



Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu

Anshel Pfeffer

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The first English-language biography of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, one of the world's most controversial political figures

For many in Israel and elsewhere, Benjamin Netanyahu is an anathema, an embarrassment, even a precursor of Donald Trump. But he continues to dominate Israeli public life. How can we explain his rise, his hold on Israeli politics, and his outsized role on the world's stage?

In *Bibi*, journalist Anshel Pfeffer reveals the formative influence of Netanyahu's grandfather and father, who bequeathed to him a brand of Zionism integrating Jewish nationalism and religious traditionalism. Pfeffer argues that we must understand Netanyahu as embodying the triumph of the underdogs in the Zionist enterprise over the secular liberals who founded the nation. As he demonstrates in this penetrating biography, Netanyahu's Israel is a hybrid of ancient phobia and high-tech hope, tribalism, and globalism--just like the man himself.

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Murtaza says

It's remarkable how little most people actually know about Benjamin Netanyahu, given the Israeli prime minister's habitual domination of the international news cycle. This book is the first biography of him by an Israeli journalist, and offers a deep background not just about Netanyahu's own life but the ideological milieu out of which he arose. From its inception Zionism has traditionally been dominated by two competing trends: the Revisionist school and Labor Zionism. Strictly speaking both of these trends are generally either hostile or dismissive towards the Arabs, but the Revisionists comprise the right-wing of the spectrum and are opposed to essentially any compromise with their neighbors over what they view as Israeli territory. Netanyahu's academic historian father Benzion was a Revisionist and his sons are as well. Over time the Revisionists have moved from a marginalized position within Israeli politics to become its dominant force, with Netanyahu at the helm.

Israeli leaders, unlike their American counterparts, comprise a type of warrior-elite of the country. Netanyahu and his brother Jonathan were both Sayeret Matkal veterans (an elite Israeli special forces unit) and spent years carrying out combat missions in the Middle East and Africa. Jonathan was killed during one mission in Uganda, becoming a sort of national martyr for Israel and the Netanyahu family in the process. It was fascinating to see in the book how much of a revolving-door has historically existed between elite U.S. institutions and the Israeli military. During their youth the Netanyahus, Ehud Barak and countless other future Israeli leaders attended Ivy League schools in the United States. While college students, they routinely headed back home to conduct assassinations and special forces raids during their semester breaks or whenever else their units requested them. These men were merely few among the thousands of other Israelis who seamlessly moved back and forth between the worlds of elite U.S. academia and business to personally wage war against Israel's enemies, before returning to their seemingly quotidian lives in America. As Israel is a country with mandatory conscription, their bifurcated life experiences were in many ways typical. To this day swarms of IDF reservists and American volunteers regularly fly to Israel from U.S. airports, whenever the country is doing battle against the Palestinians or any of its other neighbors.

Although he refused to cooperate with the book, there is a lot of detail about Netanyahu's personal life that will likely be new and fascinating to any non-Israeli reader. By all accounts he is a committed zealot for his country and has devoted his life to its wellbeing. But unlike other cases where reading someone's life story engenders greater sympathy for them, I didn't come away from Bibi with a warmer perception of him as a man. To the contrary, he and others of his generation come across like typical pioneering colonialists who were, and are, glad to do whatever is necessary to serve the interests of their tribe and don't think twice about the lesser people whose lives they destroy in the process. His life in America (where he went to school and also worked as a consultant for the high-profile Boston Consulting Group) didn't erode his fierce tribalism one bit. Netanyahu seems to have had problematic personal relationships with women while moving in American elite circles, while also learning through experience how to manipulate D.C. politics and national media for his own purposes. In many ways he seems to represent the worst of the modern American elite as well as old-school European settler colonialism, though no one can accuse him of being a hypocrite.

The first three quarters of the book are novel and exciting, while the last bit becomes quite familiar as it mostly comprises reporting from Netanyahu's already well-covered time as prime minister. Understanding more about him and his Revisionist ideological base really emphasizes how committed Netanyahu is to never making peace with the Palestinians, aside from a "peace" that entails bullying them into total submission.

