

Feature interview

Daniel Levin - author of international best seller “Proof of Life”, the sensational true story of the hunt for a young man gone missing in Syria in 2012

By BERNIE BELLAN

A couple of months back I had the opportunity to read and review an advance copy of a terrific new book titled “Proof of Life”, by Daniel Levin.

In it Levin tells the true story of a task he was given to try and find out what happened to a young man who disappeared in Syria during the early stages of what turned out to be a protracted struggle between the regime of Bashar Assad and the many different groups that emerged determined to fight him.

By now we know how incredibly vicious that fighting became – with all sides committing atrocities that shocked much of the world. Yet, despite the tremendous dangers he knew he would face in accepting his assignment, Levin was able to navigate some of the murkiest corners of the Middle East in pursuit of his goal.

Levin’s book was so completely riveting – and disturbing in many aspects, that when I was offered the opportunity to interview Levin himself, I immediately accepted. It took some time, however, to find a time where Daniel Levin could sit down and talk with me over the phone – about his life and his endlessly fascinating career which has involved his working in some of the world’s most dangerous areas.

Finally, on June 4, Levin was available – for what I originally thought was only going to be about 20 minutes, but when he told me that he actually had 45 minutes to spare, I took advantage to delve as much as I could into how he came to be doing what he does. I spoke with Levin, who was in his home somewhere in New York.

Levin’s early years took him all over the world

I had thought that what might follow would be a give and take, but in reality Levin operates in such a different world that would be so unfamiliar to most of us that he spent a good deal of his time explaining just what it is that he does. I began by saying to him: “Your background was as sort of as a negotiator - you were working to develop modes of democracy in states that had authoritarian-led governments. Is that correct?”

Rather than answer that question in a brief manner, however, Levin entered into a long and fairly complex explanation of what he does and how he ended up in the world of hostage negotiation, which is a byproduct of his primary work.

He began by informing me that he had read my review of his book, which, he said, was quite good, except that I had made one mistake. I had written that Levin was a “Swiss-born Jew”.

“I was actually Israeli-born,” he clarified – “in 1963. My father was an early founder generation – served in the Palmach, ended up going into politics, was close to Ben Gurion, became a diplomat, and in the mid-60s he was posted to Kenya – where my sister was born.

“We were there during the Six-Day War and after he returned – in 1969, his views diverged from those of his colleagues in the Labor Party. He favoured a negotiation with the Palestinians immediately – despite the Khartoum Resolution (which became famous for the “three nos: no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel”), had a big clash with most of them, and decided to leave for a few years. And because my mother was from the Italian part of Switzerland, we moved to Switzerland in 1970. That’s how the Swiss angle started.

“We lived there for most of my school years – elementary and high school. After high school I came to the US, where I went to Yeshiva, also studied martial arts. I went back to Switzerland, went to law school, moved back to Israel in 1988, both to do my military service, also because I was working on my doctorate in law and my thesis was about clashes between religious and secular legal systems.

“I came to the States in 1992 – I’m basically anchored here since.

“The reason that I’m telling you all this is that my most of my work as a lawyer involved conflicts between different legal, religious, and political systems and how they can be reconciled.

“As an example, if you have a Jewish divorce that a secular judge has to evaluate for compliance with secular constitutional norms – does he just go into his American law – or his Swiss law or his French law, or does he look at the Jewish law and see whether it might provide suitable alternate solutions that would be more compliant with his secular law principles?

“That was my initial background and when I came to the States in the early 90s I did a post doctorate at Columbia, then ended up working in a large law firm, and most of our work was in developing countries, trying to develop their new financial markets and judicial systems. I did that for a few years until I decided I wasn’t interested in doing just the transactional part and I started my own law firm with some partners with the idea of initially helping countries – in Africa, South America, in the Middle East, help them emerge from poverty and high debt levels, and try to develop new



DANIEL LEVIN



Syria - 2015: By that time Levin had ceased working in Syria, although he had been trying to mediate between the Assad regime and various anti-regime factions beginning in 2011.

political and economic structures.

“That was in the 90s. We developed essentially a development platform – at its core a non-World Bank approach. We didn’t just fly in experts and tell them what to do, but rather we developed a kind of knowledge platform – like a library, and we would provide that platform as a tool to local talent, to young professionals on the ground, and we would work with them to develop their own solutions.

