest one and tries to escape to an inner room,

but another boom follows immediately. This time is a direct hit."

In small biographical details, he recovers their humanity from the blankness of an ever-growing death toll. The Wahbas had tried for years to have a child before she finally became pregnant at the age of 36. The grandmother tried to lift little Khaled off the floor: that's when she realised her son and daughter were dead.

Levy uses a simple technique. He asks his fellow Israelis: how would we feel, if this was done to us by a vastly superior military power? Once, in Jenin, his car was stuck behind an ambulance at a checkpoint for an hour. He saw there was a sick woman in the back and asked the driver what was going on, and he was told the ambulances were always made to wait this long. Furious, he asked the Israeli soldiers how they would feel if it was their mother in the ambulance – and they looked bemused at first, then angry, pointing their guns at him and telling him to shut up.

"I am amazed again and again at how little Israelis know of what's going on fifteen minutes away from their homes," he says. "The brainwashing machinery is so efficient that trying [to undo it is] almost like trying to turn an omelette back to an egg. It makes people so full of ignorance and cruelty." He gives an example. During Operation Cast Lead, the Israel bombing of blockaded Gaza in 2008-9, "a dog – an Israeli dog – was killed by a Qassam rocket and it on the front page of the most popular newspaper in Israel. On the very same day, there were tens of Palestinians killed, they were on page 16, in two lines."

At times, the occupation seems to him less tragic than absurd. In 2009, Spain's most famous clown, Ivan Prado, agreed to attend a clowning festival on Ramallah in the West Bank. He was detained at the airport in Israel, and then deported "for security reasons." Levy leans forward and asks: "Was the clown considering transferring Spain's vast stockpiles of laughter to hostile elements? Joke bombs to the jihadists? A devastating punch line to Hamas?"

Yet the absurdity nearly killed him. In the summer of 2003, he was travelling in a clearly marked Israeli taxi on the West Bank. He explains: "At a certain stage the army stopped us and asked what we were doing there. We showed them our papers, which were all in order. They sent us up a road – and when we went onto this road, they shot us. They directed their fire to the centre of the front window. Straight at the head. No shooting in the air, no megaphone calling to stop, no shooting at the wheels. Shoot to kill immediately. If it hadn't been bullet-proof, I wouldn't be here now. I don't think they knew who we were. They shot us like they would shoot anyone else. They were trigger-happy, as they always are. It was like having a cigarette. They didn't shoot just one bullet. The whole car was full of bullets. Do they know who they are going to kill? No. They don't know and don't care."

He shakes his head with a hardened bewilderment. "They shoot at the Palestinians like this on a daily basis. You have only heard about this because, for once, they shot at an Israeli."

I "Who lived in this house? Where is he now?"

How did Gideon Levy become so different to his countrymen? Why does he offer empathy to the Palestinians while so many others offer only bullets and bombs? At first, he was just like them: his argument with other Israelis is an argument with his younger self. He was born in 1953 in Tel Aviv and as a young man "I was totally nationalistic, like everyone else. I thought – we are the best, and the Arabs just want to kill. I didn't question."

He was fourteen during the Six Day War, and soon after his parents took him to see the newly conquered Occupied Territories. "We were so proud going to see Rachel's Tomb [in Bethlehem] and we just didn't see the Palestinians. We looked right through them, like they were invisible," he says. "It had always been like that. We were passing as children so many ruins [of Palestinian villages that had been ethnically cleansed in 1948]. We never asked: 'Who lived in this house? Where is he now? He must be alive. He must be somewhere.' It was part of the landscape, like a tree, like a river." Long into his twenties, "I would see settlers cutting down olive trees and soldiers mistreating Palestinian women at the checkpoints, and I would think, 'These are exceptions, not part of government policy.'"

Levy says he became different due to "an accident." He carried out his military service with Israeli Army Radio and then continued working as a journalist, "so I started going to the Occupied Territories a lot, which most Israelis don't do. And after a while, gradually, I came to see them as they really are."

