

Americans "Are Supporting the First Signs of Fascism in Israel"

Gideon Levy talks to journalist Max Blumenthal

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Haaretz columnist Gideon Levy talks to journalist Max Blumenthal about how the Israeli occupation has poisoned not only the region but much of the world, and how BDS might be the last standing hope to dismantle it

MAX BLUMENTHAL: Hi, I'm Max Blumenthal, for the Real News. We're here at the National Press Club, at the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs Conference, examining whether the special relationship between the U.S. and Israel is good for America. And I'm here with Gideon Levy. Gideon Levy was the former spokesman for Shimon Peres, former Israeli president, and is now one of the most outspoken journalists in Israel, someone who I would say is a true dissident in Israeli society, and the voice of the voiceless in Israel. People, Israelis who are resisting occupation and resisting apartheid. And we're going to talk to Gideon not only about the U.S. and Israeli special relationship, but also about what's happening in Israeli society right now.

Gideon, you spoke earlier today, and you said that if any—if you could show any American visiting the Holy Land anything, you would first take them to Hebron. And I think you're referring to H2, the section of the city that is honeycombed with very violent, radical settlers, but is still Palestinian. Why would you show them that area? There's so much to see.

GIDEON LEVY: I would start there because there you get it in a nutshell. There is no other place where you can see the Israeli policy, the Israeli apartheid in the West Bank, in such crystal clear colors. Roads are just separated for Jews and for Palestinians. An empty town, because all the Palestinian inhabitants head to run away. I mean, the settlers terrorized them so much, until most of them, there really remained only those who have no place to go. And you see the tyranny of the settlers, their brutality. They are the most extreme settlers and they are, part of them should be questioned by psychiatrists. I mean, really. And only a very small piece of land.

And that's the way it could have—and it will look, one day—if this occupation will continue. So you get it in a nutshell.

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, yeah. It's like a microcosm of the whole occupation.

LEVY: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I know no one who, any honest person, who had been ever there and wasn't shocked.

BLUMENTHAL: And you know, I was on [Shuhata] street, standing around talking to the soldiers. And we were talking about a few hundred settlers guarded by hundreds and hundreds of soldiers, who also are very violent with the local Palestinian population. I'm standing there, I'm filming, and a settler woman walks by, and she's just staring at me. And I just go [93?] Yalla, [94?] you know, get out of here. And she goes, what do you mean, yalla? What are you talking about? And she has a Brooklyn accent. And that was incredible to me. I think—what you would hear there are New York accents in the middle of Hebron. So how do you think the U.S. has helped create that situation in Hebron?

LEVY: The U.S. is the big financier of the Zionist project

and the big financier of the settlement project. Without the U.S. there is no occupation. And the U.S. carries responsibility for any of Israel's deeds and crimes, because without the U.S. Israel couldn't do it, very clearly.

BLUMENTHAL: The U.S. claims that Israel is its ally in the region. That Israel actually serves a geostrategic purpose. Do you see it that way? Do you think Israel's actually, and under Israel—especially under Netanyahu, really cares what the U.S. thinks?

LEVY: First of all, many times, if one is watching the relations between Israel and the United States, comes up the question of who is the superpower? Is it Israel or who is the United States? Who dictates to whom? Who blackmails whom? And many times you get the impression that Israel is blackmailing the United States. And here I come and I ask myself, why? It's an enigma for me. How come that Israel is so powerful? And the other question one should ask himself is what those interests serve in terms of American, either interest or values.

Occupation is American values? Occupation serves the American interest? Doesn't America see that it pays a hell of a price for this automatic and blind support of Israel and of the occupation project? Is it reasonable that in the 21st century, the United States will finance an apartheid regime in the occupied territories? All those questions should be raised, but I'm not sure anyone has an answer.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, we don't have anyone in our media here, in our mainstream media, who raises them. And you at least are at Haaretz, you have a column. Talk about your own experiences raising these issues, raising the uncomfortable and really disturbing issues of occupation, apartheid, and how it's creeping back into Jewish Israeli society? How's that affected you over the past years, especially since Netanyahu's been in power?

LEVY: The recent years, he became less and less pleasant, and maybe even less and less secure. As you might know, there was a certain time during the last war in Gaza in which I even had to be accompanied by bodyguards. It's to be, let's leave alone me, because I'm just one individual. What really matters is that to speak for consciousness, to speak for morality, to speak for maintaining the international law, is perceived in Israel as treason. Not less than this. The worst curse that you can hear today is you are a leftist. It's a curse in Israel. This atmosphere, violent, aggressive, and lacking any kind of tolerance, is above all dangerous for the future of Israel.

