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## Report

### **The Balfour Declaration Centenary, 2017:** A Constructive Retrieval or an Odd Masquerade

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**Palestinians in the UK welcome Corbyn's Balfour celebration snub [Getty Images]**

## Introduction

From Syria to the South Asia Sea, despite the massive risk of the conflicts and crises the world is facing, the Palestinian cause remains the pivotal issue heading the world's top political risks for the coming decade. As the gist of Middle East turmoil will even get worse; it is further nominated to instigate vast universal disorder. Unfortunately, because of their dynamicy and revolutionary deeds in front of their Western Backed occupier (whose survival is one of the 'holy grails of foreign policy' in US and UK politics), the Palestinians come to contact with the world elite power in an 'underdog' perspective; the victim has nothing to do but 'cry and anger'!! Subsequently, a new plot is being weaved against Palestine, which instigates my endeavor to write this paper: The Balfour Declaration Centenary to commemorate in UK.

## "Mr. Balfour, supposing I was to offer you Paris instead of London, would you take it?"

This was the dash unfettered answer of Theodor Herzl's successor to Zionist leadership, Chaim Weizmann during his first meeting with Arthur James Balfour in 1906, when the latter asked the former's objections in regard to the 1903 Uganda Scheme, proposed initially by Herzl. Such an enquiry raises a big question here; was Britain helpless in deciding for Palestine as the oblation? Or did the declaration came as a result of "ignorance and prejudice" of the prime minister at that time David Lloyd George, as argued by Tom Segev in his book, *One Palestine, Complete?*<sup>(1)</sup> The coming year will provide some answers I think.

## The Paradoxical Context

In his first interview with the Jewish press, in June 8, 2016, the recently assigned Israel's ambassador in London, Mark Regev, has eagerly revealed UK and Israel are

working on celebrating the Balfour declaration centenary, a “public celebration together with the British government” as he said.(2) The story that recalled one of the outrageous aspects associated with colonial arrogance of the WWI. It was also confirmed previously by Benjamin Netanyahu’s spokesman who also assured: “It’s being taken very seriously at the highest levels”.(3) This of course has re-awakened certain interest between the Arab and Muslim milieu, in how the Balfour declaration will be humanly, legally and diplomatically remembered on its centenary on 2 November, 2017.

Most probably the moment of the pivotal and disastrous event in the lead-up to the longstanding catastrophe that, decisively, torn to pieces the Palestinian community’s tissue, by paving the way to the eventual creation of Israel on the remnants of their own homes, farms cities and towns. Disappointingly, by stirring emotions of the Arab and Muslim nations in general, and particularly the Palestinians who were exposed to the definite elimination by the structural implementation of the settler colonization project of Zionism, either by genocide, exile or displacement. Even the few, who escaped this fate, lived to suffer constant dismemberment, humiliation and collective punishment for the rest of their life. This is how it looks, when your homeland is stolen by force and gifted to another people.

Odd when the Israeli prime minister’s spokesperson clearly cited that “senior leadership from both sides [are] uniting to celebrate Balfour”,(4) the British officials had not denied it, while considered the attenuation of its impact. The comments of Tobias Ellwood, FCO minister for the Middle East that he would employ the term “mark” instead of “celebrate” the event -which he recognized as still “a live issue” in the Middle East- exceedingly provides a loud query on this argument and the entire policy Britain is adopting while dealing with the Palestinian cause.(5) It also imposes certain meditation on what the British relationship with the new Middle East and its position as a paramount global power in the peace process may become, chiefly as the ‘ceremony of a fulfilled promise’ retrieves the soreness of letdown and its massive ramifications of the broken promise to the Sharif of Mecca.

### **Facts not Rhetoric**

Gaze afar, the centenary of WWII has brought vital lessons to the human race in terms of how to avoid sliding into the swamp of war, “each country involved is remembering and honouring those millions who made the ultimate sacrifice during the ‘war to end all wars’”.(6) Unfortunately, one missed lesson is that the Belfour Declaration has led to Jewish-Arab and Islamic enmity which is posing a great threat to the cohesion of our global village; “the British government practiced a web of deceit”, Says Professor Mary Grey, at the University of Wales.(7)

Paradoxically, instead of rethinking the centenary as an opportunity to "take a moral responsibility on the British government to complete the work declared originally as the mandate main task, when Britain was the world power", to quote the words of the British diplomat, Sir Vincent Fean,(8) Britain preferred to re-declare another deviated role in what came to be known as the world's most entrenched 'conflict', by restating what was schemed in one of the crucial correspondents of Arthur Balfour; "I am assured that the solution of the problem of Palestine which would be much the most welcome to the leaders and supporters of the Zionist movement throughout the world would be the annexation of the country to the British Empire", (9) it's retrieved equally today by way of a gift to Israel, and an achievement to commemorate. (10)