But can that be all? Plenty of Israelis go to the territories – not least the occupying troops and settlers – without recoiling. “I think it was also – you see, my parents were refugees. I saw what it had done to them. So I suppose... I saw these people and thought of my parents.” Levy’s father was a German Jewish lawyer from the Sudetenland. At the age of 26 – in 1939, as it was becoming inescapably clear the Nazis were determined to stage a genocide in Europe – he went with his parents to the railway station in Prague, and they waved him goodbye. “He never saw them or heard from them again,” Levy says. “He never found out what happened to them. If he had not left, he would not have lived.” For six months he lived on a boat filled with refugees, being turned away from port after port, until finally they made it to British Mandate Palestine, as it then was.

“My father was traumatised for his whole life,” he says. “He never really settled in Israel. He never really learned to speak anything but broken Hebrew. He came to Israel with his PhD and he had to make his living, so he started to work in a bakery and to sell cakes from door to door on his bicycle. It must have been a terrible humiliation to be a PhD in law and be knocking on doors offering cakes. He refused to learn to be a lawyer again. He became a minor clerk. I think this is what smashed him, y’know? He lived here sixty years, he had his family, had his happiness but he was really a stranger. A foreigner, in his own country... He was always outraged by things, small things. He couldn’t understand how people would dare to phone between two and four in the afternoon. It horrified him. He never understood what is the concept of overdraft in the bank. Every Israeli has an overdraft, but if he heard somebody was one pound overdrawn, he was horrified.”

His father “never” talked about home. “Any time I tried to encourage him to talk about it, he would close down. He never went back. There was nothing [to go back to], the whole village was destroyed. He left a whole life there. He left a fiancé, a career, everything. I am very sorry I didn’t push him harder to talk because I was young, so I didn’t have much interest. That’s the problem. When we are curious about our parents, they are gone.”

Levy’s father never saw any parallels between the fact he was turned into a refugee, and the 800,000 Palestinians who were turned into refugees by the creation of the state of Israel. “Never! People didn’t think like that. We never discussed it, ever.” Yet in the territories, Levy began to see flickers of his father everywhere – in the broken men and women never able to settle, dreaming forever of going home.

Then, slowly, Levy began to realise their tragedy seeped deeper still into his own life – into the ground beneath his feet and the very bricks of the Israeli town where he lives, Sheikh Munis. It is built on the wreckage of “one of the 416 Palestinian villages Israel wiped off the face of the earth in 1948,” he says. “The swimming pool where I swim every morning was the irrigation grove they used to water the village’s groves. My house stands on one of the groves. The land was ‘redeemed’ by force, its 2,230 inhabitants were surrounded and threatened. They fled, never to return. Somewhere, perhaps in a refugee camp in terrible poverty, lives the family of the farmer who plowed the land where my house now stands.” He adds that it is “stupid and wrong” to compare it to the Holocaust, but says that man is a traumatized refugee just as surely as Levy’s father – and even now, if he ended up in the territories, he and his children and grandchildren live under blockade, or violent military occupation.

The historian Isaac Deutscher once offered an analogy for the creation of the state of Israel. A Jewish man jumps from a burning building, and he lands on a Palestinian, horribly injuring him. Can the jumping man be blamed? Levy’s father really was running for his life: it was Palestine, or a concentration camp. Yet Levy says that the analogy is imperfect – because now the jumping man is still, sixty years later, smashing the head of the man he landed on against the ground, and beating up his children and grandchildren too. “1948 is still here. 1948 is still in the refugee camps. 1948 is still calling for a solution,” he says. “Israel is doing the very same thing now... dehumanising the Palestinians where it can, and ethnic cleansing wherever it’s possible. 1948 is not over. Not by a long way.”