This is a highly recommended biography, a portrait of someone who is for better or worse among the most powerful people in the world today.

Lisabeth says

Thanks to Netgalley, the publisher, and the author for allowing me to read and review a digital copy of this book. I think this is a good book for anyone interested in Benjamin Netanyahu and his life.

April Kelcy says

The author is both inaccurate at times and at others writes in a confusing manner that hides or omits crucial dates. The book is at least as much about Israel's politics since before its rebirth through the current times as it is about Bibi. Furthermore, the journalist author dedicates the book to David Landau, the former editor-in-chief of Haaretz, and is also connected with Haaretz himself. With such a pro-Palestinian viewpoint, it's no wonder the author says many negative things about Bibi and other Israeli leaders who have understood the existential threats to Israel from many of the enemies of the Jewish people both in the past and currently. He disses as well as their historical claim to the land and the capital of Jerusalem.

The writing style is what I call "thick". It's dense and sometimes jumpy. If you are really trying to put all the pieces together and sort out facts from biases, and to understand the rise and fall of the many different leaders and Israeli political factions over the years, it takes concentrated effort. There's a fair amount of commentary also on US Presidents and interactions of senior administration officials with Israel over the years as well. I know a fair amount about Israel and modern history and still found myself trying to chart out certain events this author discusses.

So despite how "thick" this writer writes, it is not just that it is a read that takes effort. It's that journalists should at least try to be objective. Not that any human can ever reach a perfect standard on that. But IMHO Anshel Pfeffer is clearly biased yet tries to write as if he is not. To me that is a discredit to honest journalism. The footnotes though, are potentially useful to other researchers.

Robin Case says

Ok biography. The audio is 19 hours long though. Pretty big commitment. Bibi has an interesting story, still -- could have used a little more editing.

Dan Rotman says

incredibly biased, but well written

Chen says

20% into the book it is apparent that the Netanyahu dynasty is suffering from self-victimizing little bitch syndrome, a heritable genetic disorder that we shouldn't fault them for. Thank you Anshel for raising public consciousness to their plight.

I'm not sure I'll be reading the rest though. The moment you wrote Bibi isn't to be considered a Likud prince is the moment you lost me. So many prominent figures of the Israeli political elite pop up throughout the recounting of his childhood but I'm supposed to be like, yeah he definitely doesn't come from what we call Israeli nobility because no one in those elite circles wanted to be friends with his asshole of a father? Please. This is nonsense and grossly offensive to 95% of the country.

I think the book suffers from Left-Zionist blind spots too (the part about the Nakba especially) but that's to be expected. I did learn a lot from this book even reading less than half of it, so I recommend it anyway.

Kelly Korby says

If you don't like Bibi, then this is your book.

robert e. rayunas says

History is history

A lot of what happened in a country that is small and big in the world today and for 70 years. History, but without Bibi's input.

Andy says

An amazing look at an amazing world leader. It's difficult to get your hands on a book that covers really recent history, but here's a good look at the Middle East conflict of the past 25 years or so, all wrapped up in the life story of Benjamin Netanyahu.

No doubt, this biography wasn't approved by Netanyahu. There's far too much negative publicity in it. But that's part of the package of any biography, and all in all, this seems like a fair treatment of the most dominating personality in Israel today.

Mandy says

Everything a good biography should be – thoroughly researched, detailed, and (relatively) non-judgemental and even-handed. Netanyahu is a complex character and this book does its best to provide a thoughtful and insightful portrait of him. It appears that Netanyahu sees himself as embodying Israel as a modern nation and

as the leader of the Jewish people, with little concern for the Palestinians. I'm not knowledgeable enough to know whether there is any bias or prejudice in the account of his life and politics, but it felt accurate – and very alarming – to me. Compelling reading.