Celebrating the dreadful declaration, is a blessing for the Israeli systematic gormandize of what remains of the Palestinian land for the sake of expanding settlements in West Bank and Jerusalem, drifting away from the two-state solution that British policy has advocated and argued for so long time. For Britain as a key political player, to proceed in this event, illuminates the absolute intended ignorance of the Palestinian legal and historical rights in their homeland and self-determination, as a salient feature to dominate the British foreign policy towards the Middle East central issue. This may be illustrated in how easy it was for the former British Prime Minister, David Cameron, in telling leaders of the British Jewish community, "I want to make sure we mark it together in the most appropriate way", (11) totally ignoring (or overlooking) it being alive distress for the victims. I am saying overlooking as Cameron himself is the British Prime Minister who offered an apology before the House of Commons on June 15, 2010, for the 1972 "Bloody Sunday" killings of 14 unarmed protesters in Northern Ireland, clarifying "the massacre was unjustified and unjustifiable". (12)

Have he just reflected any of those Massacres Israel has decidedly committed and is still committing to the Palestinian civilians, repeatedly during 1948 war, 1967 annexation of West Bank and Jerusalem, the 1982 Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Lebanon, the 2003 and 2008 military envisions followed by the aggressive 2012 war on Gaza, and not last nor least, the recently 2014 massacre on Gaza; daringly enough, reflecting on those terrible incidents, will predominantly derive a rethink for the 'appropriateness' of celebrating Balfour's declaration, in terms of justice and humanity, as the two key claims fueling the recent wars US and UK lunched in the Middle East.

There is a sturdy symptoms of bias in the British policy towards the Palestinian issue, salient bias lies in the fact that while enrolled in establishing, supporting and 'celebrating' the Israel state, Britain has not yet recognized Palestine as a state, while promoting tow-states solution as a culmination of the peace process, even beyond the October 2014 Parliamentary vote requesting the government to recognize the state of Palestine. One may wonder then, what states are to be promoted in juxtaposition!! While

supporting one on the account of the other's existence being threatened, it's obvious that only Israel is in a position to utilize such influenced policy, exploiting the Palestinian Authority's (PA) compliance to the international dictations for a conditional fund, vital for its survival, while expanding settlements and gormandizing the remaining 12% cantonized areas of historical Palestine, professed as the 'Palestinian Territories'.

The British reaction to the Palestinian leader's intention to sue Britain over its 1917 Balfour declaration, can be clearly inferred through the rhetoric employed in the comments of the British diplomat Sir Vincent Fean, former British consul-general in Jerusalem and precisely familiar with Palestinian President Abbas as an ambassador to the Palestinian territories: "I regard what Abbas said as a cry of anger and despair rather than a statement of intent".<sup>(13)</sup> While implicitly coding the official message to the Palestinian leadership, Fean even went farther explicit with his comments, stating challenge to Abbas in his stance; "I don't see how he can do what he has undertaken to do", a phrase that explicitly gives indications for how political decisions are normally weighted in the British foreign policy, chiefly with issues pertinent to the PA with its lack of necessary bargaining power. An anti-Semitic, sinful and inexplicable phrase like that stated by a British Foreign Secretary deserves more than apology: "Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far greater import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land."<sup>(14)</sup>

### **Mining the Value**

Despite the overt inclination in the British political arena to look at the centenary as an achievement, however, this is not the sole point of view in Britain to consider. The controversial argument regarding the centenary definitely had included other points of view. Some even looked at it as a blatant infringement for the Palestinian victims' rights and sentiments, even within the Jewish community itself. As stated by the Monitor of the Middle East: "Has the government consulted widely even within the Jewish community about possible Balfour events?"<sup>(15)</sup> Indeed, no evidence that it has.

Understandably, the labour leadership candidate Mr. Jeremy Corbyn described the Balfour declaration itself as "an extremely confused document which did not enjoy universal support in the cabinet of the time, and indeed was opposed by some of the Jewish members of the cabinet because of its confusion", referring to the Jewish member of the British cabinet at the time, Lord Edwin Samuel Montagu who ardently opposed the declaration. Furthermore, and during a section discussing the centenary commemoration and how they would mark the occasion, Corbyn, clarified it "should be marked by a serious study of the history of the whole region". His balanced statement stands as a brave and responsible call for rethinking the legal framework and historical evidences within which the Balfour Declaration took place, also bringing the British policies under

scrutiny against bias and deviation become crucial, as to identify its historical responsibility towards the dramatic changes and destiny of a land and nation under its 'mandate' authority.

