

Gideon Levy's recent interview to The Independent drew a scathing attack from right-wing columnist Ben Dror Yemini. Here is Levy's rebuttal



TWILIGHT ZONE / BARON OF MANIPULATION

by Gideon Levy / Haaretz 22.10.10

Arcos lived to a ripe old age. He was an army dog. His funeral received front-page coverage in Yedioth Ahronoth and Maariv, with photographs of soldiers embracing each other over his freshly dug grave. In the days preceding the high-profile ceremony, six unarmed, innocent Palestinian civilians - two of them children - were killed in the territories. Only one of these deaths was reported in these tabloid dailies, buried of course deep inside the news sections. The papers didn't even bother reporting the other five.

In a wide-ranging interview to the British newspaper The Independent a few weeks ago, I used the example of media coverage of the death of an Israeli dog versus coverage of Palestinians deaths during Operation Cast Lead to show the Israeli media's dehumanization of the Palestinians. Arcos died three years before the 2008-2009 Gaza campaign, but the process of dehumanization, the purpose of which is to make it easier for Israelis to continue with the occupation and to feel good about it, without suffering moral doubts, reached its terrible peak during this operation.

Another Israeli dog killed by a Qassam rocket during Cast Lead received greater coverage than the dozens of Palestinians who were killed on the same day. Yedioth Ahronoth and Maariv published cumulative Palestinian body counts in their back pages: 300 dead in a period of two days, on page 13; a few days later, 384 dead, on page 11; the deaths of a woman and her four young children, page 14; the killing of five sisters, at the bottom of page 6; the deaths of a doctor and two rescue

workers that brought the total number of Palestinian fatalities to 395, plus 1,000 injured, on page 19. One later article reported the deaths of 512 Palestinians almost as an afterthought.

All of these reports came after numerous articles on the postponement of bar mitzvah parties in Sderot, a honeymoon that went on despite the war, pizza deliveries to Israel Defense Forces soldiers and folk dancing in a bomb shelter in Kibbutz Yad Mordechai. Any self-respecting journalist must openly oppose such distorted coverage, whose sole aim is to minimize the value of Palestinian lives and to make the knowledge of our actions easier to swallow.

If one day an Israeli journalist is harmed, if someone here is assaulted for expressing their opinions, then Ben Dror Yemini's opinion piece in last Friday's Maariv will be required reading. Here's how it ends: "The day that Gideon Levy is silenced, or if a strand of hair falls from his head, Israel will become the monster Gideon Levy creates in his febrile mind. He must not be allowed that pleasure. We must not punish ourselves in this way." Remember these words from an Israeli journalist.

Over poppyseed cake at my regular cafe, the front-page teaser of Maariv caught my eye - "Baron of the Industry of Lies" - with a double-page spread in the politics section. Leaving aside the lies for now, "baron and industrialist"? The most decisive response, if this drivel requires a response, is the interview in The Independent, the pretext for Ben Yemini's base, dangerous incitement.

"I want to be proud of my country," I am quoted there. "I am an Israeli patriot. I want us to do the right thing ... I'll never leave. It's my place on earth. I will leave only if I be forced to leave ... Even the criticism that I carry and the shame that I carry come from my deep belonging to the place." Of course these things, which I reiterate at every opportunity, were not mentioned in Yemini's piece, so as not to ruin the argument. He listed my "nine lies." It's my duty, I suppose, to respond, despite the enormous revulsion the task evokes from me.

My nearly 25 years of covering the Israeli occupation and expressing my controversial opinions, have indeed stirred up wrath in some circles, but I have always taken pride in the fact that after hundreds of reports from the field - this entire modest documentation enterprise - none of the facts have ever been refuted despite the efforts of many. I still believe, naively, that were Yemini, an armchair commentator, to join me on a few of my trips in the occupied territories, he would succumb to the same deep sense of patriotic embarrassment that the sights sometimes cause. I am gripped by the same sense of shame now, due to the venomous attack against me by an Israeli journalist.

These are "my nine lies."

1. I said that my biggest struggle is to re-humanize the Palestinians in Israeli eyes. Yemini says the Palestinians hate more. That's possible, but I don't get that impression. It doesn't make what Israel does right. Dehumanization is infinitely worse than hatred. And in any event, no one could disprove our dehumanization campaign against the Palestinians; Yemini didn't even try. What has been refuted is my first "lie."

