

The Balfour Declaration: A Country in Denial over 100 Years of Betrayal

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The tensions over the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration are accelerating to the long-expected fever pitch, outside Israel-Palestine and nowhere more so than in Britain.

Already there has been a row over the decision to ban from the London Underground a series of Palestinian advertisements about the impact of Balfour, although the same ads are now being shown on London's taxis.

Rival events will parade diametrically opposed narratives of those historic 67 words. The Balfour Project, which aims to secure justice and fairness for all sides, held an event in London on Tuesday that is reported elsewhere in Arab News. On Nov. 4, a march through central London in support of Palestinian rights will culminate in a rally in Parliament Square. Perhaps most bizarrely, a celebration organized by the Balfour 100 group at the Royal Albert Hall on Nov. 7 will try to portray the declaration as some kind of symbol of Jewish-Christian partnership.

What stands out, however, is that the British government is absent from any event critical of Balfour, but very much a fixture at the Israeli Zionist and anti-Palestinian ones. The British government, most notably in the person of **Prime Minister Theresa May**, has adopted almost solely the Israeli Zionist narrative. Even last year she was proclaiming that the declaration was "one of the most important letters in history. It demonstrates Britain's vital role in creating a homeland for the Jewish people. And it is an anniversary we will be marking with pride." Other British cabinet members have mouthed the same mantra.

In her public statements, May has shown not even a scintilla of feeble interest in the impact of the Balfour Declaration on the non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine. On Nov. 2 she will attend a dinner in London for the Israeli **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu**, hosted by the current Lords Balfour and Rothschild — descendants of the author and recipient of the declaration. A small silver lining, but cold comfort for Palestinians, is that the leader of the opposition Labour party, **Jeremy Corbyn**, has refused to attend. That said, having Hamas tweet support for his stand may not quite be what Corbyn needed; anti-Palestinian groups jump on every opportunity to demonize him as a Hamas-supporting, anti-Israel fanatic.

Down at the other end of the political food chain, the deputy UK representative at the UN, **Jonathan Allen**, did at least say:

"Let us remember, there are two halves of Balfour. There is unfinished

business.”

And a junior minister acknowledged last year that the declaration should have guaranteed political rights for Palestinians, not just civil and religious rights.

If senior British ministers had over the past year adopted more of this line, perhaps they would not have found themselves in quite such bad odor with their Palestinian counterparts.

For the truth is, it is hard to recall a lower point in British-Palestinian relations. For sure, British politicians were never going to issue the sort of apology that would have satisfied Palestinian demands, let alone agree to compensation. The Palestinian leadership’s threat to sue the British government was the epitome of empty, futile gesture politics.

Rather than enjoy a celebratory dinner with Benjamin Netanyahu, the British prime minister should accept responsibility for the injustice the UK initiated a century ago. – Chris Doyle

All of this follows Palestinian anger at the failure of the British government to recognize the state of Palestine, or even back this at the UN. The major success of securing the passage of UN Security Council 2334 in December 2016, which Britain did support, was short-lived as Britain quickly shifted in January to adopt positions more welcome in the Trump White House. May’s government refused to send any high-level representation to the Paris peace conference in January. Activists are also outraged that their efforts to protest at Israel’s illegal actions through the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement receive far more opprobrium from the British authorities than the actual war crimes and violations of international law perpetrated every day in the occupied territories.

However, given the appalling consequences of the Balfour declaration, an imperial, colonial act that led to 70 percent of their people becoming refugees, hundreds of their villages destroyed, over four and half million under occupation today and a million as fourth-class citizens in Israel, Palestinians had reasonable grounds to expect something just a little more respectful than what they have been served up so far.

If one thing unites Palestinians it is that Britain was the author and genesis of this conflict. **Arthur Balfour** made clear in 1919 that “in Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country.” This summarized the entire approach of the British mandate that did everything to ensure that no democratic institutions came into existence.

It is a sad reality that even in 2017 the Palestinian right to self-determination is still denied and that Britain does so little to remedy this. When Palestinians voted for a Hamas government, the British government refused to respect this. When Palestinians sought legal redress by pressing for their case at the International Criminal Court, once again Britain was in opposition. When Palestinians sought their own state, Britain stood in their way. It is time for Britain to start treating Palestinians with respect, and sooner rather than later to celebrate the establishment of a viable state of Palestine with pride.

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