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פרשת נח

Strategies & Second Guesses

Baghdadi and Trump's

Caroline B. Glick

Syrian Chess Board

US President Donald Trump's many critics insist he has no idea what he is doing in Syria. The assassination of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi over the weekend by US Special Forces showed this criticism is misplaced. Trump has a very good idea of what he is doing in Syria, not only regarding ISIS, but regarding the diverse competing actors on the ground.

Regarding ISIS, the obvious lesson of the Baghdadi raid is that Trump's critics' claim that his withdrawal of US forces from Syria's border with Turkey meant that he was going to allow ISIS to regenerate was utterly baseless.

The raid did more than that. Baghdadi's assassination, and Trump's discussion of the mass murderer's death showed that Trump has not merely maintained faith with the fight against ISIS and its allied jihadist groups. He has fundamentally changed the US's counter-terror fighting doctrine, particularly as it relates to psychological warfare against jihadists.

Following the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration initiated a public diplomacy campaign in the Arab-Islamic world. Rather than attack and undermine the jihadist doctrine that insists that it is the religious duty of Muslims to fight with the aim of conquering the non-Muslim world and to establish a global Islamic empire or caliphate, the Bush strategy was to ignore the jihad in the hopes of appeasing its adherents. The basic line of the Bush administration's public diplomacy campaign was to embrace the mantra that Islam is peace, and assert that the US loves Islam because the US seeks peace.

Along these lines, in 2005, then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice prohibited the State Department, FBI and US intelligence agencies from using "controversial" terms like "radical Islam," "jihad" and "radical Islam" in official documents.

The Obama administration took the Bush administration's obsequious approach to strategic communications several steps further. President Barack Obama and his advisors went out of their way to express sympathy for the "Islamic world."

The Obama administration supported the jihadist Muslim Brotherhood against Egypt's long-serving president and US ally Hosni Mubarak and backed Mubarak's overthrow with the full knowledge that the only force powerful enough to replace him was the Muslim Brotherhood.

As for the Shiite jihadists, Obama's refusal to support the pro-democracy protesters in Iran's attempted Green Revolution in 2009 placed the US firmly on the side of the jihadist, imperialist regime of the ayatollahs and against the Iranian people.

In short, Obama took Bush's rhetoric of appeasement and turned it into America's actual policy.

The Bush-Obama sycophancy won the US no good will. Al Qaeda, which led the insurgency against US forces in Iraq with Iranian and Syrian support was not moved to diminish its aggression and hatred of the US due to the administration's efforts.

It was during the Obama years that ISIS built its caliphate on a third of the Iraqi-Syrian landmass and opened slave markets and launched a mass campaign of filmed beheadings in the name of Islam.

In his announcement of Baghdadi's death on Sunday, Trump unceremoniously abandoned his predecessors' strategy of sucking up to jihadists. Unlike Obama, who went to great lengths to talk about the respect US forces who killed Osama bin Laden accorded the terrorist mass-murderer's body, "in accordance with Islamic practice," Trump mocked Baghdadi, the murdering, raping, slaving "caliph."

Baghdadi, Trump said, died "like a dog, like a

coward."

Baghdadi died, Trump said, "whimpering and crying."

Trump posted a picture on his Twitter page of the Delta Force combat dog who brought about Baghdadi's death by chasing him into a tunnel under his compound and provoking him to set off the explosive belt he was wearing, and kill himself and the two children who were with him.

Trump later described the animal who killed Allah's self-appointed representative on earth as "Our 'K-9,' as they call it. I call it a dog. A beautiful dog – a talented dog."

Obama administration officials angrily condemned Trump's remarks. For instance, former CIA deputy director Mike Morell said he was "bothered" by Trump's "locker room talk," which he said, "inspire[s] other people" to conduct revenge attacks.

His colleague, former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff retired admiral James Winnefeld said that Trump's "piling on" describing Baghdadi as a "dog" sent a signal to his followers "that could cause them to lash out possibly more harshly in the wake."

These criticisms are ridiculous. ISIS terrorists have richly proven they require no provocation to commit mass murder. They only need the opportunity.

Moreover, Trump's constant use of the term "dog" and employment of canine imagery is highly significant. Dogs are considered "unclean" in Islam. In Islamic societies, "dog" is the worst name you can call a person.

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It is hard to imagine that Baghdadi's death at the paws of a dog is likely to rally many Muslims to his side. To the contrary, it is likely instead to demoralize his followers. What's the point of joining a group of losers who believe in a fake prophet who died like a coward while chased by a "a beautiful dog – a talented dog"?

Then there is Russia.

