



State of Palestine
Palestine Liberation Organization
Negotiations Affairs Department

A CENTURY OF INJUSTICE

Q&A On Palestine and the Balfour Declaration

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Who was Arthur James Balfour?

Born in Scotland in 1848, Arthur James Balfour was a British politician. He served as Prime Minister between 1902 and 1905 and as Foreign Secretary between 1916 and 1919. He was ideologically conservative, a colonialist and close to several Zionist leaders.

2

What is the Balfour Declaration?

The Balfour Declaration is the name given to a letter signed by Balfour on November 2nd 1917 and sent to Lord Lionel Walter de Rothschild, the leader of the British Jewish community, in which he declared the support of the British government for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, at the expense of the Palestinian people, the native inhabitants of that land.

The precise text reads as follows:

"His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors 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".

3

Was Palestine “a land without a people” in 1917?

Palestine was a land of almost 28,000 square kilometers under the control of the Ottoman Empire, as were many of the Arab and Muslim countries at the time. It had a population of approximately 700,000 people, of which nearly 90%¹ were Palestinian Christians and Muslims. Moreover, most of the existing Jewish population at the time was considered fully part of the native Palestinian population – and not Zionists. Despite this reality, the Balfour Declaration referred to the majority Palestinian population as the “existing non-Jewish communities”.

¹ Interim Report on the Civil Administration of Palestine, 1920 (A British Government Report). By 1920, the Jewish immigration to Palestine had already started.

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But the Balfour Declaration refers to the rights of both Jews and Palestine over Palestine, doesn't it?

No. Balfour refers to a “national home” for the Jewish people, implying that only Jews have political rights while other “non-Jewish communities” would only be granted civil and religious rights. In practice, this means neither two-sovereign states nor one single democratic state. In fact, what the Balfour Declaration promised is what has resulted a century later- the imposition of one state with two separate systems, one with political rights for Jews and another one without political rights for non-Jews.

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What were the consequences of the Balfour Declaration for the Palestinian people? How does it still impact the lives of Palestinians today?

The Balfour Declaration violates the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to achieve their self-determination. The implementation of the declaration has, in fact, led to the uprooting of the Palestinian people from their own land, in order to replace them with others. It resulted in the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948, al-Nakba, wherein nearly a million Palestinians were forcibly expelled from their historic homeland. Rather than achieving independence, like other Arab and African countries in the post-colonial era, Palestine was instead subjected to further colonisation at the hands of a new state, Israel.

The political programme of the Israeli government is, in essence, the implementation of the Balfour Declaration: The negation of the political rights of the Palestinian people, through separate and unequal systems for two groups based on their religion and ethnicity. Israel, as an occupying power which today controls the entirety of historic Palestine and every aspect of Palestinians' lives, violates not only the political rights, but also the civil and religious rights supposedly protected by the Balfour Declaration.

Chaim Azriel Weizmann, Israel's first President, was once asked about how he obtained the Balfour Declaration and what he thought about the indigenous Palestinians. He responded: “The British told us that there are some hundred thousand Negroes [“kushim”] and for those there is no value.” A few years after Declaration, another prominent Zionist, Israel Zangwill wrote: “If Lord Shaftesbury was literally inexact in

describing Palestine as a country without a people, he was essentially correct, for there is no Arab people living in intimate fusion with the country, utilizing its resources and stamping it with a characteristic impress; there is at best an Arab encampment.”

This myth of “a land without a people for a people without a land” continues to be perpetuated until today, particularly within the Israeli education system and children’s literature.

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Did the United Kingdom have the right to promise Palestine to the Zionist Movement?

No. The Balfour Declaration is not based on any legal foundation. The United Kingdom occupied Palestine during World War I. This declaration can only be understood within the context of the colonialist foreign policy of the United Kingdom at the time.

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Was the Balfour Declaration unanimously approved by the British Cabinet at the time?

No. In fact, the only Jewish member of the British Cabinet at that time, Sir Edwin Montagu, completely rejected the Balfour Declaration. He described Zionism as “mischievous political creed, untenable by any patriotic citizen of the United Kingdom”. Other high officials, such as Lord Curzon, questioned what would happen to the population of Palestine: “the Arabs and their forefathers have occupied the country for the best part of 1,500 years and they own the soil (...) They will not be content either to be expropriated for Jewish immigrants or to act merely as hewers of wood and drawers of water for the latter”.

In 1922, the House of Lords refused to endorse the British Mandate due to the inclusion of the Balfour Declaration. During the British Mandate of Palestine, there were also several recommendations by British officials to honour the rights of the Arab-Palestinian people.²

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<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1922/jun/21/palestine-mandate>

8

Did the United Kingdom ever assume responsibility for the Balfour Declaration?

No. Despite the fact that the United Kingdom holds a special historical responsibility towards Palestine and its people, every UK government has avoided its responsibility and failed to take any step to repair the damage caused to the Palestinian people. The current British government has decided to celebrate the centenary of the Balfour Declaration, a symbol of Palestinian dispossession, at the same time advocating strongly against accountability for Israeli violations of International Humanitarian Law and UN resolutions.

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Are there currently any voices in the UK that speak against the Balfour Declaration?

There are many. Below are just a few recent examples from British Members of Parliament. Meanwhile, thousands of members of the British public have signed a petition calling for their government to apologise for the Declaration, and there are many individuals and solidarity groups who consistently campaign for Palestinian rights.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Conservative MP): "...the terms of the Balfour declaration are clearly not upheld with respect to the Palestinians, and in Britain that should weigh very heavily upon us indeed."

Grahame M Morris (Labour MP): "As the originator of the Balfour declaration and holder of the mandate for Palestine, Britain has a unique historical connection and, arguably, a moral responsibility to the people of both Israel and Palestine. In 1920, we undertook a sacred trust—a commitment to guide Palestinians to statehood and independence. That was nearly a century ago, and the Palestinian people are still to have their national rights recognised. This sacred trust has been neglected for far too long."

David Ward (Liberal Democrat): 'Israel is in breach of the contract set out in the Balfour declaration stating that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine". In the light of the Nakba and everything since, that seems like a sick joke.'

Lord Norman Warner: "The Balfour Declaration has created endless misery for generations of Palestinians with millions displaced".

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What do the Palestinians ask the United Kingdom to do?

Palestinians ask that the British government accept its historical responsibility and take active steps towards righting wrongs and fulfilling the long overdue rights of the Palestinian people. One way to begin this process is to honour the political rights that were violated by the Balfour Declaration, including measures to support the Palestinian right to self-determination and independence. Taking steps to counter violations of international law, including those associated with Israel's settlement enterprise; supporting- rather than actively opposing- international mechanisms aimed at upholding accountability and implementing international law vis-à-vis Israel; and recognising the State of Palestine, can all go some way toward achieving those rights, and ultimately peace.

Finally, Palestinians, like many British citizens, would expect the British government to recognise the insensitivity of celebrating the Balfour Declaration, certainly while one of the parties affected by that declaration is still suffering on a daily basis through occupation and colonisation at the hands of the other. All celebrations should be reserved for a time when both peoples have their rights and freedoms.