

The Toxic Legacy of Balfour and British Colonialism in Israel-Palestine

By [Richard Silverstein](#)

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Featured image: Banksy's mock royal apology for Balfour (Source: Tikun Olam)

What do [Banksy and Arthur Balfour have in common](#)? Read on.

When I first started hearing about the 100th anniversary of the [Balfour Declaration](#), I thought: "Ugh, not another minefield to navigate!" It's a Rorschach test for Israelis and Palestinians. One sees triumph and the other defeat, from the same document.

I really didn't want to write about this for a myriad of reasons. Primary among which: it seemed a dubious document to celebrate. Nor did it signify a great deal in terms of its actual impact on events. Yes, it had symbolic value. But it didn't translate into actual state policy or concrete action.

But then I read about the "[celebrations](#)" [planned for London](#) with none other than the Zio-energizer Bunny, Bibi Netanyahu, in attendance. That followed news that Jeremy Corbyn was [refusing the invitation of the UK Israel Lobby](#) to join the festive occasion. Of course, the UK's Lobby-fixtures, including the Jewish Chronicle and the Tory gutter press attempted to make a huge deal out of this. As if Corbyn's refusal involved some sort of anti-Semitic impulse. They couldn't possibly comprehend that a British politician might have sympathy for anyone other than Zionists. Nor could they imagine that if Balfour meant anything to Palestinians, it wasn't a happy meaning.

Several [progressive activists](#) have [published](#) their own [appraisals](#) and PressTV interviewed me last night (see video above) on the subject, so I thought I could have something new to say on the subject that might put this much-mentioned historical document in context.

First, let's say what Balfour is and isn't: it did *not* constitute British recognition of Israel as a state. It merely said that the British 'looked favorably' on the establishment of a "Jewish homeland." Even more importantly and rarely remarked upon, it added the caveat that nothing in the document was meant to diminish the rights of the non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine. In his own comments to the British press, Balfour's great-nephew [makes precisely this point](#) in saying that Israel has refused to recognize this important phrase in denying Palestinians their own national rights to a homeland.

Balfour himself was not a Zionist. He didn't even like Jews. Nor did most of the British élite of the day. Youssef Munayer even calls Balfour a "white supremacist," which is precisely

right. In fact, much like the Nazis who arose two decades later, he (along with Herzl himself) saw the creation of a Jewish homeland as a means of solving a problem. If you could rid England and the continent of much of its Jewish population and safely ensconce them elsewhere, you would relieve the internal tension and conflict resulting from Jew hatred throughout Europe (i.e. the Russian pogroms and missions of Jews who fled them to Britain). Europeans as a whole generally didn't like Jews. Getting rid of them in a benign way was thought to be an excellent means of resolving a thorny ethnic problem.

In American history, no less a figure than Abraham Lincoln [endorsed shipping African-Americans back to Africa](#). He, Thomas Jefferson and many of the most enlightened white intellectuals of their day could see no way that Blacks could integrate successfully into American society. So we see the impulse to ethnically cleanse is by no means a European phenomenon alone.

Perhaps most importantly of all, the Declaration resulted in no concrete British policy resolved to implement it. It was another 30 years before Israel declared its independence. And Britain did not leave Palestine freely and of its own will. It did not offer statehood to Israel. The end of the British mandate resulted from the nation's bankruptcy at the end of World War II and the need to rapidly shed the colonies which had been such a drain on the state treasury. When the British freed their colonies they did so abruptly and in a manner that provoked mass slaughter and ethnic conflict. This happened in both Palestine and in India.

Britain's approach in mandatory Palestine vacillated depending on who seemed up and who seemed down on any particular day. For every statement that seemed to favor one party, there was another that favored the other. For every Balfour Declaration there was a [Peel Commission report](#). There was no clear policy that offered both sides enough so that they might be satisfied and feel their interests were represented and heard by the colonial overlords. This in turn is what led to the current state of affairs and 75 years of endless bloodshed.

So the celebration in London of the centenary of Balfour is based on false premises. Which is but one of the many reasons Jeremy Corbyn made a wise decision in skipping it. There is no reason to rejoice. Balfour was the product of a failed colonial system. England has done little or nothing to promote peace or justice in Israel-Palestine. Nor is it doing so today (witness Tony Blair's feeble "Quartet" efforts). And a celebratory dinner will not change that.

In fact, it will only remind Palestinians how little the world knows or cares about the reserve clause in the original document. It will remind them that they are the forgotten party whose rights are ignored and dismissed. It will bolster support for the most militant resistance against Israeli oppression and Occupation.

The Balfour anniversary is a source of sadness and bitterness. Even historically, it doesn't mean anything like what its proponents believe. It is a sham.

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