II The scam of “peace talks”

Levy looks out across the hotel bar where we are sitting and across the Middle East, as if the dry sands of the Negev desert were washing towards us. Any conversation about the region is now dominated by a string of propaganda myths, he says, and perhaps the most basic is the belief that Israel is a democracy. “Today we have three kinds of people living under Israeli rule,” he explains. “We have Jewish Israelis, who have full democracy and have full civil rights. We have

the Israeli Arabs, who have Israeli citizenship but are severely discriminated against. And we have the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, who live without any civil rights, and without any human rights. Is that a democracy?"

He sits back and asks in a low tone, as if talking about a terminally ill friend: "How can you say it is a democracy when, in 62 years, there was not one single Arab village established? I don't have to tell you how many Jewish towns and villages were established. Not one Arab village. How can you say it's a democracy when research has shown repeatedly that Jews and Arabs get different punishments for the same crime? How can you say it's a democracy when a Palestinian student can hardly rent an apartment in Tel Aviv, because when they hear his accent or his name almost nobody will rent to him? How can you say Israel is a democracy when... Jerusalem invests 577 shekels a year in a pupil in [Palestinian] East Jerusalem and 2372 shekels a year in a pupil from [Jewish] West Jerusalem. Four times less, only because of the child's ethnicity! Every part of our society is racist."

"I want to be proud of my country," he says. "I am an Israeli patriot. I want us to do the right thing." So this requires him to point out that Palestinian violence is – in truth – much more limited than Israeli violence, and usually a reaction to it. "The first twenty years of the occupation passed quietly, and we did not lift a finger to end it. Instead, under cover of the quiet, we built the enormous, criminal settlement enterprise," where Palestinian land is seized by Jewish religious fundamentalists who claim it was given to them by God. Only then – after a long period of theft, and after their attempts at peaceful resistance were met with brutal violence – did the Palestinians become violent themselves. "What would happen if the Palestinians had not fired Qassams [the rockets shot at Southern Israel, including civilian towns]? Would Israel have lifted the economic siege? Nonsense. If the Gazans were sitting quietly, as Israel expects them to do, their case would disappear from the agenda. Nobody would give any thought to the fate of the people of Gaza if they had not behaved violently."

He unequivocally condemns the firing of rockets at Israeli civilians, but adds: "The Qassams have a context. They are almost always fired after an IDF assassination operation, and there have been many of these." Yet the Israeli attitude is that "we are allowed to bomb anything we want but they are not allowed to launch Qassams." It is a view summarised by Haim Ramon, the justice minister at time of Second Lebanon War: "We are allowed to destroy everything."

Even the terms we use to discuss Operation Cast Lead are wrong, Levy argues. "That wasn't a war. It was a brutal assault on a helpless, imprisoned population. You can call a match between Mike Tyson and a 5 year old child boxing, but the proportions, oh, the proportions." Israel "frequently targeted medical crews, [and] shelled a UN-run school that served as a shelter for residents, who bled to death over days as the IDF prevented their evacuation by shooting and shelling... A state that takes such steps is no longer distinguishable from a terror organisation. They say as a justification that Hamas hides among the civilian population. As if the Defence Ministry in Tel Aviv is not located in the heart of a civilian population! As if there are places in Gaza that are not in the heart of a civilian population!"

He appeals to anybody who is sincerely concerned about Israel's safety and security to join him in telling Israelis the truth in plain language. "A real friend does not pick up the bill for an addict's drugs: he packs the friend off to rehab instead. Today, only those who speak up against Israel's policies – who denounce the occupation, the blockade, and the war – are the nation's true friends." The people who defend Israel's current course are "betraying the country" by encouraging it on "the path to disaster. A child who has seen his house destroyed, his brother killed, and his father humiliated will not easily forgive."