Contacted by the Prince of Liechtenstein to help start a foundation

“That was the origin of our work and, around 2006 I was contacted by a head of state – a monarch in Europe, the Prince of Liechtenstein, who said ‘I really like your approach to development. What I’d like to do is start a not-for-profit foundation and you’ll use your methodology as a way to work in failed states, conflict zones, war torn areas, to help rebuild them by helping with the next generation of leaders to develop solutions that might work – so that, for example, if you go to a country like Yemen, which has been shattered by civil war and by tribalism – 187 tribes, can we figure out different political systems, different constitutional systems – rotation governments for example – not what you have in Israel right now, but rotations among tribes, and can those solutions work?’ ”

Levin continued: “We develop platform tools for training of next-generation leaders. We work with partners in the different regions. For Yemen, for example, we’re working with a partnership in Abu Dhabi. In Libya we’re working with a very high quality individual to develop a think tank outside of Libya, where we’re training young Libyans to take future leadership positions in the country.

“It’s not as if we’re coming into countries and telling people what their countries should look like. Our goal is to use our knowledge platform and our tools to help teams on the ground to develop their country based on their own preferences and traditions, but with the benefit of best practices from other countries and regions.”

Levin went on to describe the often painfully slow steps required in trying to develop democratic institutions within countries that have not had any sort of tradition of democracy. He said that his foundation tries to find young, uncorrupted individuals – not the sons and daughters of ruling elites, he emphasized - and teach them about such things as constitutions and a judicial system that will remain uncorrupted.

I wondered whether it was even possible to find – and train, young individuals, inside the countries themselves where Levin’s foundation might be attempting to develop basic democratic norms.

He admitted that, in many cases, it involves having to take individuals outside of their countries for training. “But,” he cautioned, “there is no way to replace the presence in the country itself. There is no way, for example, to avoid having to go to Syria in those early years and interact with people there.”

Levin added though, that the goal, “at some point, is to take the core team that you’re working with out of the country – and take them for further training, in the Syrian case – to Lebanon, because it’s just not safe for your own staff and for the individuals who you’re wanting to train to leave them there.”

As much as one may harbour notions of glamorous international diplomacy – jetting into world hot spots – such as how American diplomat Richard Holbrooke was famous for doing, Levin said, he wanted to make sure to dispel any idea that what he and his small team

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Feature interview

Levin do is anything except very hard work – often leading to total disappointment.

(Continued from page 16.) With that in mind, Levin launched into a more detailed explanation how he became involved in what was, at the time, a civil war in Syria between the Assad regime and a large number of factions opposed to that regime.

“That became the beginning of my work and, since the Arab Spring (which began in 2011), we’ve been so heavily involved in war zones – in Syria, for example, which is the basis of the book, that we were involved not just in developing these solutions, but in mediating between the war sides. This was early in the war – when it wasn’t clear how the war was going to end or that the regime would end up with the upper hand following the Russian intervention in 2015.

How Levin became a hostage negotiator in Syria

“It was in that context that I was approached by various families (including of the young man who went missing in Syria), who said: ‘You’re active in Syria, you’re active in Libya, can you help us find our missing son, our missing husband? That was the entry into the world of hostage negotiations.’”

At that point I said to Levin that I was glad he provided context for how he ended up involved in trying to find out what happened to one young man in particular in Syria. I said to him that anyone who would read “Proof of Life” would find themselves plunged right into the harrowing tale of Levin being immersed in a very dangerous pursuit of information – without knowing all that much about Levin himself. In fact, I said to him, if he hadn’t made clear at the outset of the book that what the reader was about to read was all true, I’m sure that a great many readers would think that it’s a work of fiction.

I said to Levin that “the next question that would probably come to mind to any Jewish reader, for sure, and probably almost anyone for that matter, is how does a Jew – and you didn’t pretend to be anything other, gain entrée into all these countries where one would think a Jew – never mind an Israeli, would not exactly be received with open arms. Was it a problem at all?”

Never hid the fact he was a Jew - although he didn’t advertise his being Israeli-born

Levin responded: “There are a number of elements to that. First of all I never have hidden the fact that I’m Jewish; I did not advertise the fact that I’m Israeli. I have multiple citizenships, but I am Israeli-born. Israeli was my first one (citizenship) and the one I’m most attached to. I view myself as Israeli; I served in the army there, my father served in the army there; I was in combat multiple times. I didn’t advertise that and that is why I am very careful how I describe myself in the book.

“I do show how I recorded and documented everything in the book, but I didn’t want the book to be too much about myself. I am the protagonist in this, but I really wanted to tell the story of this war economy (in Syria) and some of its victims (some girls who were forced into prostitution in Dubai became subjects of Levin’s interest during the course of his investigation).

“As to my own background and my ‘Israeliness’, it shines through – and some of the things that I did in the army were tools that I needed to navigate these 20 days (Levin spent in pursuit of his goal) and some other scenarios.”

