

The Tragic Declaration: Colonial Legacies, Balfour and Israel

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So much after the fact; so much in terms of opportunism gone to seed and destruction. But planned historical calamities tend to be rare. There are only absurd moments, dastardly opportunities, and tragic convergences. History is less the outcome of wise deliberation than folly dressed up as reason, occasionally tinged by a touch of malice.

On November 2, 1917, the British government published the Balfour Declaration (one of “sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations”) by means of a letter written by Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur James Balfour to Lord Walter Rothschild. It suggested forthcoming British assistance for the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine.

Problems soon emerged, showing what Arthur Koestler would suggest as the solemn promising of one nation to a second the country of a third, all happening even before the Ottoman Empire had ceased to exist.

This was British imperial opportunism at its worst, or, if you fancy that sort of pluck, best. It played on the aspirations of Zionists; it also went counter to the promise of liberation for Arabs in the event they overthrew their Ottoman overlords. The moral tic only came later, a sort of retrospective imposition.

Submerged in the Declaration are a series of questions writ large. There is the Eastern Question – one of Ottoman-eastern influences on Europe and more broadly, the Occident. Then there was that overall niggling problem of where European Jewry persisted as carriers of an eastern legacy in Europe, “which Enlightened and un-Enlightened European Christians,” poses Joseph Massad, “found intolerable.”[1]

This became, with all its paranoid fixations, cultural mania and concern, the “Jewish question”, an absurdist fantasy that attempted to press Jewish influence in Europe as a matter of unreformed, eastern practice. How much better, then, to have that influence exiled altogether?

This task also assumed the oddest of forms, and the creation of uncomfortable bed fellows in what effectively became a colonial project of collusion and complicity. Theodor Herzl, founder of the First Zionist Congress in August 1897, revealed the realpolitik caste of mind that would also be mirrored by the politics behind Balfour.

Those “anti-Semites,” he proclaimed, “will become our most dependable friends, the anti-Semitic countries our allies.”

The Balfour letter itself retained those various contradictions. Having pitched for a Jewish state, it then went on to suggest 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 of Jews in any other country.” This was imperial parcelling of the worst sort, making claims about racial, religious and ethnic reordering without a mind to consequence.

Over time, reading the Declaration suggested the workings of a psychodrama, teasing historians into adventurous analyses. Historian Barbara Tuchman in her classic *Bible and Sword, England and Palestine from the Bronze Age to Balfour* (1956) imputed to Lord Balfour a religious motive, morally biblical more than realpolitik imperial. The Jews, went this line, needed repaying in some form, a gesture of historical recompense.

Tuchman, it must be said, then proceeded to acknowledge good old little Englander power plays at work. It was Britain’s intention “to take Palestine anyway for its strategic value; but they had to have a good moral case”. By proclaiming “that Britain would enter Palestine as trustee for its Old Testament proprietors would fulfil this purpose admirably and above all would quiet the British conscience in advance.”

As appropriately noted by Michael J. Cohen, reading the British response here requires an understanding of public show and private intimations.[2] A degree of duplicity in diplomacy – the public self adorned differently to the private – is always demanded.

Take, as an example, the meeting between Prime Minister Lloyd George and Chaim Weizmann held on July 21, 1921 at Lord Balfour’s home, with the Colonial Secretary Churchill present. Weizmann, it is noted, was reassured that the British “had always understood and meant the eventual possibility of a Jewish state.”

The 1922 Churchill White Paper supplies an example of the public show, a case of hedging, avoidance, and qualification as to what the intention of the Declaration had been. There was, for instance, never an intention to create “a wholly Jewish Palestine”. To think so was to sport an “impracticable” expectation.

Indeed, the paper went on to suggest a reassurance: that the Declaration had not envisaged that “Palestine as a whole should be converted into a Jewish National Home, but that such a Home should be found in Palestine.” A home, as it were, within a home – or perhaps a spacious room in a large abode.

The terminology “National Home” was picked up by the Peel Royal Commission in 1936 as a problematic formulation, having caused “unrest and hostility between Arabs and Jews”. That term, it is also worth noting, was a confection, less of British foreign policy than that of the First Zionist Congress in 1897.

The language does not suggest promise, but a degree of wooliness. But there was enough certainty to propel modern relevance. It has encouraged urgings on the part of the Palestinian Authority’s Foreign Minister, Riyad al-Maliki, to press for an international law suit fronted by Arab states against the United Kingdom citing the Declaration as the cause of the mass Palestinian eviction in 1948 that became the Nakba.

The complexity behind the machinations of Balfour have now been washed away by moral absolutes and declarations. The gala dinner on November 2 saw British Prime Minister Theresa May speak of British pride in “our pioneering role in the creation of the state of

Israel” yet careful to insist on a two-state solution negotiated by fictionally equivalent partners.

Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also afforded thanks, and suggested with force the ultimate triumph of a colonial venture that had to be swallowed, consequence and whole.

“A hundred years after Balfour, the Palestinians should finally accept a Jewish national home and finally accept a Jewish state. And when they do, the road to peace will be infinitely closer.”[3]

A truly bitter history pill to swallow.

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Notes

[1] <https://electronicintifada.net/content/balfour-declarations-many-questions/22216>

[2] <http://www.tandfonline-com.ezproxy.lib.rmit.edu.au/doi/pdf/10.1080/00263206.2017.1360289?needAccess=true>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/02/may-netanyahu-balfour-declaration-israel-palestine>

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