Trump's critics insist that his decision to abandon the US position along the Syrian border with Turkey effectively surrendered total control over Syria to Russia. But that is far from the case. The American presence along the border didn't harm Russia. It helped Russia. It freed Russian President Vladimir Putin from having to deal with Turkey. Now that the Americans have left the border zone, Turkish President Recep Erdogan is Putin's problem.

And he is not the main problem that Trump has made for Putin in Syria.

Putin's biggest problem in Syria is financial. The Russian economy is sunk in a deep recession due to the drop in global oil prices. Putin had planned to finance his Syrian operation with Syrian oil revenues. To this end, in January 2018, he signed an agreement with Syrian President Bashar Assad that effectively transferred the rights to the Syrian oil to Russia.

But Putin hadn't taken Trump into consideration.

US forces did not withdraw from all of their positions in Syria last month. They maintained their control over al-Tanf airbase which controls the Syrian border with Jordan and Iraq.

More importantly, from Russia's perspective, the US has not relinquished its military presence adjacent to Syria's oil facilities in the Deir Azzour province on the eastern side of the Euphrates River. Indeed, according to media reports, the US is reinforcing its troop strength in Deir Azzour to ensure continued US-Kurdish control over Syria's oil fields.

To understand how high a priority control over Syria's oil installations is for Putin it is worth recalling what happened in February 2018.

On February 7, 2018, a month after Putin and Assad signed their oil agreement, a massive joint force comprised of Russian mercenaries, Syrian commandos and Iranian Revolutionary Guards forces crossed the Euphrates River with the aim of seizing the town of Khusham adjacent to the Conoco oil fields. Facing them were forty US Special Forces deployed with Kurdish and Arab SDF forces. The US forces directed a massive air assault against the attacking forces which killed some 500 soldiers and ended the assault. Accounts regarding the number of Russian mercenaries killed start at 80 and rise to several hundred.

The American counter-attack caused grievous harm to the Russian force in Syria. Putin has kept the number of Russian military forces in Syria low by outsourcing much of the fighting to Russian military contractors. The aim of the failed operation was to enable those mercenary forces to seize the means to finance their own operations, and get them off the Kremlin payroll.

Since then, Putin has tried to dislodge the US forces from Khusham at least one more time, only to be met with a massive demonstration of force.

The continued US-Kurdish control over Syria's oil fields and installations requires Putin to continue directly funding his war in Syria. So long as this remains the case, given Russia's financial constraints, Putin is likely to go to great lengths to restrain his Iranian, Syrian and Hezbollah partners and their aggressive designs against Israel in order to prevent a costly war.

In other words, by preventing Russia from seizing Syria's oil fields, Trump is forcing Russia to behave in a manner that protects American interests in Syria.

The focus of most of the criticism against Trump's Syria policies has been his alleged abandonment of the Syrian Kurds to the mercies of their Turkish enemies. But over the past week we learned that this is not the case. As Trump explained, continued US-Kurdish control over Syria's oil fields provides the Kurdish-controlled Syrian Democratic Forces with the financial and military wherewithal to support and defend its people and their operations.

Moreover, details of Baghdadi's assassination point to continued close cooperation between US and Kurdish forces. According to accounts of the raid, the Kurds provided the Americans with key intelligence that enabled US forces to pinpoint Baghdadi's location.

As to Turkey, both Baghdadi and ISIS spokesman Abu Hassan al-Mujahid, who was killed by US forces on Tuesday, were located in areas of eastern Syria controlled by Turkey. The Americans didn't try to hide this fact.

The Turkish operation in eastern Syria is reportedly raising Erdogan's popularity at home. But it far from clear that the benefit he receives from his actions will be long-lasting. Turkey's Syrian operation is exposing the NATO member's close ties to ISIS and its allied terror groups. This exposure in and of itself is making the case for downgrading US strategic ties with its erstwhile ally.

Even worse for Turkey, due to Trump's public embrace of Erdogan, the Democrats are targeting the Turkish autocrat as Enemy Number 1. On Tuesday, with the support of Republican lawmakers who have long recognized Erdogan's animosity to US interests and allies, the Democratic-led House overwhelmingly passed a comprehensive sanctions resolution against Turkey.

The al-Baghdadi assassination and related events demonstrate that Trump is not flying blind in Syria. He is implementing a multifaceted set of policies that are based on the strengths, weaknesses and priorities of the various actors on a ground in ways that advance US interests at the expense of its foes and to the benefit of its allies.

Hey America: Israel is Losing It Too!

Victor Rosenthal

I know that I sound like a broken record. OK, none of you are old enough to know what that sounds like. How about a scratched CD, one that plays the same phrase over and over and over: Bibi, Gantz, Lieberman, Lapid: get your acts together. It is a matter of life and death.