I asked Levin this: “The way you were able to capture the dialogue (of the various characters who are introduced through the course of the book) – you weren’t carrying recording devices on you, were you? By the way, tell me if there’s anything you don’t want me to disclose.” (After all, I thought, wouldn’t it be detrimental to Levin’s future work in the Middle East if individuals with whom he might need to be in contact were aware



A man believed to be Peter Theo Curtis, a U.S. citizen held hostage by an al-Qaida linked group in Syria, delivers a statement in 2014. The U.S. government later confirmed that Curtis, who had been held hostage for about two years, had been released. No details were given as to how Curtis’s release was obtained.

that he might be revealing information about them the way he did in “Proof of Life”?)

Levin answered: “I never hide my Israeliness; I just don’t advertise it. If someone asked me I wouldn’t lie about it. Anything I’m telling you now – unless I say something is off the record, you can go ahead and write about.”

As for how Levin recorded actual conversations (which are often quoted verbatim in the book – and some of them are extremely frightening as he is able to get certain characters to open up about some terrifying incidents in which they have been involved, including murder) - “The way I recorded (conversations),” Levin explained, “was primarily with my phone. I created a short cut to my home screen. I didn’t have to open my phone; I just had to tap a button and start recording, and I had a separate recording device.

“Whenever I was able to record a conversation, I did that. There were several situations in which I was unable to do that – especially the night in Beirut where I had to surrender all my electronic devices. In those cases, I would take notes whenever I could and I’m careful in the book to indicate when I’m writing down from memory, also when the memory of others was different from the way I remembered moments, so that I try to be as honest as I can.

Levin said he “wanted to add (in response to my question how Levin was able to navigate some of the murkiest areas of the world in the Middle East) that I had lived in Africa as a kid, and one of the languages I learned was Swahili – and Swahili has a very strong Arabic base. It later helped me when I learned Arabic, much, much later in my professional career. So, part of the answer to your question is I was able to blend in, rather than stand out as Jewish or

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Feature interview

Levin

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Israeli.” I wanted to switch tacks from talking about “Proof of Life” to Levin’s experience as a negotiator in other venues. “Have you been asked by various governments to get involved in behind the scenes negotiations at other times?” I wondered.

“Yes – there are two angles to this. Usually – in the case of hostages, I get approached by families and then I coordinate with governments if it’s relevant – with the intelligence community or diplomats, but generally I get approached by families because they’re not getting anywhere with their home governments.

“With respect to mediation between the sides in the Middle East (and it’s usually the Middle East where Levin gets involved, he noted) it’s on our foundation’s platform either to mediate a conflict or to provide what I call a ‘Track 3 diplomacy’ channel, which is a very informal - with full plausible deniability, communication channel, so that the sides that might not otherwise be talking – and there are several of those in the Middle East, as you can imagine, have a way to communicate – not so much to sign some sort of peace agreement – that’s an illusion, but just, for example, to prevent unintended escalations.

“Very often Israel is one side of this equation – and an action gets misinterpreted as an intended act of aggression, and there’s a real need to have indirect conversation and make sure that it doesn’t trigger consequences. It’s something that I get very involved in as part of my daily work.”

I asked: “Given that, is there anything you’d like to say about the recent war between Israel and Hamas? If you had been involved, was there some sort of expertise that you might have been able to offer that could have prevented that war?”

“The short answer to your question,” Levin offered, “is no.

“I’ve been involved in escalations both between Israel and Palestinians and countries surrounding Israel. The issue in all the clashes between Israel and Hamas – as well as Israel in Lebanon, is: ‘Are you trying to mediate this for the sake of finding a solution or are you trying simply to mitigate the suffering or are you merely going through the motions based on your own particular identity – even if you look at the recent clash and, even if you try to avoid the particular tribal or political affiliation – Jewish, not Jewish, conservative, progressive – those types of discussions tend to be tedious and unproductive, because once people have identified who they are, their positions tend to flow from there without much flexibility or room for negotiation.

“My job is different because, in the case of Israel and Hamas, these types of escalations have clear political benefits for very specific individuals or parties. If you take the recent one, it’s very clear that Netanyahu’s political fortunes had reached an end...and obviously with this most recent case, it started with a very clear provocation by right wing Israeli groups in Sheikh Jarrah. If you want to start into a discussion about who’s been in the Middle East longer – 3,000 years, 5,000 years – I’m not interested in that.

“What I’m interested in is that people are suffering in the region and you have to make a decision whether you’re working toward a political solution or not. This particular escalation benefited Netanyahu – at least very temporarily, and it benefited Hamas. Hamas itself was starting to lose control over the street in Gaza. I’ve been to Gaza many times and Gaza today is not Gaza of 20 years ago – before Israel pulled out – in 2005. It’s also not Gaza of ten years ago.

