

Analysis

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Washington Watch

Netanyahu's
real crimes

By Dr James J Zogby

After years of investigation and months of delay, Israel's Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit formally indicted Benjamin Netanyahu for crimes ranging from his violation of public trust to bribery and fraud. Israel's apologists will argue that the fact that a sitting Prime Minister has been charged with crimes against the state and people presents compelling evidence of the country's democracy and commitment to the rule of law.

This is the very point that Mandelblit made in announcing the indictments - "The public interest requires that we live in a country where no one is above the law." However, this is only partially true since it appears that in Israel the principles of democracy or the rule of law only apply to Israeli Jews or the interests of the state, itself. In fact, Netanyahu's entire sordid career is evidence of the selectiveness of Israeli's sense of justice.

In the past the Netanyahu household has been charged with some of the pettiest forms of corruption imaginable. For example, his wife was found guilty of taking the empty bottles from beverages consumed at official state functions and keeping the money she received for turning them for recycling. The Netanyahus were also known to bring three weeks of dirty laundry on two-day official state trips and sending them to the hotel in which they were staying for a night so that the cleaning bill would be charged to the state's budget. This is the sort of past petty thievery for which the Netanyahus were famous.

Looking at the recent indictments, it is clear that the Prime Minister has graduated to bigger and better forms of fraud and corruption. What's striking, however, is that all of the crimes with which he is charged were focused on feeding his ego or his appetites. In some instances, they were favors done for a businessman in exchange for hundreds of thousands of dollars in gifts, in others they were the corrupt deals he made with various media tycoons in which he promised them benefits in exchange for their guaranteeing him positive coverage in their news outlets.

There is no doubt, that in all of these cases, Netanyahu's behavior has been clearly criminal and reprehensible, and, as described by the Attorney General, a breach of the public's trust. But what I find so striking and disturbing, is that these crimes pale in significance when compared to what Netanyahu has done to the Palestinian people and the prospect for Israeli-Palestinian peace - crimes for which he will not be called to account. After Oslo, Netanyahu organized a back-door lobby to mobilize US Congressional opposition to the peace accords. This was the first time an Israeli lobby worked in the US to oppose their own government. He should have been charged with treason.

Back in Israel, during the same period, he organized with Ariel Sharon and a few others a smear campaign of incitement against Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The campaign was so virulent and threatening that many Israelis, including Rabin's wife, held Netanyahu responsible for Rabin's assassination. Netanyahu should have been charged with incitement.

In 1996, he was elected prime minister on a platform dedicated to ending the peace process and he did everything he could to slow down, distort, and ultimately sabotage the Oslo Peace Process. Even the agreement he signed with the Palestinians at Wye so encumbered the process that by the end of his first term in office, peace was on life support. He should have been charged with destroying the prospects for peace and putting at risk the lives of millions.

During his last three terms in office, he incited violence and hatred against Palestinians, both those who are citizens of Israel and those living under occupation. This has fueled extremist settler movements that have engaged in daily acts of violence, destruction of property, and murder. He also encouraged soldiers in the Israeli army to murder defenseless Palestinians and supported them when they were charged with crimes. In addition, as he did with Rabin, he has falsely accused his Israeli opponents of being too close to the Arabs and accused the Palestinian citizens of Israel of being enemies of the state. He should have been charged with hate crimes.

During his time in office he has: expanded settlements on stolen Palestinian land and the demolition of Palestinian property; overseen a number of devastating assaults on Gaza resulting in the indiscriminate massacre of thousands of innocent civilians and the destruction of Gaza's infrastructure; instituted and maintained a cruel blockade of Gaza's population, as an act of collective punishment, in which, for long periods of time, food, medicine, and other essential items were restricted or severely regulated - resulting in death, disease, and impoverishment of millions of innocents. He should have been charged with war crimes.

NOTE: Dr James J Zogby is the President of the Arab American Institute

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A bike-delivery food messenger stands next to another man as they both use smartphones along the side of a street in the Iranian capital Tehran yesterday. — AFP

Net outage forces Iranians to resort to old ways

Iranians struggled to adjust to life offline for almost a week and were forced to resort to old ways due to a near-total internet blackout imposed amid violent protests. The demonstrations flared on Nov 15, hours after a shock decision announced at midnight to raise the price of petrol by up to 200 percent in the sanctions-hit country. The timing of the announcement was seen as a bid to forestall chaos, such as caused by motorists stocking up on fuel before the hike took effect.