Perhaps Sara Roy was the one who has eloquently put it while describing how the Palestinian community has been taken away in a manner not seen since any time of Israeli occupation. She did that by commenting on her quote of Martin Buber (the most prominent Jewish religious thinker of our time, she says) in a [fiasco] letter to Mohandas Gandhi, explaining the Jewish people's need for a homeland: "Dispersion is bearable; it can even be purposeful if somewhere there is ingathering, a growing home center, a piece of earth wherein one is in the midst of an ingathering and not in dispersion and from whence the spirit of ingathering may work its way out to all the places of the dispersion. When there is life, there is also a striving, common life, the life of a community, which dares to live today, because it hopes to live tomorrow. However, when this growing center, this increasing process of ingathering is lacking, dispersion becomes dismemberment.(16)

### **Struggling with a Reconciling Heart(17)**

Roy then meaningfully stated her statement, saying; "Today, there should be no doubt that Palestinian society and economy are slowly being dismembered in the way Buber meant it". Her statement came in her research project 2004, but it is thundering now as it describes today Palestine. Timeframe doesn't matter as 'Dispersion is bearable', particularly in the case of ongoing settler colonialism, tolerated by the global power elite. In their quest for hope and peace, as best stated by Cheryl Rubenberg (2003), in her book "The Palestinians: In Search of a Just Peace", (18) The Palestinians who since 1917, are in a daily base and in different ways sacrificing for the sake of their rights, their shelter, for a shining tomorrow to the coming generations, have proved pragmatically enough when they went to sacrifice part of their 'sacred land' for the sake of peace for their progeny.

With all of the despair and frustration brought by Oslo accords, dearly enough, they are still ready to continue their way towards justice and equality. Hopefully, "... this year will be a good opportunity to reflect on painful legacy", says Ben White, author of Israeli Apartheid.(19) This year can also make a great and reasonable opportunity for Britain to stand for its historical responsibility towards the Palestinians in their dilemma. "Now, [...] there could be a unique opportunity for us British to take an honest look at both the positive and negative of our twentieth century imperial experience and its long term impact on certain parts of the world", states Professor Grey, addressing Palestine and the Declaration centenary.(20) Nevertheless, if Britain sees the Balfour declaration as an achievement to celebrate for establishing the state of Israel, then what about more than 12 million Palestinians scattered over the globe because of this achievement?

## Dares to Say

In their efforts to stress how the centenary has a role to play in encouraging a mindful and thoughtful interpretation, early this year, the Palestinian and Arab Community in Britain signed their petition to the British government and Parliament to apologise for the Balfour Declaration and lead peace efforts in Palestine. Again, the answer came frustrating: "The Balfour Declaration is an historic statement for which HMG does not intend to apologise. We are proud of our role in creating the State of Israel. The task now is to encourage moves towards peace."<sup>(21)</sup> One can wonder about the extent to which, the British Government considers the pathway Israel is marching through, is a way to make use of an unrepeatable opportunity for peace! The role may sound better to fairly rethink a justifiable resolution, mainly through a balanced position like those stated by the British Labour and the academic scholars; to responsibly stand a strategic retreat on how to recompense the victims. This can open a haven for justice and regional integration, instead of, poignantly, retrieving their catastrophe and confirming the mandate's historical guilt; "If we are committed to reconciliation and justice it means bearing the pain of the wounded memories of the victims and survivors".<sup>(22)</sup>

I also believe that the approaching centenary should be marked in the British nation with awareness and honesty, as stated by the Balfour project; "we believe British people need:

- to learn what our nation did a hundred years ago, and understand how those actions are perceived today by all concerned.
- to acknowledge, with honesty and humility, where reprehensible attitudes and unethical behavior in our nation contributed to the ensuing impasse".

Palestine, as any other part of our 'global village', has yet to find her place in the international community as an independent, sovereign, viable and integrated country. The loneliness and steadfastness of the Palestinians in their quest for peace, in front of the Israeli's wide range repertory of alliances coverage and rationalization for its violations of human rights and the international treaties, exceptionally the Oslo agreement, in an area flaming under the 'bowl of politics', if not being timely remedied, unquestionably confirms bringing the moribund peace narratives to a non-reckoned end.

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- (6) Mary Grey, "The Balfour Declaration (1917) and Its Impact on the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict: What Are Our Responsibilities Today?," *Perfidious Albion: Britain's broken promises*: (2014), <http://www.balfourproject.org/britains-broken-promises-the-balfour-declaration-1917-and-its-impact-on-the-israelipalestinian-conflict/>. Professor Mary Grey is an ecofeminist liberation theologian, until recently D.J. James Professor of Pastoral Theology at the University of Wales, Lampeter and formerly Professor of Contemporary Theology at the University of Southampton
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- (12) Dan Fastenberg: "Bloody Sunday", *Times*, Thursday, June 17, 2010, accessed 22/10/16, at: [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1997272\\_1997273\\_1997274,00.htm](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1997272_1997273_1997274,00.htm)
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- (14) Balfour's confidential 1919 memo, August 11, 1919. See Khalidi W, *ibid.*, p. 226.
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- (19) Ben White, "A Century after Balfour, the UK Should Face Uncomfortable Home Truths," *Essay, Middle East Eye* (2016).
- (20) Grey.
- (21) This phrase was the prologue in the British Government respond to the petition signed to the Government and Parliament: "UK must apologise for the Balfour Declaration & lead peace efforts in Palestine"; Petitions reply came through UK Government email on: Saturday 22/04/2017 00:59.
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