These supposed 'friends of Israel' are in practice friends of Islamic fundamentalism, he believes. "Why do they have to give the fundamentalists more excuses, more fury, more opportunities, more recruits? Look at Gaza. Gaza was totally secular not long ago. Now you can hardly get alcohol today in Gaza, after all the brutality. Religious fundamentalism is always the language people turn to in despair, if everything else fails. If Gaza had been a free society it would not have become like this. We gave them recruits."

Levy believes the greatest myth – the one hanging over the Middle East like perfume sprayed onto a corpse – is the idea of the current 'peace talks' led by the United States. There was a time when he too believed in them. At the height of the Oslo talks in the 1990s, when Yitzhak Rabin negotiated with Yassir Arafat, "at the end of a visit I turned and, in a gesture straight out of the movies, waved Gaza farewell. Goodbye occupied Gaza, farewell! We are never to meet again, at least not in your occupied state. How foolish!"

Now, he says, he is convinced it was "a scam" from the start, doomed to fail. How does he

know? "There is a very simple litmus test for any peace talks. A necessity for peace is for Israel to dismantle settlements in the West Bank. So if you are going to dismantle settlements soon, you'd stop building more now, right? They carried on building them all through Oslo. And today, Netanyahu is refusing to freeze construction, the barest of the bare minimum. It tells you all you need."

He says Netanyahu has – like the supposedly more left-wing alternatives, Ehud Barak and Tzipi Livni – always opposed real peace talks, and even privately bragged about destroying the Oslo process. In 1997, during his first term as Israeli leader, he insisted he would only continue with the talks if a clause was added saying Israel would not have to withdraw from undefined "military locations" – and he was later caught on tape boasting: "Why is that important? Because from that moment on I stopped the Oslo accords." If he bragged about "stopping" the last peace process, why would he want this one to succeed? Levy adds: "And how can you make peace with only half the Palestinian population? How can you leave out Hamas and Gaza?"

These fake peace talks are worse than no talks at all, Levy believes. "If there are negotiations, there won't be international pressure. Quiet, we're in discussions, settlement can go on uninterrupted. That is why futile negotiations are dangerous negotiations. Under the cover of such talks, the chances for peace will grow even dimmer... The clear subtext is Netanyahu's desire to get American support for bombing Iran. To do that, he thinks he needs to at least pay lip-service to Obama's requests for talks. That's why he's doing this."

After saying this, he falls silent, and we stare at each other for a while. Then he says, in a quieter voice: "The facts are clear. Israel has no real intention of quitting the territories or allowing the Palestinian people to exercise their rights. No change will come to pass in the complacent, belligerent, and condescending Israel of today. This is the time to come up with a rehabilitation programme for Israel."

III Waving Israeli flags made in China

According to the opinion polls, most Israelis support a two-state solution – yet they elect governments that expand the settlements and so make a two-state solution impossible. "You would need a psychiatrist to explain this contradiction," Levy says. "Do they expect two states to fall from the sky? Today, the Israelis have no reason to make any changes," he continues. "Life in Israel is wonderful. You can sit in Tel Aviv and have a great life. Nobody talks about the occupation. So why would they bother [to change]? The majority of Israelis think about the next vacation and the next jeep and all the rest doesn't interest them any more." They are drenched in history, and yet oblivious to it.

In Israel, the nation's "town square has been empty for years. If there were no significant protests during Operation Cast Lead, then there is no left to speak of. The only group campaigning for anything other than their personal whims are the settlers, who are very active." So how can change happen? He says he is "very pessimistic", and the most likely future is a society turning to ever-more naked "apartheid." With a shake of the head, he says: "We had now two wars, the flotilla – it doesn't seem that Israel has learned any lesson, and it doesn't seem that Israel is paying any price. The Israelis don't pay any price for the injustice of the occupation, so the occupation will never end. It will not end a moment before Israelis understand the connection between the occupation and the price they will be forced to pay. They will never shake it off on their own initiative."