I have sometimes sounded smug when I criticize the USA, my former home, for descending into madness. On the one hand you have the spitting and cursing leftist “resistance” to Trump, who find an angle to criticize everything that he does, accuse him of every imaginable crime, boo him at baseball games, and would certainly murder him if they could. On the other side are his partisans, to whom every action he takes, no matter how ill-considered, is portrayed as a stroke of genius. Normal mortals may not be able to see it, but there is a Plan.

That’s just the politics. Culturally, people are obsessed with race and gender in ways that defy reason, there is a strong current to throw away the idea of free speech, and – yes – they are beating up and shooting Jews there, too.

Israel, I used to suggest, is different. We aren’t crazy. We are a small country that makes the best of its opportunities, with competent leaders. We can’t afford an army like the US has, but ours is still the best in the region, because Jews are smart and know how to innovate. Aren’t we the “startup nation?” Haven’t we found a way to be both a Jewish state, a refuge for persecuted Jews the world over, while still maintaining halfway decent relations with the 20% of our population that are Arabs? Aren’t we, despite all the challenges, a democratic state?

Well, boker tov [good morning] Eliyahu as they like to say here to someone who finally understands the obvious. We are just as crazy as America. Our political and social fabric is tearing here just as badly as it is over there, and we seem to be just as clueless about how to mend it.

The behavior of Bibi, Gantz, Lieberman, and Lapid, whose almost unbelievable selfishness, egotism, and stubbornness has prevented the establishment of a government after two elections, and which threatens to produce a third (and probably equally inconclusive) one is deplorable – and intolerable. Israel is on the verge of war with Iran and its proxies, a multi-front, complicated war with an intelligent and creative enemy, one which will certainly exact a high price in blood from us. We are, it seems, unprepared, and it will take a supreme effort and expense to get prepared in time. And yet, the squabbling continues! How can they not understand this?

To the Left, it is all about Bibi’s alleged criminal activities and the Right’s “attack on democracy,” which means an attack on those unelected elements that lean Left and have so much influence, including foreign-funded lobbyists. But Bibi has been subjected to a campaign of fishing expeditions and illegal leaks to the media about them almost since he took office; something that played a large role in bringing about the current stalemate.

Today, Minister of Justice Amir Ohana referred to the “symbiosis” between the police investigators, the prosecution, and the media in connection with the leaks, which have never been investigated. Ohana is a Netanyahu appointee, but he’s quite right. Whether or not Bibi turns out to be a witch, he has been and continues to be the subject of a witch hunt (an interesting analysis of the charges against him is here).

On the other hand, Bibi has used more force to crush opposition to him in his party than he has to stop Hamas from setting wildfires in the area adjacent to our border. I can’t count all the ministerial portfolios that he is holding at once. Once perhaps the most competent Prime Minister in Israel’s history, his obsession with his legal problems and his inability to delegate responsibility seems to have neutralized him.

Yesterday’s big news was that a couple of Netanyahu’s aides allegedly paid a Bratslaver sound truck, one of those that drives around playing joyous music, stopping from time to time to allow the occupants to come out and dance in the street, to park in front of the house of Shlomo Filber, a State’s Witnesses in one of Bibi’s criminal cases. Instead of

joyous music, they broadcast accusations that Filber was a liar. The police, investigating the incident, are alleged to have improperly taken the telephones of the perpetrators, and downloaded their content. The USA has nothing on us for craziness.

Social problems are multiplying. Young people still can’t afford apartments. The Haredi Rabbinit continues to embitter the lives of thousands of Israelis. The healthcare system is falling apart from a shortage of doctors, nurses, and money. Arab citizens of Israel elect politicians to the Knesset who oppose the existence of a Jewish state. Nothing is done to remove the infiltrators from South Tel Aviv. Nothing is done to prepare for the inevitable powerful earthquake. As happens in third world countries, money flows into the pockets of the elite, while public needs receive less and less attention.

I’d call for a military coup if the worthless opposition party weren’t already heavily laden with former Chiefs of Staff. Or a revolution, if I didn’t know that historically revolutions tend to end up with the most extreme, brutal factions in charge.

Really, all we need is a competent government, made up of people who put the needs of the state and its people first. Is that too much to ask?

Democracy Devoid of the Demos?

Martin Sherman

Former Justice Minister, ‘Tommy’ Lapid: “...the legal system in Israel is being undermined by an overzealous State Prosecutor’s Office, that is losing esteem and credibility with each additional trial...”

They who sow the wind will reap the storm

–Hosea 8:7.

[There is a] dangerous symbiosis between elements in the police Major Crimes Unit, the State Prosecutor’s Office and the media.

—citation from Justice Minister Amir

Ohana’s Press Conference- Oct. 29, 2019

This week was a tumultuous one for Israel’s legal establishment—and rightly so.

