Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu by Anshel Pfeffer

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The temptation to write a biography of Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu, who has served as prime minister of Israel for 12 years and continues to be the preferred candidate of most Israelis for a further term, is great. Like Menachem Begin, the founding father of the Likud and Israel’s first right-wing prime minister, Netanyahu arouses fierce and contradictory emotions. Supporters view him as a leader who has transformed Israel into a regional power with a thriving economy, enjoying relative security against the backdrop of a tempestuous Middle East. Opponents argue that he is leading Israel towards a chauvinistic nationalism, neglecting the diplomatic and moral need to resolve the Palestinian issue and, above all, splitting Israeli society with his divisive rhetoric. The Netanyahu puzzle demands a solution.

A historian would hold off writing a biography for two main reasons: First, some perspective is needed in order to determine whether Netanyahu’s policies are mistaken or correct. For example, the focus of his diplomatic activities over the past decade has been the threat of Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Between 2010 and 2012, Netanyahu sought to initiate a military strike against Iran, and he is a fierce opponent of the agreement signed between Iran and the superpowers in 2015 freezing the country’s nuclear programs. Only time will tell whether Netanyahu’s threats were well-placed and he was mistaken only in not carrying them out (mainly due to opposition from Israel’s security establishment), or whether his opposition to the compromise deal might lead to its collapse and hence to the nuclearisation of Iran. Moreover, it remains unclear what the ramifications of such a development would be for Israel.

The second reason a historian might delay writing a biography of Netanyahu is that pertinent documents are still classified in Israeli archives, while Netanyahu himself, to the best of our knowledge, has not kept a journal, and in any case has not exposed one to a biographer. Perspective and sources are vital tools without which no biography can be complete. Nevertheless, in an age when international diplomacy is conducted over Twitter, it is difficult to refrain from attempting to unravel Netanyahu’s character, even if only from overt sources.

Such a task requires an accomplished journalist, and Anshel Pfeffer, the wide-ranging and admired correspondent for Haaretz and the Economist, embarked on his mission courageously, despite the fact that Netanyahu refused to cooperate. Pfeffer recalls that at one of their meetings, in the presence of other journalists, Netanyahu, commonly known as Bibi, remarked: “This is Mr Pfeffer who’s writing a book about me. He doesn’t know anything about me. It will be a cartoon.”

In that respect, at least, Netanyahu was mistaken. This is not the first biography written about him, but it is one of the best, the most fascinating and the most comprehensive. Pfeffer omits no detail concerning Netanyahu, from his grandfather’s involvement in the Zionist project through stormy recent times, as Netanyahu fights for his political life (and perhaps for his personal liberty, if he is convicted of corruption) against the legal and media establishments.

Who is Bibi? Why does he simultaneously arouse such admiration and antagonism? The first reason lies in the fact that Bibi, who was born in Israel as the state was established, but was educated in the United States, where his father Ben-Zion moved for his academic career, has never maintained a complete and rounded identity. As a youth in the United States in the 1960s, he felt alienated from the American experience and wanted to go home (and he indeed returned to Israel alone, at the age of 18, to enlist in the IDF’s elite Sayeret Matkal unit). On the other hand, after completing his service five years later, he returned to the United States to study, and later settled in the country. In the 1980s, thanks mainly to his family connections, and after his brother Yoni was killed in the heroic operation to free Israeli hostages in Entebbe in 1976 – a tragic death that imbued the Netanyahu family with a halo of national heroism – Bibi began to work in the Israeli embassy in Washington DC. He later served as ambassador the United Nations. During this period, in his late twenties and thirties, it seems that Netanyahu was already captivated by American culture. His assimilation in America in the 1980s came as the neo-Conservative camp was exerting an increasing influence over the Republican party. Armed with these connections and ideological influences, Netanyahu returned to Israel to compete in the Likud list for the 1988 elections. Yet since his return, his disconnection from Israeli reality has been apparent. To this day, he conducts his intimate conversations in English.

