

Twilight Zone / Cut off

By [Gideon Levy](#)

Last Friday night, the phone rang at my house. It was Munir. We hadn't spoken for several months, and every conversation with him stirs powerful feelings in me. Last month marked three years since the last time we met.

I remember it well: We drove together to Indira Gandhi's preschool (the proprietor of this school in Beit Lahia had been named after the late Indian leader). Two days before that, the Israel Defense Forces had fired a missile near a minibus transporting the children, killing two, plus other bystanders and the young teacher, Najwa Halif - all this in front of 20 youngsters on their way to kindergarten.

When we arrived at the well-tended kindergarten, funded by donations from Germany, Gandhi showed us the preschoolers' drawings: children lying on the ground and bleeding, a teacher in a pool of blood, a plane and a tank firing barrages of missiles. This is what the kids of Indira's kindergarten have grown up with. It is also my last memory of the Gaza Strip. Since then, I haven't been permitted to go there.

Indeed, for three years, Israel has prohibited local journalists from visiting Gaza, but no one makes a fuss over this scandalous media blackout. Television reporters even collaborate in this, while using a terribly deceptive tactic: Microphones with their network logos are held up by other journalists in Gaza, to make it look like the Israelis

were actually there. But like me, they haven't been for three years. A journalistic protest? Don't even mention it. Who wants to visit Gaza anyway?

When Munir called, my voice trembled. Yes, I miss him and I also miss the sights of Gaza. It's almost ludicrous to describe to Israelis the longings for that place, which brainwashed people think is nothing more than a "nest of murderers." Only someone who visited the Strip for years and saw its beauty and ugliness, its wretchedness and dignity, its inhabitants' helplessness and wondrous resilience, poverty and nobility, sense of acceptance and determination - can understand nostalgia for Gaza, of all places.

Gaza, an hour and 15 minutes' drive from my home, is one of the places that is off-limits to me. I miss it, its people, its landscapes, its seashore and even its smells. And I miss Munir and Sa'ad, the two taxi drivers who took me to the darkest alleys and the most dangerous streets, to the most remote refugee camps and the most miserable victims, to houses of bereavement and destruction, loss and pain. Throughout the years, together, we traveled to document Israel's actions.

Two years after we parted with the usual embrace, perhaps forever, exactly one year ago this weekend, Operation Cast Lead began. On December 27, the first frightful day, the initial brutal air assault killed 225. The next day, Sunday, I wrote (in "The neighborhood bully strikes again," Dec. 28):

"Israel embarked yesterday on yet another unnecessary, ill-fated

war ... Once again, Israel's violent responses, even if there is justification for them, exceed all proportion and cross every red line of humaneness, morality, international law and wisdom ... The pictures that flooded television screens around the world yesterday showed a parade of corpses and wounded being loaded into and unloaded from the trunks of private cars that transported them to the only hospital in Gaza worthy of being called a hospital. Perhaps we once again need to remember that we are dealing with a wretched, battered strip of land, most of whose population consists of the children of refugees who have endured inhumane tribulations ... Hamas will not be weakened due to the Gaza war; to the contrary.

"In a short time, after the parade of corpses and wounded ends, we will arrive at a fresh cease-fire, as occurred after Lebanon, exactly like the one that could have been forged without this superfluous war. In the meantime, let us let the IDF win, as they say. A hero against the weak, it bombed dozens of targets from the air yesterday, and the pictures of blood and fire are designed to show Israelis, Arabs and the entire world that the neighborhood bully's strength has yet to wane. When the bully is on a rampage, nobody can stop him."

In the ensuing weeks I spoke on the phone frequently with Munir and Sa'ad. Our conversations were terrible, often cut off because of shelling or electrical outages. Sa'ad's Skoda, in which we had covered thousands of kilometers, was struck by an Israeli missile. Munir was sitting at home, trembling with worry over the fate of his pregnant wife and their children, reciting the Yom Kippur kapparot prayer he knew from when he worked as a butcher in the Hatikva

market in Tel Aviv - "This is my exchange, this is my substitute, this is my penance" - on the phone from a Gaza, under bombardment. But for Munir and Sa'ad and the other million and a half inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, there was no forgiveness.

Last Friday, Munir sounded like his old self. He always tries to paint an optimistic picture. Sa'ad bewails and Munir encourages - that was always the division of labor: the driver who sees the good and the driver who sees the bad. Sorrowful-looking Sa'ad, in his relatively new Skoda. And eternally smiling Munir, in his trusty old Mercedes with a million kilometers on the odometer, a million kilometers clocked between Gaza and Rafah in worse times, and between Jaffa and Gaza in better times. Now they hardly drive anywhere or ferry any passengers about. They sit idle at the Erez checkpoint waiting for better days, if any will come. Foreign journalists also hardly go to Gaza anymore.

Munir told me about the frequent power outages at his house, for half a day or even entire days, in the cold and rain. Just imagine. The car parts that are smuggled in through the tunnels are lousy, but almost everything can be had, added Munir, who nearly always could find a way to make do. But the prices of the faulty Egyptian parts are exorbitant. Even when he had to fuel his seven-seat Mercedes with recycled oil used for frying falafel, he didn't complain. Even about the awful smell from the engine. Munir's best days, he always said, were those of the total Israeli occupation of Gaza - with no checkpoints, no Fatah or Hamas, with work in the Hatikva market and lots of hope, the possibility of supporting his family and enjoying relative freedom.