Perversion of the democratic process

For almost a decade, I have underscored repeatedly that certain sectors of Israeli civil society have, time and again, (mis)used their unelected positions of influence and authority, to dominate the political discourse—and hence, to a large degree—to determine political outcomes. More often than not, these were outcomes that not only did not conform to voter preferences as reflected in the election results—but starkly contradicted them! In particular, I pointed to a trinity of interacting sets of civil society elites with distinctly left-leaning political proclivities—in the mainstream media, the academia (particularly in the social sciences and humanities, including law), and the legal establishment.

Slowly, awareness of this perversion of the democratic process has edged its way into the public consciousness and the public debate—with the legalistic crusade against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu giving it added impetus.

Indeed, this was clearly demonstrated this week in the furor over the harsh criticism leveled by the recently appointed Justice Minister, Amir Ohana, against Israel’s legal system—or, at least, important sectors of it.

“A dangerous symbiosis”

At a press conference on Tuesday (Oct. 29, 2019), Ohana severely condemned the “*dangerous symbiosis between elements in the police Major Crimes Unit, the State Prosecutor’s Office and the media*”, warning that the State Prosecutor’s Office “*had become a political actor*”, thereby exceeding the proper bounds of its assigned duties.

Significantly, he began his address with a quotation (see below for the somewhat surprising source):

“I know the State Prosecutor Office well. There are many diligent prosecutors who serve in it and who carry out their duties faithfully, day after day in court, at times against dangerous criminals and organized crime gangs. But there is also a different kind of Prosecutor’s Office—a Prosecutor’s Office within the Prosecutor’s Office.”

He went on citing: “There are those, who, by means of a small sect of “court-yard” [i.e. compliant] reporters, have succeeded in promoting the perception that there is a war raging here between the forces of good against the forces of evil, in which the Prosecutor’s office valiantly defends the public

against its elected representatives. The public believes that the politicians are corrupt, that the institutions of government are rotten, that public figures are not only guilty until proved innocent, but even after they are proved innocent.”

“If that is not extortion, I do not know what is...”

Still adhering to the quotation, Ohana continued: “Any expression of doubt, any word of criticism is immediately rejected. A pack of complicit journalists and biased pundits always rush to the defense of the Prosecutors Office and portrays the expressions of doubt as heretical opposition to the rule of law.”

Echoing its grave warning, he lamented: “Political and public careers have been destroyed one after another, while the public — which is not privy to the facts — is convinced that the ‘stables are being cleaned out’. Almost no one dared expose the dangerous symbiosis between elements in the police Major Crimes Unit, the State Prosecutor’s Office and the media. That’s how the system worked. That’s how careers were destroyed. The closing of cases or acquittals in court always came too late.”

The quotation ended in a dour tone: “When necessary, in order to get rid of a Minister of Justice, of whom the legal Establishment did not approve, old charges were reopened, details leaked to certain people in the media—always the same people. All this was done so that the politicians, who were marked, will remember that there is always a sword suspended above their head... If that is not extortion, I do not know what extortion is.”

Ohana finally revealed who had authored these words: Reuven Rivlin, then (2004) Speaker of the Knesset, today President of Israel! Significantly, Rivlin has been widely embraced by elements of the Israeli Left for what they perceive as his statesman-like, centrist demeanor as president.

Yair Lapid: Only to change feet?

In response to Ohana’s censure, Yair Lapid, one of the heads of the Blue & White faction, responded with an irate tweet:

“On the wall of the Ministry of Justice there is a picture of my father [Yosef “Tommy” Lapid, who served briefly as Justice Minister in Ariel Sharon’s government (2003-2004)]. If pictures could feel shame, it would be ashamed of his successor [Amir Ohana]. Verbal violence, in a degrading attack on the very system he is supposed to defend, in a transparently sycophantic effort to curry favor with a prime minister, suspected of grave criminal offenses. It is no longer shocking. It is no longer embarrassing. It is sad. The time has come for change.”

Regrettably, it seems that lately, Lapid jnr. only opens his mouth to change feet.

For shortly after his disapproving tweet, the Web was abuzz with tart retorts, showing that in fact his father had expressed very similar sentiments to those of Ohana regarding the State Prosecutor’s Office—indeed, if anything, even harsher.

“A terror unit” within the State Prosecutor’s Office”

Thus, on primetime TV, Lapid senior, railed against the State Prosecutor’s Office:

“We need to understand how what is happening, actually happens. First of all, I want to say that the legal system in Israel is being undermined by an overzealous State Prosecutor’s Office...that is losing esteem and credibility with each additional trial...In the Prosecutor’s office there is a band of young “hungry” lawyers that put pressure on the older ones. I call them the “terror unit” within the Prosecutor’s Office.”