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. Where do you see the future going? You have a culture minister, Miri Regev, who is demanding a kind of loyalty oath from artists. Actually, an artist friend of mine, Natali Vaxberg Cohen, has been jailed, or indicted, for her art. In the school system you're seeing very strong imposition

of religious nationalist indoctrination, militarism. The youth in polls seem to be more racist than their parents and grandparents. We're talking about the Jewish Israeli youth. And it doesn't seem like the occupation is coming to an end. It actually seems like a future component of Israel. So where do you, where do you see it going over the next five or ten years, and how long can you hold on?

LEVY: First of all, American liberals should know all this. They should know that they are supporting the first sign of fascism in Israel. I don't call it yet fascism, but first signs, very clear, first signs of fascism. And America is behind it. And America is supporting it. And America keeps one blind eye to it. And America keeps financing it. This should be known and should be recognized by any American, mainly the liberals, who care where their taxpayer money goes, and so much of it.

Now, where does it go? I can't imagine myself one hopeful scenario. You name it. I mean, there is no source of hope right now. There's no alternative to Netanyahu. And the alternative that might replace him is not any better. Atmosphere, as I said, is becoming less and less tolerant, and the standing of democracy is minimal and many times very twisted. People think that democracy, most of Israel, think that democracy means the rule of the majority, and all the rest is totally unimportant. Levels of ignorance which I never saw before, the young generation of Israel, you might know it, reached level of ignorance. They know nothing about nothing, and they care nothing about nothing. Which should worry, above all, Israelis before anyone else. But I don't see Israelis worry about it.

And then we had this hope that the United States would change. We had the huge hope seven years ago. This hope was totally misleading, and finally we are seven years with Barack Obama, who did nothing in the Middle East. He was a great president, I'm sure. It's not for me to judge. But when it comes to the Middle East, he did nothing. And you are really hopeless. The only source of hope is that in many cases in history, the unexpected happens. In many cases, rotten regimes fall by itself. And there is nothing more rotten than the Israel occupation.

BLUMENTHAL: A lot of the younger, Jewish Israeli activists, they started to kind of go into the West Bank through this loosely-knit group, Anarchists Against the Wall. And they would join Palestinians in the small villages, [name inaudible], and so on. And that's, you know, that whole cooperation, I feel like it's been crushed by the military, and the Palestinian authority. And I see a lot of them, who I've known since that period, moving into the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. And they're behind a group called Boycott from Within. They're basically calling to the outside world and saying, boycott my country. Why are they doing that, and what do you think of the prospects for the BDS movement? Do you think this might be potentially a game changer, and provide some hope?

LEVY: First of all, I can't blame those young people. As devoted, as courageous as they are, they were crushed not only by the Israeli army. Also by the Israeli media. Which delegitimizes them on a systematic basis. And really, their voice was, really their mouth was shut, practically. Either delegitimization in the media, or really physical attacks by the army. And you know, week after week, and they lost hope, in many ways.

The only hopeful tool right now, the only game in town, which might show some kind of hope, is BDS. It's a nonviolent tool, a very legitimate one. It was proven extremely effective vis-a-vis apartheid South Africa. And there is no reason the [worldwide] wouldn't be applied to Israel, because Israel is continuing to, to stand behind all those crimes, and behind the

occupation.

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. Most Israelis see BDS as tantamount to destroying Israel. How do you respond to them when they say, oh, it's just another way of throwing us into the sea?

LEVY: Nothing will destroy Israel more than the occupation. And those who care about the future of Israel should better do something about the occupation. That's the biggest enemy of Israel, that's the biggest danger for Israel. Morally, politically, economically, and militarily. Anyone who thinks Israel will live on its sword forever just doesn't know anything about history. Because there are no empire which lasted forever living only on its sword. And BDS has a very concrete goal, and this is to put an end to the occupation. It's a very legitimate goal. It's a moral goal. And I wish I wouldn't say so, but I don't see anything more effective than this.

BLUMENTHAL: Let me ask you about your own political development. As I mentioned in the intro, you were a member of the Labor Party in good standing. You were close to Shimon Peres, you were close to the whole peace process, and the peace camp. And there's an incredible scene from a short documentary by a friend of ours, Eran Torbiner, where you're in the old Labor Party headquarters, where it's completely empty and kind of being demolished, and it's a symbol for the Labor Party today. The Labor Party today, under Isaac Herzog, is proposing a plan to do away with the two-state solution that it used to really define itself on.

So how did you get to where you are, supporting the BDS movement, and how did the Labor Party get to this point, supporting Netanyahu's goals?

LEVY: I think I made the long journey. I'm not sure that Labor changed. Finally, Labor was always what it is today. There were times in which we believed the bluff, or I believed the bluff. But by the end of the day, Labor carries more responsibility for the occupation than any other political group in Israel. They put the foundations. They take, they did nothing to put an end to the occupation, ever. The only evacuation of occupied territories were made by Sharon, not by anyone of Labor. So by the end of the day, Labor didn't change. And Herzog is a typical leader of Labor, like Shimon Peres, like Rabin. Also in my view, was a trap. And it was never aimed to put an end to the occupation, and the proof is that it never evacuated one settlement. And without evacuation of settlements your intentions are very, very transparent. You don't mean to put an end to the occupation.

