

“Bibi - The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu”

A Book Review

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This morning I read online the current problems Benjamin Netanyahu is having within the Knesset and within his own political party,

“Now, Netanyahu’s once stable coalition is hanging by a thread, with the support of only 61 members in the Knesset. This means that the coalition’s once comfortable majority is now dependent on a single MK. One wrong move and Netanyahu could find himself forced into snap elections, a choice that, at least for now, he dreads. [“Netanyahu’s Predicament: The Era of Easy Wars is over.” Ramzy Baroud. Palestine Chronicle, November 28, 2018.]

How appropriate, as after reading *Bibi - The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu* by Anshell Pfeffer, it is very much in line with how the rest of his political career has progressed - hanging on by a thread, short elections cycles, scandals of different sorts orbiting around him, coalition partners deserting him. Nothing new.

Pfeffer’s work is an interesting read on Israeli political history, restricted in its comments about the Palestinian situation or concepts about Palestine, except for a noteworthy ongoing reiteration on Palestine that I will explore later. It has some faults with certain narrative aspects of its history - again more later - but overall it appears to be a fairly complete analysis of Netanyahu’s life and times.

Unfortunately it starts with one of those faults, the idea that “before then [1929] the Arabs living there had not factored into Zionist thinking.” Except that it had, and one of the critical political ideologues/philosophers of early Zionism, Ze’ev Jabotinsky, who plays an important role in the political ideas of Netanyahu and throughout this history, recognized both the existence of the Arabs and the need for force for Jewish settlement:

The Arabs loved their country as much as the Jews did. Instinctively, they understood Zionist aspirations very well, and their decision to resist them was only natural There was no misunderstanding between Jew and Arab, but a natural conflict. No Agreement was possible with the Palestinian Arab; they would accept Zionism only when they found themselves up against an ‘iron wall,’ when they realize they had no alternative but to accept Jewish settlement. [from Haaretz, 1923]

Different stories

From there it gets narrowly political, and relates a story not only of Netanyahu but of much of Israeli politics. It tells the history of the long political battle between Mapai/Labour (the

secular socialist side) and Likud (the Revisionist or Jabotinsky side) . It tells of the earlier history of Benzion Netanyahu and his life and career considerably spent in the U.S. with that influence bearing on Benjamin. In the early stages it tells more about Netanyahu's brother Yoni, whom Benjamin idolized with "reverence", and about whom a mythological heroic figure was created. It also tells the story in part of Ben Gurion and his conflicts within Israeli politics.

In sum, the politics of Israel seem not much different than that of other countries, one full of political infighting, crossovers, corruption, double dealings, recriminations and attacks - and above all, it is a story of power hungry elites.

It is centred on the story of Netanyahu of course, but he is a minor figure through much of the early history, seemingly out of place in Israel and very comfortable in the U.S., uncomfortable with people in general, but becoming a master of manipulation.

Bibi

Netanyahu spent a considerable amount of his time in childhood and early adolescence living in the United States. His education from the U.S., both in his youth and later as a young adult, proved highly influential, and he seemed more comfortable in the U.S. than in Israel. It is where he first encountered how the media influenced politics, how it could be used to manipulate populations on a large scale and without worrying about facts as much as ideology. One of his prime ideological influences was Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*,

Rand's muscular blend of capitalism and individualism appealed to Netanyahu and has influenced his political and economic thinking ever since.

He was not interested in people, but power, wanting to change Israel from its socialist somewhat accommodating intentions towards peace to a competitive capitalist and militarily powerful country. Pfeffer variously describes him as egotistical, arrogant, averse to making concessions, and disdainful of others, ready to use whomever as was required to reach his goals.

The U.S. influence is writ large in everything Netanyahu does. He uses U.S. political ideas in the sense of cultivating a fear factor based on racism, spreading it through modern technology, and relying on a base that supported him pretty much regardless of his misdeeds and failures. His base, the people he knew who would support him through thick and thin, are the far right wing, ideologues of the settler community and their many small but influential political parties that often carried the balance of power in his favour. In spite of being a secular Jew, he used the religious right to augment his hold on power, offering cabinet positions in return for support.