The Internet restrictions, for their part, apparently aimed to temper shows of dissent and anger over the move and stop footage of the unrest from being shared. Brigadier General Salar Abnoosh, a deputy head of the Basij volunteer militia, said Friday that the internet outage had helped to "disrupt the complicated" plans by Iran's enemies.

Yesterday - day seven of the Internet restrictions and the start of the working week in Iran - people in Tehran were trying to overcome problems brought on by the outage. Some said they had been forced to make long journeys to carry out simple transactions that they used to be able to do in a couple of clicks online. "We have no other choice," said a woman in her 30s who only gave her name as Asgari. "What I could have done by using Internet now I have to do by telephone or some other means," she told AFP. "I've taken today off from work to come into town

do something which I could've done by using the Internet." Others said they were having difficulty reaching loved ones overseas. "I wanted to call my children but I couldn't," said Taheri, a man in his 70s. "They were worried and had to go and get a card to call us. This is not right."

Economic impact

For many in Iran, the lack of internet access was more than just a hindrance to social activity. The country has a thriving online economy, with its own equivalents for apps like Airbnb, Amazon and Uber. They have come through the outage largely unscathed as people can still access domestic applications on their phones. However, smaller businesses that rely heavily on social media to stay in touch with their clients suffered during the outage.

Among them were travel agencies whose services were badly disrupted. "An acute problem has been created for all travel agencies," said Hormatollah Rafiei, head of the Travel Agents Guild Association. "The sale of foreign tickets and reservations for foreign hotels reached zero and some travel agencies closed due to financial losses," he said, quoted by IANA news agency.

Connectivity in Iran "began to fluctuate on Friday evening (November 15) before a sequence of cuts that saw levels fall to a nadir of four percent" compared with normal levels, said Netblocks, a site that monitors global internet

disruptions. "Apart from fluctuations on Sunday, access to the outside world flattened consistently until Thursday when limited connectivity appeared across most regions," it said. Yesterday, connectivity was back up, the monitor added.

'What can we do?'

Iran's arch-enemy the United States slapped sanctions on its telecommunications minister overnight "for restricting internet access". The minister, Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi, said he was just another Iranian made to suffer the consequences of sanctions that the US reimposed after withdrawing from a 2015 nuclear deal. "I'm not the only member of club of sanctioned persons," he tweeted. "Before me, Iran ICT startups, developers, cancer patients and EB children were there," he said, referring to epidermolysis bullosa (EB). Iran says the US sanctions have hindered its access to drugs for EB, a skin condition that afflicts children, causing several deaths.

The government said it would unblock the Internet only when it was sure it would not be abused. Mina, a woman in her 50s, said she had little choice but to sit tight. "My family lives abroad and I was always in touch with them but now I have no contact with them," she told AFP. "I need to get a phone card because it's too expensive to call abroad (from a fixed line phone)," she added. "What can we do? We are trying to stay patient!" — AFP

With schools shut,
Haiti children
also endure crisis

In the middle of the deadly political unrest that has rocked Haiti for more than two months, another crisis is unfolding - most schools are closed, leaving Haitian children with nothing to do and their parents flailing to cope. In some homes, parents are trying to teach their own kids, while simultaneously working to assuage their mounting anxiety about the violence they see every day in the streets. "I'm muddling through. I don't really know how to do all this," confesses Edine Celestin, who is holding a reading workbook in her lap. "One might think it's easy to teach your kids, but you only realize afterwards that the child did not understand what you said, and you have to teach the same lesson three or four times."

Since September, Celestin has tried to make sure her five-year-old daughter gets some kind of schooling each day. Their living room has become a classroom. But somewhere between her bedroom and the makeshift schoolhouse, little Lyne-Renee is prone to boredom - she hardly ever even leaves the house anymore, due to the risk of violence erupting outside. "She has to know how to read and write, at least a little bit, in order to be admitted to a primary school next year," Celestin says. "Registration will take place in January and February. We have a lot of work to do," adds the worried mother, who knows that the spots in the best schools are highly coveted.

