

ISSN: 2587-2532 | e-ISSN: 2587-1862
<http://filistin.org>

FAD- Filistin Arařtırmaları Dergisi Sayı: 6 (Kış 2019)

BPS- Bulletin of Palestine Studies Issue: 6 (Winter 2019)

Kitap Tanıtımı/Book Review: Ben Caspit, The Netanyahu Years, trans., Ora Cummings
New York, Thomas Dunne Books-St. Martins Press, 2017, 512 pages, ISBN: 978-1250087058

Yazarlar/ Authors
Mahmoud Ansari

ORCID ID
0000-0002-8480-4932

Makale Türü / Type of Article: Kitap Tanıtımı/Book Review
Yayın Geliş Tarihi / Submission Date: 24.09.2019
Yayına Kabul Tarihi / Acceptance Date: 01.01.2020
Yayın Tarihi / Date Published: 01.01.2020

FAD- Filistin Arařtırmaları Dergisi
BPS- Bulletin of Palestine Studies
Tarandığı Uluslararası Indexler/ Abstracting & Indexing

INDEX COPERNICUS | SCIENTIFIC INDEXING | CEEOL | DRJI | İSAM

INDEX COPERNICUS
INTERNATIONAL



Yazar: Mahmoud ANSARI*

Kitap Tanıtımı/Book Review: Ben Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, trans., Ora Cummings New York, Thomas Dunne Books-St. Martins Press, 2017, 512 pages, ISBN: 978-1250087058.

The Netanyahu Years was originally written in Hebrew by the Israeli Journalist Ben Caspit, a senior columnist for the leading Israeli daily *Ma'ariv* and the *Al-Monitor* site which covers the Middle Eastern affairs. It was translated by Ora Cummings, an Israeli literary agent, and first published by Thomas Dunne Books in July 2017.

The book consists of four chapters concentrating on Netanyahu's biography, and comes in 506 pages including the indexes. It covers all issues related to Netanyahu's life and contains a considerable amount of information on Netanyahu's public and private life. Actually it is not Ben Caspit's first book about Netanyahu. The first part of it is based on his former book, *Netanyahu: The Road to Power* (co-authored by Ilan Kfir) published in 1997. Beside covering the two decades since Netanyahu's first period, this book includes many new revelations, fresh research, and many new insights. It reportedly took the author three years to compile this new book, during which he held "interviews with 168 sources, in three languages, spread over three continents and five countries" p. (492).

The book captivates the readers and attempts to offer an objective portrait of the politician. Despite the author's personal leaning to the left, his book constitutes an unbiased and in-depth biography of Netanyahu, the first Israeli prime minister to beat Ben-Gurion's record in the length of continuous term in power.

In the first chapter, which constitutes the first half of the book, Ben Caspit focuses on Netanyahu's biography and discusses the history of Netanyahu's family. He speaks about Netanyahu's grandfather Nathan Mileikowsky, a rabbi born in Lithuania in 1880, who was ordained in the rabbinate at the age of eighteen. He dwells on the grandfather's political affiliations, his admiration for Herzl and then for Ze'ev Jabotinsky, leader of the Jewish Revisionist movement. He relates how Nathan Mileikowsky instilled his ideology in his children, who passed these on to their own children. Then the author introduces the second influential character in Netanyahu's life, his father, Benzion Netanyahu, who was born in 1910 and studied history, literature and philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, graduating

* Mahmoud Ansari, Kastamonu Üniversitesi, İlahiyat Fakültesi, mutanabi9999@yahoo.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8480-4932>.

in 1929. Because of his right-wing ideology, the father was unable to come to terms with the Mapai Party activists in Israel who were leading the country, so he left for New York. There he met his idol Jabotinsky and became his personal assistant until the latter's sudden death in 1940. Benzion was a staunch supporter of the Republican Party, and he instilled this political stance in his sons as well. He lived all his life in solitude, reading and authoring books, and he enforced a strict discipline in his house, which affected his children's psychology. In this context Ben Caspit analyzes the psychological state of Netanyahu and his relations with his elder brother, Yonni, who was killed in Operation Entebbe. These family links, according to the author, were the pillars of Netanyahu's legitimacy for ruling Israel. He also narrates the intimate life of Netanyahu, indicating that he was married twice before Sara and that he has a daughter called Noa from his first marriage, who doesn't appear to the media at all. Ben Caspit analyzes Sara's influence on Bibi and the way she made him so obedient to herself. Additionally, he writes about Netanyahu's long list of wealthy American acquaintances from whom the latter draws his power. He also talks about Netanyahu's political creed, his first term in the prime minister's post, the Why Rivers accord, his struggles within the Likud Party, his loathing of the Clinton family, his life in New York, his post as the deputy of the Israeli ambassador in Washington, his stance toward the Palestinian issue, and many other issues.

