

Palestine: Britain Should Apologise for the Balfour Declaration, Not 'Celebrate' It

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The [Balfour Declaration](#) is a letter from then British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Walter Rothschild, for transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland. The critical part of this short letter said:

"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."

This was a prime example of colonial arrogance by which Britain, which was not then in occupation of Palestine, promised the Zionist Federation, which did not represent all Jews, without the consent of the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine, the Palestinians, to facilitate the creation of a homeland for Jews in Palestine. The letter was dated 2 November 1917.

Thus, November 2017 will mark the centenary of Balfour and rumours abound that the British government plans to mark it in some form. Israel's recently arrived Ambassador [Mark Regev](#) claimed: "It's being taken very seriously at the highest levels. We're hoping to do a public celebration together with the British government." The former spokesman for Israel's prime minister talked up the possible events, saying that "senior leadership from both sides [will be] uniting to celebrate Balfour."

Former British Prime Minister [David Cameron](#) told leaders of the Jewish community, "I want to make sure we mark it together in the most appropriate way." He said this without any consultation with British Palestinians about whether, and how, they would wish to see the Balfour centenary commemorated. This seems to be at best misguided and, at worst, a demonstration of Britain's double standards when it comes to the Palestine-Israel issue. Israel was not established on empty land; it has been built on the homeland of the Palestinian people. How then can it be logical for the British government not to consult the Palestinians, either in Palestine or in the UK, about the Balfour centenary?

The notion that Britain should "celebrate" the Balfour Declaration is extremely offensive to every British Palestinian I have talked to and to the Palestinian leadership. Balfour gave the green light to the Zionist movement, which perpetuated the lie that Palestine was "a land without a people for a people without a land". The truth is that Jews, like Muslims and Christians, were citizens of many countries, including Syria and Iraq, and Palestine was inhabited by a people, the mainly Muslim but also Christian and Jewish, Palestinians. Had Israel not been created in Palestine, it is quite logical to assume that Palestine would have

eventually gained independence and that Arab Jews, just like their Christian and Muslim brethren, would have continued to live in all the Arab countries in which they had thrived for centuries.

The Balfour Declaration and Britain's League of Nations Mandate rule in Palestine were key reasons for the growth of Jewish migration to Palestine, which accelerated following the Second World War and the Holocaust. The creation of Israel as Britain rushed to abandon Palestine left the Palestinians at the mercy of murderous Zionist terror groups hell-bent on expelling as many if not all of them from their homeland. The injustice felt in the Middle East at the creation of Israel also contributed to the tensions that led to Arab Jews leaving their home countries for the nascent Zionist state.

The injustice of the lack of a viable Palestinian state and the continuing refugee catastrophe continues to this day. How can Britain celebrate this? Even if Britain claims that it is not "celebrating" Balfour, but simply "marking" the document's centenary, that will also offend Palestinians living under Israel's military occupation in Palestine, and in the refugee camps of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, as well as the diaspora.

If fair minded people read the text of the Balfour Declaration and then look at what happened subsequently, they will surely find it difficult to accept that the conditions implicit in the British government's "favour" have been fulfilled. Israel brazenly flouts the "civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine" on a daily basis, and has done since its creation in 1948. Its illegal occupation continues to oppress, humiliate and generate hatred. Israel's siege on the Gaza Strip — described by David Cameron as "a prison" — continues unabated. House demolitions in the first half of 2016 are already markedly up on 2015. Settler violence has escalated and Jewish terror has taken the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

The fact is that Britain has not even recognised Palestine as a state following the October 2014 Parliamentary vote requesting the government to do so. Add to this that 2017 also marks the 50th anniversary of the occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza and other Arab land and Israel's refusal to end this, and it is obvious that any reasonable person would say that a "celebration" of the Balfour Declaration would be completely inappropriate. If you do something shameful, as Britain did, from a Palestinian perspective, then you would do far better to apologise for it than to mark or celebrate it.

The argument for a celebration of Balfour is that the Jewish community in Britain see the creation of Israel as a major achievement in which the declaration played a major part. However, not all British Jews share this view. Has the government consulted widely even within the Jewish community about possible Balfour events? There is no evidence that it has. If it does mark the centenary in some way then it should know that there will be many Jews in Britain siding with the oppressed Palestinians to mark the Catastrophe (Nakba) that the creation of the state of Israel represents to them. Discussions among Palestinian groups in Britain and supporters of justice for Palestine are ongoing in order to formulate a suitable response to the governments' intentions.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian leadership has finally stirred itself and threatened to [sue Britain](#) for the Balfour Declaration. What that really means and to which court the Palestinians would make a case remains unknown. It may yet prove to be another example of the Palestinian leadership making grandiose claims which lead to nothing and are then retracted. This, though, remains to be seen.

As we approach 2017 with Israel entrenching its military occupation of Palestine and senior politicians articulating their rejection of a Palestinian state, Britain should avoid inflaming the situation by marking Balfour in any way. A more helpful act would be to establish an inquiry into Britain's role in the creation of Israel and dispossession of the Palestinian people. Its role would be to establish the facts and to assess how justice can be brought to the Holy Land as the Balfour centenary approaches. This would be far better than "celebrating" what is indeed a dark chapter of Britain's colonial history.

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