2. When I recalled the terrifying experience of IDF soldiers shooting at the Israeli taxi carrying me, my photographer and my go-between near Tul Karm, while we were traveling by order of an IDF officer, I said the soldiers are quick to shoot "because "they do it every day." In fact, during this time, the terrible year of 2003, with all the terror attacks, soldiers fired routinely. After the incident, in which only the cab's bullet-proof windshield saved us, not a single high-ranking officer bothered to come and to discipline the soldiers. It was all routine for the IDF in that time.

3. The dog: Oops. I misstated the date of publication of the page-one pictures. All the rest is mentioned above. How did Yemini put it in his blog this week, when he withdrew some of his accusations following readers' comments? "You got me."

4. Yemini quoted me as saying, "Israel frequently targets medical crews and UN schools." The source

indicated that I meant during Operation Cast Lead. Here is a report from Yemini's newspaper, from January 7, 2009, on the front page this time: "42 killed in firing on UNRWA school." It was never proved that terrorists were in the building, the UN Relief and Works Agency adamantly denies the allegation, just as it was never proved that terrorists hid in the basement of Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City, as Yemini claimed. According to UN figures, during its Gaza operation the IDF hit 15 hospitals and 43 clinics. Eighteen schools were completely destroyed and 280 were damaged. In the operation, 50 UN facilities were damaged; 16 medical personnel, including physicians, were killed and 25 injured. Twelve ambulances were damaged. These numbers should have shocked any Israeli. Even Yemini.

5. "Were it not for the Qassams, nobody would have paid attention to the Palestinians ... they are only fired after IDF assassination operations." This is my opinion: Without the Qassams, Gaza would be forgotten by the world and by Israel. The current situation proves this. Who today remembers the punishment of Gaza? But in the interview to The Independent I said a few other things, that were overlooked by the critic of my lies. The British interviewer, Johann Hari, wrote that I "unequivocally condemn the firing of rockets at Israeli civilians." But this, Baron Truth Industry chose to conceal from his readers, just as he chose to conceal my remarks on the boycott against Israel.

6. "Israel complains that Hamas hides among the civilian populations, but the Defense Ministry, too, is located in Tel Aviv." Is that false? A lie? So where is the Defense Ministry, and the IDF General Staff? Hamas has nowhere to hide in the Gaza Strip apart from population concentrations. Had Yemini bothered going to the Gaza Strip in the past several years he would have understood why.

7. "Israel continues to carry out ethnic cleansing wherever it's possible." Yes, in my opinion what we are doing now to the shepherds of the Jordan Rift Valley and the Bedouin living north of Be'er Sheva deserves this term. What we did in 1948 is barely disputed by the world's important, honest historians. And what should we call the fact that not a single Arab remains between Jaffa and Gaza?

8. My opinions on the peace process and on Israel's intentions to end the occupation remain unchanged, despite Yemini's scolding. No lies there, of course.

9. "The occupation is the excuse for terror in many places around the world." In the source: "The occupation is the best excuse for many worldwide terror organizations. It's not always genuine but they use it. Why do you let them use it? Why give them this fuel?" Is that, too, a lie?

When the substantive arguments are exhausted, the incitement begins; when one doesn't know how to contend with opinions and views, one calls them lies. When one wants to strangle those with other positions, one calls them "baron" and "industry." When the anti-critical atmosphere runs wild, making McCarthyism look like an enlightened movement, all the populist pen-pushers rush in. And when one wants to silence critics, they fabricate accusations.

Yemini has adopted the goal of battling the world's "industry of lies" against Israel. This, of course, is a worthy objective, certainly for propagandists. Yemini is one of the active among them; the baron of the manipulation industry. There is just one little problem: Even this war must be based on truth - a commodity that is superfluous for him and those like him.

And despite it all, on the day that Yemini is silenced or harmed, critical journalists and the left will become the monster that Ben Dror Yemini creates in his febrile brain. He must not be permitted this pleasure. We must not be given this punishment.

On second thought, there's no cause for concern. The left has never lifted a finger against anyone in Israel. That's reserved for the right. Yemini can continue to sling his mud without hindrance.