Youth in Gaza feel oppressed by Hamas

“In Gaza today you have a youth fighting battles that were born after those conflicts of 20-25 years ago and they don’t feel the same allegiance to Hamas; they feel oppressed by Hamas. Hamas is starting to lose some of its authority and needs to resort to more and more oppression to stay in power. They had an interest in this escalation because they can present themselves as the protector of Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and responding to the provocation of Israeli policemen and soldiers with boots in the mosque. Those kinds of games and provocations have been going on for decades. There’s really nothing for me to do because no one is really trying to find a solution, through mediation or by other means – yes, there’s mediation for a cease-fire, but you’re never getting at the root of the conflict. I want to get involved when there’s a genuine desire to go beyond just repeating the same mistakes.”

I wanted to return to Levin’s experience in Syria, which, after all, led him to write “Proof of Life”. I asked him whether his involvement in mediating between various sides – both pro-regime and anti-regime, would also have led him to get involved with “Islamist groups” as well?

He answered: “No, not at the time. If you look at the timeline of the war in Syria, you have the uprising starting in 2011 – and it’s really starting over an increase in bread and food prices. And, instead of responding intelligently, they (the Assad regime) responded brutally – like many countries



Levin is currently working to try to create democratic institutions that might work in Yemen, where 187 different tribes are often fighting with one another. “It’s a very complicated place to try to turn into a functioning state,” he says.

if we could deescalate the violence; the regime was not gaining the upper hand, the opposition was organized under the Free Syrian Army, and there were – within each camp, really genuine requests to see if there was a way that we could end this slaughter.

“When the whole thing collapsed – in 2014 and 15, we aborted our project there and stopped any form of mediation because the regime was no longer interested in a peaceful, negotiated solution. But I still remained involved in several matters in Syria, including the searches for missing persons and hostages.”

Levin’s current focus is on Libya and Yemen

I asked: “You say you’ve been involved in countries in Africa and the Middle East that could be described either as failed states or states attempting to emerge from authoritarian rule. Are there any other countries in which you’ve been involved?”

Levin said: “Yes, certainly in a development capacity, in Central America, Southeast Asia – Malaysia, Indonesia, but in terms of real conflict negotiation in the sense that I’ve been describing (during this conversation), it’s been primarily in north Africa, the Middle East, and the Gulf – from Yemen to Libya, even some aspects of the Iran conflict.”

“Libya and Yemen?” I said. “Those can best be described as failed states run by gangs and warlords. Is there anything you can offer as a ray of hope for the futures of those two countries?”

“Yes, I think so,” Levin replied. “Our foundation is actively involved in both those countries. In Libya, there is some hope – not so much because of the current temporary prime minister – (whose name is Dbeibeh), but rather because there is a weakening of the warlords, particularly the warlord in the east of the country, whose name is Khalifa Haftar, who is supported primarily by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, and Russia. There is some form of reconciliation there, also encouraged and supported by European countries which finally recognized that the only way to stem the flow of African refugees coming to Europe through Libya was to have some form of stability in Libya.

“Yemen,” Levin observed, “is a very tribal society – some 187 different tribes – very fragmented, fragmented religiously between Sunni and Shia – fragmented between south and north. Yemen has been in a tenuous state since the 50s and every outside party that has tried to get involved in Yemen has failed. It’s sort of the Arab Vietnam. It’s a very complicated place to try to turn into a functioning state.

“There are very legitimate questions – and we’re working with groups, trying to figure out whether Yemen should be one nation or should it be a confederation of states or even tribes? Yemen was also a terrible mistake by the Saudi Crown Prince who thought he could prove his manhood with a quick win in Yemen and didn’t realize he would face the same fate as Nasser did 65-70 years ago (when Egypt’s then President Nasser also intervened in Yemen).

“So, Yemen is in far worse shape than Libya, I would say in answer to your question.”

As much as reading “Proof of Life” led me to want to find out quite a bit more about Daniel Levin, talking to him about the book and his career led me to ask him whether there might be more books in the works.

He said that in September a book called “Milena’s Promises” will be released in German (“Milenas Versprechen”). “It’s a crime story, a dialogue between an Israeli woman and a young man in the U.S. in the form of an email exchange. It’s all about the question of God’s existence and omnipotence, the suffering of innocent people, and the meaning of being a “chosen” people.”

“Proof of Life”, which was released on May 18th, has garnered a myriad of sensational reviews – including my own. As a result, I can hardly wait to read “Milena’s Promises” once it comes out in English.