He went on to accuse the Prosecutor’s Office of indicting defendants, despite flimsy evidence as to their guilt, without taking into account the suffering the wrongly accused undergo until acquitted.

He then presented his grave assessment: “This happens in so many instances that a Commission of Inquiry must be set up to examine what is going on in the Prosecutors Office.”

Interestingly, it appears that Lapid snr. not only concurs with Ohana as to the problematic functioning of the Prosecutor’s Office, but also, in general terms, as to how this issue should be addressed. Thus, just before submission of this article (Oct. 31, 2019), in an interview to Yisrael Hayom, Ohana declared that “if there is not a serious response to Tuesday’s press conference, I would like to exercise my authority and set up a government investigation committee into the conduct of the prosecutor’s office.”

When legality loses its legitimacy

However, the State Prosecutor's Office is not the only sector of the Israeli legal system that is facing a crisis of confidence. I have written several times, in some detail, on the steep erosion of public faith in the judiciary, including in the High Court, reflected in a comprehensive ongoing study at Haifa University—see for example here and here.

I will, therefore, confine myself to citing a review of this study by Eimav Schiff, entitled "The Supreme Court is losing the people's trust". In it, he writes: "The view of the court as an ivory tower, home to self-appointed gods, is becoming more and more common, and this is reflected in different confidence indexes. Last May, for example, the Rule of Law Index by Prof. Arie Ratner of Haifa University found that 49 percent of Jewish Israeli citizens have confidence in the Supreme Court. In 2000, that rate stood at 80 percent. This isn't a slip or a drop, it's a collapse."

He warned: Needless to say, the High Court's image among the public cannot remain as it is now. Eventually, there will be a political constellation that could enable another constitutional revolution... which will be powered by support from the people".

The legal establishment will ignore these warning signs at its peril.

The backdrop for Netanyahu indictments

This crisis of public confidence is, in many ways, the backdrop to the prospective indictments of Prime Minister Netanyahu. After all, to anyone but a rabid "Bibiphobe", they appear transparently contrived, indeed, a thinly veiled attempt at a legalistic coup—see here, here, here and here—creating a deep sense of unease that Israel's legal establishment is being exploited for patent political ends—i.e. that unelected elites are using their positions of influence and authority to bring about political outcomes that do not correspond to—even contradict—the election results, depleting the influence of the demos in Israeli democracy.

Indeed, as a layman, it is difficult to avoid the distinct impression that the unrelenting drive to bring an indictment—any indictment—against Netanyahu has long exceeded the bounds of reasonable law enforcement. Thus, it would seem, that where Netanyahu is concerned, the forces of law and order appear to be trying to outlaw every give-and-take interaction in political life, thereby extracting the very essence of political activity itself.

Indeed, especially in light of the recent endeavor to bring highly dubious charges of witness harassment against work associates of Netanyahu, one might be excused for sensing a creeping suspicion that a desperate attempt is underway to criminalize anything and anybody with any perceived congenial affiliation with Netanyahu—whether professional or personal.

Reaping the storm

This is—to understate the case—deeply regrettable.

For, there are testing times ahead for Israeli society. Beset by harrowing external threats and what is liable to be unprecedented domestic tumult, there are unlikely to be any positive outcomes that emerge from the endeavor to prosecute Netanyahu.

If he is not indicted, or indicted and acquitted, it will be a massive blow to the credibility of the nation's law enforcement.

If he is convicted and forced out of office, many will see this as naked politicization of law enforcement in the country, in effect, a legalistic coup d'état, designed to annul the outcome of elections—and will deal a mortal blow to their faith in the democratic process.

Either way, there will be no winners—and the real casualty will be the public's belief in the institutions of state in Israel—just when that belief may be sorely needed.

Indeed, we may soon find that those who tried to sow a legalistic wind will reap a storm far beyond anything they imagined.

Martin Sherman is the founder & executive director of the Israel Institute for Strategic Studies

An Assault on Israeli Press Freedom

Caroline B. Glick

On Sunday, press freedom in Israel effectively ended, at least for some.

Sunday evening, the police and State Attorney's Office divulged that they are conducting a criminal investigation against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's top media advisors Jonatan Urich and Ofer Golan. The two are suspects and police investigators have seized their cellphones.

Follow Israel Hayom on Facebook and Twitter. Then on Monday, police revealed that two other top media advisors to the prime minister, Topaz Luk and Israel (Srulik) Einhorn are also under criminal probe and that their cellular phones have also been seized.

The four are suspected of sending a jalopy to the home of Shlomo Filber, a former top Netanyahu adviser turned state witness against him in Case 4,000, one of the three criminal investigations being conducted against Netanyahu. The car was sent to Filber's residence in August, ahead of the September Knesset election.