No money, no teachers
Haiti's public schools already suffer from a severe lack



Samara, 8, is homeschooled by her dad Samy Janvier while her little brother Samy Jr gets a reading lesson in Delmas, south of Port-au-Prince, on Nov 20, 2019. — AFP

of funding and teachers. They can only accommodate a third of the pupils. The impoverished Caribbean nation's crisis began in late August, prompted by a national fuel shortage. Since then, protests against unpopular President Jovenel Moise have raged. Barricades block the streets, and armed gangs roam freely. Nearly 70 percent of the schools have remained closed, according to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and its cultural agency UNESCO.

"The school principal told us several times, 'Come on Monday to do a bit of work.' When we arrive, the teachers are not there, and the principal is alone with five or six students," explains Reeves Bosquet, who is 20 but still hopes to complete his high school education. Bosquet is not alone - many children in Haiti get a late start on going to school and suffer through frequent interruptions in their attendance along the way when their parents cannot afford to send them.

45 years after Nixon,
another US president
faces impeachment

On Aug 7, 1974, a trio of top Republican leaders went to the White House and told President Richard Nixon that party support was eroding and impeachment was inevitable. He resigned the next day. Fast forward 45 years, and another US president, Donald Trump, is facing impeachment by the House of Representatives and a potential trial in the Senate. Unlike Nixon, however, Trump appears to enjoy - at least for the time being - the support of Republican lawmakers, and has given no hint that he'll buckle in the face of what he calls a partisan "witch hunt".

"Part of the story of Watergate and the investigation is watching Republicans peel off, start to call into question their support for Nixon," said Kevin Mattson, a professor of contemporary history at Ohio University. "Now they just seem to be stiffening," said Mattson, author of "Rebels All: A Short History of the Conservative Mind in Postwar America". "Partisanship is so much stronger today than it

was back in the days of Watergate." Trump is accused of withholding vital military aid from Ukraine, a country at war with Russia, in a bid to elicit political dirt on potential 2020 Democratic rival Joe Biden. Adam Schiff, chairman of the Democratic-controlled House committee conducting the impeachment inquiry, claimed that Trump's conduct goes "beyond anything Nixon did". "What we've seen here is far more serious than a third-rate burglary of the Democratic headquarters," Schiff said in a reference to the 1972 break-in at the Watergate hotel that led to a cover-up attempt and eventually Nixon's resignation.

Trump, like Nixon, is accused of "using the powers of the presidency for personal political reasons," said Jon Marshall, an assistant professor at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. But the accusations against Trump are indeed more serious than those facing Nixon, said Louis Caldera, who served as Secretary of the Army under president Bill Clinton and now teaches at American University.

"One is just about domestic politics," Caldera said, while Trump "withheld military aid to an ally at war". "He's not advancing legitimate US national or foreign policy ends," he said. "He's basically trying to stir the pot to create problems for a political rival." Alan Baron, a lawyer who served as special impeachment counsel in the cases of four federal judges, said Trump's actions were essentially a shakedown that "makes Watergate look like child's play."

Decline of bipartisanship

What's changed since Nixon faced impeachment and today, Marshall said, is the "media environment and the nature of our politics. 'There was much more bipartisanship in the 1970s in Congress than there is now,' said Marshall, author of "Watergate's Legacy and the Press: The Investigative Impulse". "There were conservative Democrats and there were liberal Republicans and they were used to working together."

As for the media landscape, "the status of the media and how much people trust the media is just radically different now than it was in the 1970s", said Mattson. The three network TV channels in the 1970s and a few major newspapers and news magazines "really determined the coverage," Marshall said. "It's much easier now for people to choose a partisan outlet that they feel comfortable with," he said. "And of course we now have an infinite number of social media outlets and websites that people can go to get their own partisan spin on things."

In addition, Marshall said, Trump can take his case to the American people directly through Twitter while Nixon only had recourse to occasional news conferences. With Trump capable of firing off an angry tweet at any moment, "members of Congress cross this president at their peril," Caldera said, knowing opposition could endanger their chances of re-election. — AFP