

Palestine and Israel: Instead Of Celebrating The Balfour Declaration, Britain Should Be Ashamed Of What It Did

By [Sharif Nashashibi](#)

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This year marks the centenary of the infamous Balfour Declaration, a letter written in 1917 by Britain's then-foreign secretary Lord Balfour to Baron Rothschild, a leader of the Zionist movement. In the letter, Balfour said the British government viewed "with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people", and would use its "best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object".

The effect of this declaration was best summed up by the late British author and journalist Arthur Koestler: "One nation solemnly promised to a second nation the country of a third." It had no moral or legal right to do so.

The declaration contradicted Britain's previous promise of "complete and final liberation" for the Arabs if they rose up against their Ottoman rulers. Their subsequent revolt was pivotal to the weakening of the Ottoman Empire, and thereby the outcome of the First World War. Balfour reneged on his own pledge in his letter to Rothschild that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine".

In 1919, he wrote in a memorandum:

"In Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country... Zionism be it right or wrong is more important than the wishes of 700,000 Arabs," who constituted some 94 per cent of the population of Palestine at the time.

The Balfour Declaration, and its implementation by the British Mandate in Palestine from 1920, culminated in Israel's creation in 1948, and the wholesale dispossession of the Palestinian people.

PALESTINE FOR THE JEWS.

OFFICIAL SYMPATHY.

Mr. Balfour has sent the following letter to Lord Rothschild in regard to the establishment of a national home in Palestine for the Jewish people :—

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of his Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to and approved by the Cabinet :—

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

As such, one would reasonably think that 2017 would, or at least should, be a time of national introspection in Britain over its central responsibility for the Palestinians' continuing plight, not to mention the devastating consequences it has had on the wider region.

One might think that this year would be an opportunity to right a monumental wrong by supporting Palestinians' fundamental, inalienable rights and national aspirations as a form of moral redress. Failing that, one could at least expect more balance in UK policy towards Israel and the Palestinians.

After all, there is nothing inherently anti-Israeli about calling for an end to the longest military occupation in modern history, to the illegal colonisation of another people's land and to a racist, apartheid system that should have gasped its last breath in South Africa almost 30 years ago.

As Israeli doves – sadly an ever-shrinking community – will tell you, campaigning against these injustices is an act of patriotism, not treason. And while such campaigning should ideally be done in the context of sympathy for the just Palestinian cause, Israel's allies can do so in the name of its own welfare – a sign of true friendship.

In September last year, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas told the United Nations General Assembly that Britain should use the Balfour centenary as an opportunity to apologise to the Palestinians for the declaration. And a campaign by pro-Palestine activists in Britain has been launched to that effect.

Instead, however, it is choosing to double down on its unflinching support for Israel, and thereby its oppression of the Palestinians. Instead of showing contrition for the declaration's catastrophic legacy, or at the very least maintaining a deliberate – if awkward – silence about it, Britain will actually be celebrating it, and has invited Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to take part.

Not only has he accepted, but for the first time there will be a British royal visit to Israel to coincide with the centenary, in “a very important year in the history of bilateral relations”, as Israel's president said.

The Balfour Declaration “demonstrates Britain's vital role in creating a homeland for the Jewish people,” British prime minister Theresa May told the Conservative Friends of Israel recently. This year's anniversary is one “we will be marking with pride”, she added. This is pride in ethnic cleansing, no less.



A family going for a stroll along the sea at a Jewish settlement in Palestine, in June 1946. Two years later, war broke out between Palestinians and Jewish communities and the state of Israel was founded. Britain's role in the conflict is still contentious AP Photo

Not to be outdone, her foreign secretary, Boris Johnson – who has described Mrs May's government as “rock-like supporters” of Israel – last week said “the priority” in any Israeli-Palestinian accord “has to be the safety and security of the people of Israel. If you can guarantee that, maybe there is some way of also giving autonomy to the Palestinians”.

This is a clear example of the perverse expectation by Israel's allies that the onus should be on an occupied people to guarantee the security of their occupier, rather than vice versa, and that the welfare of a systematic human rights abuser far outweighs that of the abused. And if the Palestinians fulfill those absurd expectations, “maybe” Israel can find it in its heart to grant them a measure of their rights with which it feels comfortable.

People often complain of attempts by Israel's allies to portray an equivalence, moral and otherwise, between oppressed and oppressor. But the reality is far worse – to them, Israel deserves to be superior. In 2015, when Mr Johnson was mayor of London, he described the Balfour Declaration as “a great thing... the right thing”. Expect more grotesque praise of this colonial nation-theft from him and his colleagues as the centenary approaches.

This despite opinion polls showing that at least twice as many Britons sympathise with the Palestinians than with Israel (as much as two and a half times, according to a YouGov poll). A poll in November 2015 showed that three-quarters of British Jews oppose Israel's settlement expansion and its approach to peace, and believe that the Palestinians have a “legitimate claim to a land of their own”.

As such, the British government is woefully out of step not just with world opinion, but that of its own citizens. This is not because of the need to court trade markets outside the EU

post-Brexit – successive British governments are guilty of kowtowing to Israel.

The last two decades have seen no discernible shift in policy, despite several administrations and all three major political parties having been in power. I have personal experience of this, having taken part in numerous meetings between these administrations (at their invitation) and British-Arab community figures.

The supposed purpose was dialogue, but after years of attending I refused to participate because, among other things, of successive governments' refusal to consider pressuring or sanctioning Israel in the way they were prepared to do against other regional violators of human rights and international law.

Pro-Israel activists often complain that it is singled out for special treatment. These meetings showed me first-hand that it is, but in a way that gives it carte blanche to do as it pleases. As such, the government's fawning over the Balfour Declaration this year would be the same whether Mrs May, her Conservative predecessor David Cameron, or before them Labour's Gordon Brown and Tony Blair were prime minister.

Much like Israel's political left and right, to Palestinians there is no difference. All these British prime ministers have proudly professed support, friendship and admiration for Israel – it is practically a rite of passage.

This centenary is a reminder that Britain's political rulers still feel no need to support, befriend or admire a people whose rights and aspirations their predecessors so callously abrogated 100 years ago. They are doing far worse than turning a blind eye to the monumental injustice of the Balfour Declaration – they are spitting in the faces of its victims.

Sharif Nashashibi is a journalist and political analyst.

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