One of his strongest supporters, among the many from the United States, is Sheldon Adelson, a U.S. billionaire businessman. Adelson spent \$93 million while operating an Israeli newspaper designed with the purpose of supporting Netanyahu's political career, and spending twice that amount for publicity during critical election times. Netanyahu never achieved a full majority government, using the right wing parties to support him in the Knesset, using the fear factor, racism, and modern media to hang on to his base, and using the usual bagful of political promises to gain power. The economy in a statistical sense did thrive under his leadership, but as with all governments that apply capitalist austerity - tax

cuts, social benefit cuts, firings, privatizations, and deregulation of finances – poverty and inequality increased significantly.

Fault lines

As mentioned earlier, there are some historical narrative faults scattered through the history. While they do not change what is mostly an insider political history (with the U.S. being considered part and parcel of Israel's history) they need to be addressed as it is a soft way of reiterating the overall Israeli narrative concerning their interactions with the Palestinians.

Pfeffer does admit that the 1948 war “results were much more devastating” for the Palestinian population than the Israelis,

Around two-thirds of that community, some 750,000 people, had fled their houses at the advice of the Arab leaders, for fear of the fighting and Jewish reprisals, or had been forcibly banished by the new Israeli army.

That needs to be looked at in reverse order. “Forcibly banished” is an understatement as what occurred were genocidal murders and demolitions of whole villages using bulldozers and dynamite. Following that, yes, word spread, the fear spread that similar actions could and would be repeated as IDF forces moved from village to village, eventually removing from the landscape about 500 Palestinian villages.

Another small point is snuck by the reader while discussing the pre 1967 situation where tensions had risen “with Syria over attempts by Israeli farmers to work on land in contested areas of the demilitarized zone.” “Contested” is the preferred word used by the Israelis to describe land the colonial settler society wanted to use for itself at the exclusion of the Arabs; for the Arabs it was not contested, but “occupied”.

A bigger fault line emerges with the actual 1967 Six Day War. Pfeffer admits that the war started with a pre-emptive attack on the Egyptian military but he also adds,

But Israel had half planned, half-blundered into the war. Now it would approach a long military occupation of another nation in the same manner.

To give credit, the author does recognize that there is a “long military occupation of another nation”, but it is an undefined statement especially as to what would constitute a Palestinian ‘nation’. The original point about half-planned and half-blundered is simply not true.

Current historical readings show clearly that the generals and military had clear plans and clear knowledge about the status of the opposing Arab armies and knew they could win readily if they struck preemptively. At the other end of the war, the Israelis imposed martial law on the occupied territories (not contested) with plans developed over a period of years before the war began. [see Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. One World Publications, Oxford, England, 2006, and *The Biggest Prison on Earth – A History of the Occupied Territories*. Ilan Pappé. Oneworld Publications, London, 2018. Also see, Miko Peled's *The General's Son: Journey of an Israeli in Palestine*. Just World Books, Washington, DC, 2012.]

In 2006, Hamas won the civic elections held in Palestinian territory for a new Palestinian Authority government. In what was considered at the time to be a very fair election free of outside meddling or internal corruption, Hamas won the majority of positions. This was not the correct result for the Israelis and was quickly condemned by Canada, the U.S., and other countries who withdrew financial support from the Palestinians in an attempt to have them change the situation. Pfeffer says, without mentioning the election results nor the reaction to it,

In June 2007, Hamas launched a coup in Gaza, ousting the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority.

This is taken completely out of context as Pfeffer places it within the dismantling of settlements with “no arrangement...put in place to help alleviate the plight of the Palestinians in Gaza.” While he does not say that one action resulted in the other, his context strongly implies it. In truth, Fatah attempted to take control of Gaza with their coup attempt, supported by Israel and the U.S., as a consequence of the election results favoring Hamas. Hamas was effectively silenced in the West Bank, but they managed to defeat the Fatah led coup in Gaza. It is only one line in the book, but it carries a whole load of misinformation and narrative twisting along with it.

Bibi's faultlines

In conclusion, Pfeffer does not see much hope in a Netanyahu government.