Ben Caspit's main point in this initial chapter can be summarized as follows: Benjamin Netanyahu has managed to build his own fortress or reign, and he is not willing to give it up without a fight. He further calls Netanyahu a "narcissist," "lonely man," a "liar," a "manipulator," and a "man of words and not actions." And he claims that Netanyahu had gathered around him as many loyal people as he could, so that they would help him stay in the office as long as he wanted. He was building Netanyahu's monarchy. On the other hand, the author also portrays Netanyahu as an eloquent speaker, a diligent perfectionist who is eager to compete all the time and emerge as the winner.

In the second chapter, entitled "Dangerous Relations," Ben Caspit focuses on the relations between the United States and Israel during Obama's term in the White House. It starts with an account of the incidents of the first meeting between Netanyahu and Obama before the latter's election, in spring 2007. At that time, Ben Caspit indicates, Netanyahu was impressed by Obama and told his advisor Prof. Uzi Arad: "The young man who was just here is a sophisticated political animal. He can beat Hillary."

At that time, Netanyahu's main concern was not to have to deal with Hillary Clinton in case the Democrats took the control of the White House after President's Bush tenure. But his opinion of President Obama and his approach to the issues in the Middle East changed quickly. He could not get along with the Americans on two issues: the first of these was the Palestinian Issue, and the second was the Iranian nuclear program. The Americans' secret interim agreement with Iran in Oman, in particular, drove the Israelis crazy and caused a serious deterioration the relations between Israel and America. This deterioration was not over before Donald Trump won the election in 2016 against Hillary Clinton. On the other hand, both sides agreed on the security issue and America sustained its efforts to ensure Israel's superiority in the military field. The author relates the whole story of the relations between the two allies, mentioning all the individuals who contributed, in a positive or negative way, to these relations.

In the third chapter, the author concentrates on the issue of the Iranian nuclear project. He points out at the start that Netanyahu was the first to pinpoint the Iranian danger in the early nineties. Then he relates the whole story of Israel's problem with the Iranian nuclear project, the alliance between Ehud Barak and Netanyahu to undertake a military offensive so as to thwart the Iranian nuclear project, the American efforts to dissuade Israel from making such an operation, and the objections to the idea coming from the president Shimon Peres and the chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi. Ben Caspit ends this chapter by emphasizing that the Americans were convinced, at the end, that Netanyahu was a coward and would not venture on such an operation on his own for fear of its repercussions.

The fourth chapter of the book is dedicated to the Palestinian issue. Here, too, Ben Caspit tries to explain Netanyahu's ambivalent attitude toward this issue. On the one hand, he observes, Netanyahu did not believe in the two-state solution due to his Zionist creed. On the other hand, he was compelled by the Americans to negotiate with the Palestinians and give them land in return for peace, something he disdained to the utmost degree. So, while he managed to evade any agreement and to manipulate the Americans and the Europeans on this issue, he continued to establish settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem, completely ruining the Peace Process. Ben Caspit observes that Netanyahu did all this only to stay in power, and managed to convince the Israelis that his rule was indispensable for the existence of the state of Israel. The author remarks that "there remains no finite solution to the Netanyahu riddle" (regarding the Palestinian issue). He points out that as leader of Likud Netanyahu acknowledged the Oslo Accords, handed

Hebron back to the Palestinians, signed the Wye Memorandum and gave the Bar-Ilan speech, but also demolished the Oslo Accords and buried the peace process.

Ben Caspit's book relates in detail all the negotiations, closed-door discussions and insights of the politicians who made history in the time period it covers. It reveals what happened behind the closed doors, the disputes between the Americans and Israelis, the quarrels between the Israelis and the Palestinians and, perhaps most importantly, the political backdrop of these events.

Ben Caspit ends his book with the following statement, which is also a fitting conclusion for this review: "As this book is going to press, Benjamin Netanyahu is conducting a rear-guard battle for his political survival, vis-à-vis a big wave of criminal investigations. If he does indeed step down from the political stage, he will have been the personification of the biggest missed opportunity in Israel's history. The man who could have achieved almost everything, but did practically nothing. If he survives, we'll meet in the next biography" (p.490).