It was equipped with a loudspeaker. Likud activists at the scene ran a recorded message through the speaker appealing to Filber not to betray Netanyahu and filmed their actions as a campaign stunt.

Filber reportedly alerted the police to the event. But, according to his lawyer, he didn't file a criminal complaint, because, as his lawyer said, he didn't feel harassed.

All the same, law enforcement decided to open a criminal investigation. Netanyahu's top media advisers are being accused of witness tampering, a felony that carries a 3-year prison sentence.

The legal viability of the case is an open question. But the undeniable message of the decision to seize the spokesmen's phones is that as far as Israel's law enforcement agencies are concerned, freedom of the press is finished.

Earlier this month, Israel Hayom revealed that just before Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit concluded his 4-day pre-indictment hearing for Netanyahu, two senior American jurists, Nathan Lewin and Prof. Avi Bell were ushered into the hearing room. Mendelblit is expected to decide in the next month whether he will indict Netanyahu in the three cases code-named Case 1,000, Case 2,000 and Case 4,000.

Case 1,000 relates to cigars and champagne that Netanyahu allegedly received as gifts from wealthy friends. It is the least serious of the cases.

Cases 2,000 and 4,000, which are considered more serious, relate to Netanyahu's dealings with owners of media organizations. They are based on a legal theory advocated by State Attorney Shai Nitzan. Nitzan claims that the provision of positive coverage to politicians by news organizations is a form of bribery.

Lewin and Bell presented the opposite claim. Bell and Lewin warned Mendelblit that if he adopts Nitzan's view and defines the provision of positive coverage to a public servant by a media company as bribery, he will strike a fatal blow at freedom of the press and freedom of speech in Israel. Indeed, he will undermine the very foundations of Israeli democracy.

As they explained in their written brief, "Prosecution of the Netanyahu case would signal to journalists and media executives that favorable or damaging publicity about a candidate may be investigated by the police and by prosecutors to determine whether the publicity was a quid exchanged for the quo of official action. If the police and prosecutors are empowered to probe the mixed motives of journalists and politicians, they can exercise arbitrary control over essential institutions of democracy."

Through their latest assault on Netanyahu's advisers—and the seizure of their cellphones—the State Attorney's Office and the police are proving the validity of the warning.

In its response to the investigation of Netanyahu's top advisers and the seizure of their phones, the prime minister's office reasonably focused on how it affected

Netanyahu's ability to function. "The goal is clear: to neutralize the prime minister's capacity to fight for public opinion against a never-ending flood of leaks against him by harming those close to him," Netanyahu's office said in a statement.

Although accurate, the statement ignored the main problem with what police and prosecutors have done. Their seizure of the four advisers' phones is not merely an assault on the advisers and on Netanyahu. It is an attack against everyone who has been in contact with Netanyahu or his advisers. Case 2,000 against Netanyahu is rooted in information the police found while investigating his former bureau chief Ari Harow on unrelated charges.

Other high-profile investigations of public officials have similarly been initiated following the seizure of cellular phones and the incidental finding of unrelated information during the course of the search of their contents.

The advisers' cellphones document nearly every contact between Netanyahu and the media going back several years.

Every journalist, editor, and media owner that has been in contact with Netanyahu has likely corresponded with them. Since all of these communications are now in the hands of police investigators, and since police are operating under Nitzan's criminal theory of relations between politicians and the media, every reporter, editor, and media owner who has been in contact with Netanyahu through his spokespersons has to be concerned that he is in the crosshairs of police investigators and state prosecutors.

At any moment those reporters, editors and media owners may receive a summons to report for police questioning and expected to account for their decision to adopt a positive approach to Netanyahu.

The investigators insist they can be trusted. They have sealed the phones away and will only search them if they receive permission from a judge to do so. They say and only look for information related specifically to the charges under investigation. But these protestations are impossible to countenance.

Since the State Attorney's Office is operating under Nitzan's authoritarian view that relations between the media and politicians are inherently suspect and criminal—a theory, which as Bell and Lewin warned, has been rejected by every other democracy on earth—it is reasonable to assume that some Israeli judges agree with them.

Judges who agree that a conversation between a reporter and a politician is evidence of bribery will happily sign a search warrant and unlock every communication Netanyahu has had with every journalist covering him for the past four years.

Moreover, the police themselves have already shown that their promises are empty. On Monday evening it was reported that Urich's attorney sent a letter of complaint to Mendelblit claiming that during the course of Urich's investigation, a police investigator asked Urich to unlock his phone and failed to advise him that he had the right to refuse her request.