Netanyahu's Israel is living on borrowed time....the occupation of another nation, nearly of equal size, is eroding Israeli democracy and human rights at an alarming rate. Netanyahu has no plans to deal with that erosion, save for stoking racism and fear.

Perhaps the word “revealing” should be used instead of “eroding” as Israel, now a declared Jewish state is not a democracy. Any country living as an apartheid state, with discriminatory laws against half its population, a population under a rather brutal military occupation, cannot be considered in any way, shape, or form to be democratic. Certainly the fear factor is still there, but it is mostly directed at Iran rather than at neighbouring Arab countries, perhaps as most of them, apart from Syria, have acquiesced to Israel's' presence and actions in the Middle East.

This leads to Netanyahu's biggest faultline – fear of Iran, or fear of Palestinians. His ranting against Iran is well known, from his sadly infantile rant at the UN with his kindergarten bomb drawing to his speech to his adoring sycophantic U.S. admirers in Congress (without Obama's presence or invitation). Throughout this book Pfeffer quotes him frequently as indicating that the Palestinians are not the problem, they are a “diversion”. The conflict “is not about the Palestinians, borders, or refugees....It rises from an implacable Arab and Muslim hatred toward the West, and Israel is the West's outpost in the Middle East.”

The latter quote is Pfeffer's words, revealing Netanyahu's position but also identifying a century long truth from early Churchill, Balfour and the British government that Israel is indeed an outpost of the west, an idea similarly held by U.S. counterparts.

But back to Bibi. While meeting with Obama in 2009, “the Palestinian issue was a

distraction from the real threat [Iran], not just to Israel, but to the entire world.” This is a rather highly inflated fear factor, but it certainly works on most of the U.S. mainstream. Fortunately Obama was able to reach a nuclear energy/control deal with Iran through the working group with Russia and the European powers.

Then comes the “aha” moment to Netanyahu’s bluster on Iran,

...the focus on Iran significantly reduced the pressure on Netanyahu to make concessions to the Palestinians.

Ever since Oslo, the ability to talk, and talk some more, to create distractions with some pretty little war somewhere all played into keeping the mainstream entertained as to Israel’s good intentions all the while they continued their military occupation, ramped up the apartheid system, and continued with their slow ethnic cleansing.

It has to be obvious to Netanyahu and any other Israeli politician that keeping the Palestinian narrative out of the western mainstream press was a paramount concern for their control and take over of all Palestinian lands. Thus the Arab states became the problem – their non democratic governments and their hatred of the west and its freedoms.

But as a corollary, if Israel had actually done something, actually accomplished something towards establishing a peaceful settlement with Palestinians, be it two states, one state, or a binational state, then the Arab states would no longer be hostile towards Israel (except perhaps for the occupied Golan Heights of Syria). But even as the governments of those Arab states are even now generally accepting of the existence of Israel and some are de facto allies, the need for an enemy, the ‘other’, has to go somewhere, and thus Iran.

Without Iran, without an ‘other’, Netanyahu would have no one to use his fear mongering and racism against, forcing him to then address the Palestinians as the fear factor, but then only drawing more attention to the manner in which Israel occupies and controls their territory.

A readable history

From Jabotinsky’s recognition of the Palestinians resisting Jewish occupation to the rantings of Netanyahu against Iran, the racism and fear factor have been a constant in Israeli political life. It has become stronger under Netanyahu’s leadership and his adoption of the U.S. manner of politicking. It has become stronger as Israel clearly demonstrates a high degree of ownership of the U.S. state. Pfeffer’s conclusion, after Netanyahu loses power, sometime soon if current Knesset actions play out fully, is that his “ultimate legacy will not be a more secure nation, but a deeply fractured Israeli society living behind walls.”

Regardless of the faultline criticisms, *Bibi* is well worth the read, if only to see that the Israel government is as elitist, corrupt, manipulative, and filled with power hungry people as much as any other state. I am not sure if Pfeffer’s one off faulted comments are due to his believing in the full Israeli narrative or are part of a softening of the narrative on his part in order to make the book more publishable, but they do not take away from the political story. The personal story defines the man as an egotistical, vain, and insecure person. The political story is thought provoking and interesting, covering much of Israel’s internal history during *The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu*.

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