Where didn't we go together, in the Skoda or the Mercedes, which once sank into the Gaza sands when we went to document the Israeli shellings that spewed thousands of nails into bodies and walls? Together with the radical American-Jewish professor Norman Finkelstein, we pushed the orange Mercedes back onto the road. Afterward, we were horrified to see all the black nails in the walls of houses - incriminating evidence of the use of flechette shells, which are not permitted for use against population centers. But who cared?

Only once did I travel in Gaza without Sa'ad and Munir. It was in November 1989, when then minister of industry and trade Ariel Sharon took me with him in his government-issue Volvo for a sightseeing trip, from his Sycamore Ranch to Gaza and back. Sharon, an experienced Gaza tour guide, sought to make it plain to me why Israel must never, ever withdraw from Gaza. There we were, just Sharon and I, sitting in the back seat, on a field trip, unaccompanied. Oh, those were the days.

The fact that Sharon spoke at the time about the return of tens of thousands of refugees from Gaza "to Nazareth, Acre and Lod," as he put it, as part of a solution to the refugee problem, was met with total silence. Now he is in a coma in the hospital, Israel is on the fence in Gaza and no one (in Israel) talks about refugee return anymore.

Long before Operation Cast Lead, there were unbearable scenes from Gaza. In January 2005, at Shifa Hospital, we met four children who had all lost both of their legs in the appalling shelling of the

strawberry fields in Beit Lahia. They were in their wheelchairs facing the window, silently looking out at the world, their gloomy expressions heartbreaking. A year later I met them on crutches, looking just as lost. In that same shelling, Kamal the farmer and his wife Maryam lost three sons, two nephews and a grandson. Another son lay in Shifa on a respirator, having lost both legs, a hand and an eye. Where is he today? Did he survive? Are there still strawberries in that blood-soaked plot? When we arrived that day, Kamal still thought his surviving son had lost just one leg.

A dozen kids who had gone out on their first day of school vacation to help the farmers pick strawberries were dead, long before the Goldstone report. And the knee-jerk, blood-curdling response of the IDF Spokesman did not even express regret: "It must be noted that a terrorist cell operated from within a populated Palestinian area. The IDF is investigating the incident." Blah, blah, blah. The heartlessness is still chilling.

Long before Goldstone, I became attached to little Maria, who lost her brother Mohammed, her mother Na'ima, her grandmother Hanan and her aunt Nahad as a result of a missile strike by an Israeli plane on the Peugeot her father Hamdi had bought that very day. It was the family's first trip in the car. Maria sat on her mother's lap in the back seat singing songs, a moment before it was all over.

For three and a half years, Maria and Hamdi have been living at the Alyn Hospital in Jerusalem, where she has a breathing tube and is permanently paralyzed from the neck down. A sweet girl who feeds a parrot from a spoon she holds in her mouth, operating her

sophisticated wheelchair with her chin while her father tends to her with the most profound devotion I've ever seen. Once every six months or so, the Defense Ministry threatens to expel them back to Gaza; once every six months a small group of dedicated Israelis acts to thwart the evil decree.

In recent weeks, Hamdi has sounded more dejected than ever. The first time we met, on the sandy floor of his home in Gaza, he was limping as a result of his own injury and in total shock. That was two days after the tragedy, and he could hardly utter a sound.

Another person dumbstruck by tragedy was the mother of Dam Hamad - a 14-year-old girl killed by a concrete beam that went flying as a result of an Israeli missile strike, as she lay sleeping in the arms of her paralyzed mother. When we arrived at their impoverished home in the Brazil neighborhood of Rafah, the mother was lying, mute, in bed. Dam was her only daughter. We kept driving.

Also struck by tragedy was Islam, the girl in black whom we met on one of our last trips to Gaza, in November 2006. She sat on a stone wall outside the ruins of her home in Beit Hanoun, after losing eight family members, including her mother and grandmother. All told, 22 people were killed in an instant by shells fired into the heart of the neighborhood, because of a malfunction of an electronic chip in the weaponry, according to the IDF Spokesman. And we drove on.

We met beautiful Fatma Barghout, in her 20s, whose breast cancer had spread and who faced inhuman obstacles, placed in her way by Israeli authorities, barring her from lifesaving treatment in Israel.

nce she was even sent away from the Erez checkpoint because her prosthetic breast set off the metal detector; explanations and pleading were of no use. By the time she finally obtained an entry permit, it was too late. A few days before she died in Gaza, I took her out for a day of fun: to the Safari in Ramat Gan, Hayarkon Park in Tel Aviv and the alleyways of Old Jaffa. She got to see wild animals, green lawns and unarmed Israelis for the first time in her short life.

And there was the Ghazal family, from the Al-Daraj neighborhood, who once invited us to share in their Id al-Fitr feast: two little salted fish, bought with NIS 10, to feed 13 people.

It's as if the heroes of these columns and others are gone with the wind. Who knows which of them is still alive, who has recovered from his tragedy - or who, God forbid, was killed in Operation Cast Lead, one year ago this week? I'll never know. I wasn't able to meet the many victims of the army incursion; we were prevented from telling their story. Gaza is still closed to Israel journalists, and no one cares.

Fuente: <http://www.Haaretz.com> 25/12/2009