The investigator then allegedly conducted a wide-ranging search of his phone. She allegedly copied information from his phone to her phone and sent it to a Telegram chat group of police investigators regarding Case 4,000. In other words, in Urich's presence, the police investigator initiated a fishing expedition geared not towards investigating his alleged harassment of Filber but towards finding evidence for an unrelated investigation of Netanyahu.

The police acknowledged the veracity of Urich's allegations, and similar ones launched by Golan's attorney on Tuesday. Their presumably illegal search of the two men's phones, along with the reasonable assumption that investigators will have no problem finding a compliant judge, makes clear that the seizure

of the spokesmens' cellphones was a direct assault on press freedom in Israel.

From the moment investigators got their hands on the phones, every reporter, editor, and media executive who has supported Netanyahu in any way is liable to be called in for police questioning.

Well, actually, not every journalist who has been in touch with them needs to worry.

One of the more disturbing things that we have learned about press freedom in Israel over the past generation is that most senior journalists and the most powerful media organizations in Israel are willing to sacrifice the freedom of expression of a large segment of the population and support the closure of media outlets identified with the political Right.

This authoritarian tendency stood behind the mass media's lockstep support for a blatantly political Supreme Court ruling in 2002 to shut down the only right-wing radio station in Israel at the time – Arutz 7.

In 2013, most media outlets and senior journalists enthusiastically supported draft legislation of the so-called Israel Hayom Bill whose sole purpose was to shut down the largest circulation daily newspaper in Israel because it was right of center.

And this year, the same mass media outlets and senior reporters supported a regulatory bid to shut down Channel 20 due to its right-wing outlook.

Today, the same media organizations and reporters that thrilled at Arutz 7's closure and eagerly supported shutting down Israel Hayom and Channel 20 are happily reporting and justifying the investigation of Netanyahu's spokesmen and the seizure of their cellphones. They broadcast and write in support of Nitzan's plan to criminalize media relations with politicians.

Their readiness to support blatant assaults on press freedom in Israel is not surprising. These "enlightened" media bigwigs live comfortably with selective law enforcement and discriminatory legislation enacted by equally "enlightened" prosecutors, police investigators and justices in support of their common world view. That common worldview is based on their shared visceral hatred of the political Right.

For the "enlightened" journalists and prosecutors, Israel will always remain a democracy with press freedom. It is only for their "unenlightened" rivals on the political Right that Israel is becoming an autocracy in which, as in Turkey, journalists can be questioned for the content of their articles.

And that's just fine with them.

In Other News ...

The Corner of the Altar Found in Shiloh?

Maayan Jaffe-Hoffman

"When the news reached Joab, who had conspired with Adonijah though not with Absalom, he fled to the tent of the Lord and took hold of the horns of the altar" --(1 Kings 2:28).

This passage in the Bible may have come to life just a few weeks ago for a team of 200 archaeologists and volunteers, who have been excavating in the field of ancient Shiloh. This summer, under the guidance of Dr. Scott Stripling, they made the discovery of a horn, which was one of the four corners of an ancient altar, as described in Kings.

The find, said Stripling, director of excavations at ancient Shiloh and head of the Associates for Biblical Research, is consistent with what he expected to find in the fields of the ancient city where, according to the biblical account, the tabernacle for the Ark of the Covenant once stood.

Stripling is a "biblical archaeologist." He has been excavating the land of Israel for decades. He directed excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir from 2013 to 2017, served as a field supervisor of the Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project

from 2005 to 2010, and was a supervisor of the Jerusalem Temple Mount Salvage Project, as well.

His Shiloh team is made up of archaeologists and volunteers from 11 universities around the world – an interdisciplinary team of scientists, historians and biblical scholars. In the last three years, they uncovered multiple large pithoi – "famous Israelite collar-rimmed jars" – inside a series of "storage rooms" that they found surround the ancient city.

These jars, more of which were found over the 2019 summer, likely held grains and fruits – tithes in Stripling's words, brought by the Israelites to the Temple.

The group also discovered a kobaat, a goblet or ritual chalice, which could be linked to religious use.

A most exciting find at the end of summer 2018, Stripling said, was a ceramic pomegranate.

"The pomegranate is a sacred motif," he said. "The only sites in Israel where we have found pomegranates like this one have been Levitical sites."

The pomegranate measures between 2.5 and three inches and has hooks by which it could be hung, he explained. Stripling said a similar pomegranate was found nearly 100 years earlier by another excavation team. He said the Bible describes pomegranates hanging from the bottom of the robe of the High Priest, who served in Shiloh for more than three centuries – after the conquest of Canaan and until King David established Jerusalem as the eternal capital of the Jewish nation.

"Make pomegranates of blue, purple and scarlet yarn around the hem of the robe, with gold bells between them," reads Exodus 23:33 in reference to the High Priest's dress.