It sounds like he is making the case for boycotting Israel, but his position is more complex. "Firstly, the Israeli opposition to the boycott is incredibly hypocritical. Israel itself is one of the world's most prolific boycotters. Not only does it boycott, it preaches to others, at times even forces others, to follow in tow. Israel has imposed a cultural, academic, political, economic and military boycott on the territories. The most brutal, naked boycott is, of course, the siege on Gaza and the boycott of Hamas. At Israel's behest, nearly all Western countries signed onto the boycott with inexplicable alacrity. This is not just a siege that has left Gaza in a state of shortage for three years. It's a series of cultural, academic, humanitarian and economic boycotts. Israel is also urging the world to boycott Iran. So Israelis cannot complain if this is used against them."

He shifts in his seat. "But I do not boycott Israel. I could have done it, I could have left Israel. But I don't intend to leave Israel. Never. I can't call on others to do what I will not do... There is also the question of whether it will work. I am not sure Israelis would make the connection. Look at the terror that happened in 2002 and 2003: life in Israel was really horrifying, the

exploding buses, the suicide-bombers. But no Israeli made the connection between the occupation and the terror. For them, the terror was just the 'proof' that the Palestinians are monsters, that they were born to kill, that they are not human beings and that's it. And if you just dare to make the connection, people will tell you 'you justify terror' and you are a traitor. I suspect it would be the same with sanctions. The condemnation after Cast Lead and the flotilla only made Israel more nationalistic. If [a boycott was] seen as the judgement of the world they would be effective. But Israelis are more likely to take them as 'proof' the world is anti-Semitic and will always hate us."

He believes only one kind of pressure would bring Israel back to sanity and safety: "The day the president of the United States decides to put an end to the occupation, it will cease. Because Israel was never so dependent on the United States as it is now. Never. Not only economically, not only militarily but above all politically. Israel is totally isolated today, except for America." He was initially hopeful that Barack Obama would do this – he recalls having tears in his eyes as he delivered his victory speech in Grant Park – but he says he has only promoted "tiny steps, almost nothing, when big steps are needed." It isn't only bad for Israel – it is bad for America. "The occupation is the best excuse for many worldwide terror organisations. It's not always genuine but they use it. Why do you let them use it? Why give them this fury? Why not you solve it once and for all when the, when the solution is so simple?"

For progress, "the right-wing American Jews who become orgiastic whenever Israel kills and destroys" would have to be exposed as "Israel's enemies", condemning the country they supposedly love to eternal war. "It is the right-wing American Jews who write the most disgusting letters. They say I am Hitler's grandson, that they pray my children get cancer... It is because I touch a nerve with them. There is something there." These right-wingers claim to be opposed to Iran, but Levy points out they vehemently oppose the two available steps that would immediately isolate Iran and strip Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of his best propaganda-excuses: "peace with Syria and peace with the Palestinians, both of which are on offer, and both of which are rejected by Israel. They are the best way to undermine Iran."

He refuses to cede Israel to people "who wave their Israeli flags made in China and dream of a Knesset cleansed of Arabs and an Israel with no [human rights organisation] B'Tselem." He looks angry, indignant. "I will never leave. It's my place on earth. It's my language, it's my culture. Even the criticism that I carry and the shame that I carry come from my deep belonging to the place. I will leave only if I be forced to leave. They would have to tear me out."

IV A whistle in the dark

Does he think this is a real possibility – that his freedom could be taken from him, in Israel itself? "Oh, very easily," he says. "It's already taken from me by banning me from going to Gaza, and this is just a start. I have great freedom to write and to appear on television in Israel, and I have a very good life, but I don't take my freedom for granted, not at all. If this current extreme nationalist atmosphere continues in Israel in one, two, three years time..." He sighs. "There may be new restrictions, Ha'aretz may close down – God forbid – I don't take anything for granted. I will not be surprised if Israeli Palestinian parties are criminalized at the next election, for example. Already they are going after the NGOs [Non-Government Organizations that campaign for Palestinian rights]. There is already a majority in the opinion polls who want to punish people who expose wrong-doing by the military and want to restrict the human rights groups."