Herein lies the paradox. In this period, Netanyahu was welcomed with open arms both by Likudniks and by the media, particularly because he was regarded as a “man of the world” who had come to us from America. At the time, Israel was still a conservative and insular society that admired anyone who came from overseas equipped with perfect English. As the years passed, however, and the world became more accessible to Israelis, Netanyahu’s American character also aroused feelings of alienation and strangeness. Nevertheless, and as the book rightly shows, the primary key to understanding Netanyahu lies not in his cultural affinities but in his ideology. In 1993, five years after entering the Knesset, he conquered the leadership of the Likud party, which at the time was in opposition. At the same time, he published his important book, *A Place among the Nations*. To this day, the book remains a compulsory text for understanding his worldview. In it, Netanyahu left no room for any practical hope of peace, at least until a substantive process of democratisation occurs in the Arab world. He set the Zionist-Arab conflict against the backdrop of a struggle between Islamic values and those of the West, shared by Israel. In September 1993, shortly after his book was published, the leaders of the Israeli Labour Party, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, signed the historic Oslo Accord with the Palestine Liberation Organisation, in a surprise move. At first, it seemed that the agreement would lead to a new era in which Jews and Palestinians would share their contested land and the entire region would become a “New Middle East,” as Peres promised. Against this background, the promising young Netanyahu suddenly seemed to have missed the boat, remaining faithful to the outdated ideology of the Greater Land of Israel. It was at this point that Netanyahu began his battles against the mainstream Israeli media, which supported the Oslo Accord initiated by the country’s old elites. However, the agreement was accompanied by terror attacks that led many Israelis once again to suspect that Israel cannot trust the Palestinians. In 1996, after Rabin was assassinated by a religious Jew opposed to the agreement, Peres and Netanyahu stood in direct elections for the position of prime minister. To the great surprise of all – at least all who relied on the media – Netanyahu was victorious, albeit with a wafer-thin majority.

In 1999, Netanyahu’s suspicious attitude toward the peace process and his poor personal relationships with the heads of his own party led to his defeat by Ehud Barak, who, like his predecessors from the Labour Party, offered the hope of a comprehensive peace. However, the negotiations for a permanent agreement collapsed in 2000, leading to the outbreak of the Second Intifada and a wave of terror attacks. Ever since, Israelis have been unwilling to vote for the Left. Bibi led the Likud back to power in 2009 after Ariel Sharon, who headed the party in the 2000s, fell into a coma.

Since then, Netanyahu has won repeated election campaigns. Netanyahu is quite simply convinced that he is right. Pfeffer quotes Netanyahu’s assertion during his time in the military that “more than Israel needs America, America needs Israel as its ally.” He highlights Netanyahu’s consistent conviction that Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians is merely a part of the greater story of the Israeli-Arab conflict – and not a particularly important one at that. Moreover, this larger conflict, in turn, is merely a chapter in a greater struggle between Christians and Muslims. Accordingly, Netanyahu is in no rush to even attempt to resolve the conflict. The secret of his leadership lies in a profound pessimism that reflects his approach to the conflict (and, to an extent, to life) – a pessimism that is regarded as realism by most Israelis. The fact that the absence of diplomatic hope has been accompanied by an economic and cultural boom serves only to justify his policy in his own eyes and those of his supporters, exacerbating the frustration of the liberal camp in Israel, which, as in many other parts of the Western world, is in decline.

Pfeffer accurately describes Netanyahu’s success in representing Israel’s lower class, despite the fact that he was born to an elite family which enjoyed a comfortable life in America, and in channelling the anger of many Mizrahi Jews and right-wing Israelis toward the old elites and the media for his own benefit. In this respect, Bibi is both a uniquely Israeli phenomenon and part of an international trend of populist leaders who exploit democratic systems in order to amplify their own power, while weakening the mechanisms that are essential for protecting democracy.

For now, as in Trump’s America, Netanyahu is only being strengthened by his confrontations with the media and the authorities. Unlike the United States, however, the calm and prosperity that many Israelis enjoy in the era of Netanyahu are liable to collapse suddenly into a bloody storm on the Palestinian or Iranian fronts. Accordingly, we may come to see Netanyahu’s era as one when, precisely because of its prosperity, Israel regrettably missed opportunities it could have seized during its good years.

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