There are seven sacred foods in the land of Israel – two grains and five fruits, Stripling explained. But only one of them "goes into the presence of God, only one of them is sacred, and that is pomegranate... The pomegranate is a major motif of the Tabernacle and the Temples.

"The Bible and other ancient religious texts is what has driven archeology in this region," Stripling said, proud to hold the holy book in one hand and a shovel in his other. "We have to recognize the validity of the Bible... I am comfortable with the biblical story – and now we have proof of that story, really."

But not everyone agrees. While the site was first excavated nearly 100 years ago in 1922 by a Danish expedition, which returned two more times in 1926 and 1932, the most recent excavation – and the most extensive one before Stripling's – was done by a team led by Tel Aviv University Professor Israel Finkelstein from 1981 to 1984.

Finkelstein discovered a large bone deposit that was dated to the Late Bronze Age (around 1483–1177 BCE, according to Stripling), which he said provided evidence of a Canaanite sacrificial system at Shiloh.

The timing also works with the biblical narrative, and Stripling saw the ancient Jewish text in those bones, as well.

"These were kosher and young animals, many with signs of burn or butcher marks on them, and they were mostly from the right side of the animal," Stripling explained. "This did not mean much to Finkelstein. For me it was Leviticus Chapter 7: The right side of the animal was the priest's portion, which would have been consumed at Shiloh. It would have been sacrificed, eaten by the priest and the bones disposed."

He uses a big word to describe when this happens: verisimilitude.

"It means consistency between what we read in the text and what we find on the ground," he said.

There are essentially two schools when it comes to biblical archaeology: maximalists and minimalists.

"Maximalists are those who really dig with one hand and read the Bible with the other," explained Jacob Wright, a professor of Hebrew

Bible at Emory University in Atlanta. "They see the Bible as primary source on par with the archaeological witness."

In contrast, Minimalists, he said, try to disconnect their findings from the holy text and often have a political agenda of delegitimizing the modern State of Israel.

He said Maximalists and Minimalists hold extremist views and that most archaeologists fall somewhere in the middle.

"Archeology has one story to tell and the biblical narrative has another," according to Wright.

"Let's imagine we find a lot of things related to a cultic sanctuary at Shiloh and the Bible describes it the same way: Does that prove the biblical narrative is true?" Wright asked. "No. But it does indicate this site was an important cultic center. Who knows? You don't want to jump to conclusions."

With this, Stripling expressed similar sentiments. As such, he said that he uses the most modern technology to help him on his scientific yet faithful journey.

Six years ago, his excavation team used their first drone to take pictures and create a site map of a different site. "Everyone stopped working to take pictures of the drone," he recalled.

Now, the team takes 1,000 drone shots every day and compresses them to make 3-D images so they can see the site from many different angles. They don't draw plans; they hover the drone over the field to capture the perfect picture and take notes directly onto the image.

Supervisors use iPads to jot down findings; the data is automatically collected on Stripling's own iPad simultaneously, allowing him to make data-driven decisions in the field.

Most recently, he built a unique wet-sifting station at Shiloh, modeled after the one used for the Temple Mount Sifting Project.

Volunteers are trained to use the washing station, water tower, hoses and nozzles to go through the finds, capturing at least 80% more evidence than they did in years prior. Now, the Associates for Biblical Research are writing up their wet sifting process and will create a blueprint on which other archeology teams can model.

Dr. Eilat Mazar, of the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem – the granddaughter of Benjamin Mazar who excavated the land of Israel under the British Mandate – is known for her advice: "Let the stones speak for themselves."

"We can discover the date of a structure," said Brent Nagtegaal, Jerusalem representative of the Armstrong International Cultural Foundation, "but without the Bible, we don't understand its context... The Bible is the best tool that archaeologists have in Israel."

Jerusalem Post - JPost.com

The Israeli Election

On October 21, the prime minister recognized that he could not form a government and returned the mandate to Rivlin.

"I made every effort to bring Benny Gantz to the negotiating table, every effort to establish a broad national unity government, every effort to prevent another election. He simply refused."

By October 23, the president had given the mandate to Gantz, who has 28 days in which to form a government. His chances of doing so are considered very poor.

It has been suggested that if Gantz were to drop Yesh Atid, and the very troublesome Lapid, from his party, then a deal might be struck with Netanyahu, but this scenario is unlikely.

Gantz met with Netanyahu on Sunday. While the meeting was allegedly cordial, no progress was made.

If Gantz is unable to form a government, then the members of the Knesset have the option of selecting someone else from within that body to try. A majority of the Knesset would have to submit the name of an MK to the president within two days. That individual would have two weeks to form a coalition.

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