And as for myself, this shift that I went through is due only to one thing; to the fact that I started to cover the occupation, to travel week after week, many times day after day, for 30 years, over 30 years. And what I witnessed very few Israelis had witnessed. And nobody who was conscious could stick to any other consequences and conclusions but the radical conclusion that this occupation must come to its end unconditionally and immediately, because it is criminal.

BLUMENTHAL: Since we're in Washington, a place where many people are unfamiliar with the images you would see on a weekly basis just traveling 30 minutes from your home, people here, information about this, is very hard to get. What do you sense when you get, when you come here to this town? Do you talk to any people who are in Congress? Do you talk to Congressional aides, do you ever get summoned to talk to anyone with any influence on policy, on foreign policy in the U.S.?

LEVY: Unfortunately not. Many years ago when I was more with the mainstream, I had more opportunities to meet legislators and officials. I'm, I'm really bent here, I mean, nobody will

talk to me. Not that I tried. I never tried. But I don't feel any interest in my views. American media, or most of it, American politicians, legislatures, diplomats, they don't seem, I think it's much of a challenge for them to face my views.

BLUMENTHAL: Welcome to my world.

LEVY: Exactly.

BLUMENTHAL: What role do you see AIPAC and the pro-Israel lobby playing in making—in the transformation of Jewish Israeli society, where you say the stages of fascism are beginning?

LEVY: Let's talk about the [inaud.]. I claim that AIPAC is an anti-Israeli organization, not a pro-Israeli organization. They corrupt Israel. Not only them, but they start this whole process, which enable Israel to continue the occupation with no limitations, with no restrictions. They stand behind this terrible phenomena in which a state like Israel, which is very well off, well-equipped, very strong, gets these enormous sums of money year after year which corrupts Israel. This American money that AIPAC is responsible for getting it, this money corrupts Israel. And therefore in my view, AIPAC is not only not pro-Israel, in my view AIPAC is one of the biggest enemies of the state of Israel.

BLUMENTHAL: Sheldon Adelson would disagree.

LEVY: I guess. But not only on this. He will disagree on anything I say.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, yeah. He doesn't seem to believe Palestinians exist.

LEVY: I am so proud to be different than Sheldon Adelson. So proud.

BLUMENTHAL: I hope that I get that distinction, as well. This last question, wrapping up. Because, you know, it's campaign season. What kind of, how do you feel about the U.S. presidential campaign? There's going to be a walkout at AIPAC against Donald Trump by some of the figures that you've accused of perverting Israeli society. Hillary Clinton is sort of the, you know, challenger of Trump. The presumptive challenger of Trump. But she is also someone who is winning a lot of support from the pro-Israel lobby, and reaping a lot of donations. So do you see any hope or anything coming out of this election campaign?

LEVY: First of all, if I had to choose between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump concerning the Middle East, not concerning [inaud.], concerning the Middle East, I'd rather vote for Donald Trump. With Hillary Clinton we know very well this means the continuous support, the automatic blind support in the

occupation in Israel, and all its crimes, and all it takes. I mean, Clinton is the worst.

Donald Trump is unknown. Might be a catastrophe. But until now he's said some interesting things, like wanting to be neutral. That's outrageous.

BLUMENTHAL: Pretty radical.

LEVY: That's out—to be neutral. I mean, I don't think he's a man of justice, I don't think he's a man of morality. I don't think he cares at all, he cares at all about the Palestinians. He hardly knows who they are. Really, you look at this and you look at this, and you understand that the Middle East is now doomed to another four or eight years of stagnation, of developing and strengthening the occupation even more. Nothing will come from Washington. For sure not from there officially. And therefore, again, we are going to think back to the important role of civil society. Because when this is the administration, the only hope will be from campuses of universities, from public opinion, from activists, from NGOs, and from individuals who will raise their voice against.

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. How do you avoid burning out, or going crazy? How are you going to survive the next four to eight years? Because—I'm asking for myself. I struggle with this.

LEVY: Okay. Who told you I'm going to survive? I'm not sure. Seriously, it's much easier than you think. Because when you really believe in what you do, you have no other choice. It's not like I can make a choice. I don't have any other choice. This is what I believe. This is my profession, to write. This is the mission I took upon myself. And nobody can change it. Unless, you know, I'd be expelled, I'd be jailed, I'd be killed. I don't know what. But as long as I am free to choose, nothing will stop me.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I can just tell you, when I started making the transition from covering domestic politics to writing about Israel-Palestine, it was your voice during Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009 that really helped me, that really encouraged me, and I think there are countless other people who feel the same. So just as a word of encouragement, in closing—

LEVY: Thank you very much.

BLUMENTHAL: Thanks a lot.

LEVY: Thank you, Max. Thank you very much. It was a pleasure.

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