

Netanyahu's Real Crimes

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*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 Israelis' 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.

The list could go on, but this should suffice.

The bottom line is that, to be sure, Netanyahu is a criminal. But in today's Israel he can't be found guilty of his most serious crimes - treason, incitement, destroying peace, hate crimes, and war crimes. Instead, he will be asked only to answer for his narcissistic appetites and corruption.

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