There is also the danger of a freelance attack. Last year, a man with a large dog strutted up to Levy near his home and announced: "I have wanted to beat you to a pulp for a long time." Levy only narrowly escaped, and the man was never caught. He says now: "I am scared but I don't live on the fear. But to tell you that my night sleep is as yours... I'm not sure. Any noise, my first association is 'maybe now, it's coming'. But there was never any concrete case in which I really thought 'here it comes'. But I know it might come."

Has he ever considered not speaking the truth, and diluting his statements? He laughs – and for the only time in our interview, his eloquent torrents of words begin to sputter. "I wish I could! No way I could. I mean, this is not an option at all. Really, I can't. How can I? No way. I feel lonely but my private, er, surrounding is supportive, part of it at least. And there are still Israelis who appreciate what I do. If you walk with me in the streets of Tel Aviv you will see all kinds of reactions but also very positive reactions. It is hard but I mean it's...it's...what other choice do I have?"

He says his private life is supportive "in part". What's the part that isn't? For the past few years, he says, he has dated non-Israeli women – "I couldn't be with a nationalistic person who said those things about the Palestinians" – but his two sons don't read anything he writes, "and they have different politics from me. I think it was difficult for them, quite difficult." Are they right-wingers? "No, no, no, nothing like that. As they get older, they are coming to my views more. But they don't read my work. No," he says, looking down, "they don't read it."

The long history of the Jewish people has a recurring beat – every few centuries, a brave Jewish figure stands up to warn his people they have ended up on an immoral or foolish path that can only end in catastrophe, and implores them to change course. The first prophet, Amos, warned that the Kingdom of Israel would be destroyed because the Jewish people had forgotten the need for justice and generosity – and he was shunned for it. Baruch Spinoza saw beyond the Jewish fundamentalism of his day to a materialist universe that could be explained scientifically – and he was excommunicated, even as he cleared the path for the great Jewish geniuses to come. Could Levy, in time, be seen as a Jewish prophet in the unlikely wilderness of a Jewish state, calling his people back to a moral path?

He nods faintly, and smiles. "Noam Chomsky once wrote to me that I was like the early Jewish prophets. It was the greatest compliment anyone has ever paid me. But... well... My opponents would say it's a long tradition of self-hating Jews. But I don't take that seriously. For sure, I feel that I belong to a tradition of self-criticism. I deeply believe in self-criticism." But it leaves him in bewildering situations: "Many times I am standing among Palestinian demonstrators, my back to the Palestinians, my face to the Israeli soldiers, and they were shooting in our direction. They are my people, and they are my army. The people I'm standing among are supposed to be the enemy. It is..." He shakes his head. There must be times, I say, when you ask: what's a nice Jewish boy doing in a state like this?

But then, as if it has been nagging at him, he returns abruptly to an earlier question. "I am very pessimistic, sure. Outside pressure can be effective if it's an American one but I don't see it happening. Other pressure from other parts of the world might be not effective. The Israeli society will not change on its own, and the Palestinians are too weak to change it. But having said this, I must say, if we had been sitting here in the late 1980s and you had told me that the Berlin wall will fall within months, that the Soviet Union will fall within months, that parts of the regime in South Africa will fall within months, I would have laughed at you. Perhaps the only hope I have is that this occupation regime hopefully is already so rotten that maybe it will fall by itself one day. You have to be realistic enough to believe in miracles."

In the meantime, Gideon Levy will carry on patiently documenting his country's crimes, and trying to call his people back to a righteous path. He frowns a little – as if he is picturing Najawa Khalif blown to pieces in front of her school bus, or his own broken father – and says to me: "A whistle in the dark is still a whistle."

Gideon Levy's book 'The Punishment of Gaza' is available from Verso Books. You can buy it [HERE](#).

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