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Palestine/Israel

The implications of the Balfour declaration

- Features -

Publication date: Thursday 20 September 2018

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Below we publish two articles written almost a year ago to mark the centenary of the Balfour declaration, a key moment in the history of the Middle East. The issues raised in the two pieces, respectively by Gilbert Achcar and Julian Salingue, are as least as pertinent today as they were when they were written.

Behind the scenes of the Balfour Declaration, the breeding ground for the creation of Israel

In 1917, the Balfour Declaration changed the fate of Palestine forever by turning it into a home for the Jews. In reality, its instigator wanted to prevent the immigration of Jewish refugees into Britain.

At the annual luncheon of the Conservative Friends of Israel, the British Prime minister, Theresa May, said: "On November 2, 1917, Arthur James Balfour, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, wrote this:

His Majesty's Government envisages favourably the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will make every effort to facilitate the achievement of this objective."

The British Prime Minister read the whole of Balfour's open letter. "This is one of the most important documents in history," she added. "It shows Britain's crucial role in creating a homeland for the Jewish people."

An odour of anti-Semitism

In 1917, Edwin Samuel Montagu was the only Jewish member of the British government of David Lloyd George, of which Balfour was part. After reading the draft of the Balfour Declaration, he sent a memorandum to the British Government stating: "*I would like to formally express my view that the policy of His Majesty's Government is Anti-Semitic and, therefore, will play into the hands of anti-Semites in all countries of the world.*

"It is inconceivable that the British government should formally recognise Zionism and allow Mr. Balfour to say that Palestine must be transformed into a national home for the Jewish people," he continued. "I do not know exactly what that implies, but I suppose it means that the Mohammedans and the Christians will have to give way to the Jews, that the latter should have preference in all things and should be assimilated to Palestine as the English are to England or the French to France and that the Turks and other Mohammedans will be regarded as foreigners in Palestine in the same way that Jews will be treated as foreigners in all countries.

"Perhaps it will also be necessary to grant citizenship only after a religious examination," he added with irony (for he certainly did not believe it). This last sentence nevertheless proved to be premonitory, since the granting of Israeli citizenship has become inseparable from the Jewish religious identity (today about 22 per cent of Israeli citizens are not Jewish).

"Christian Zionism"

You will perhaps understand Edwin Montagu's concern for Muslims and Christians living in Palestine – at the time they represented more than 90 per cent of the country's population – but you will wonder why he considered "the policy of His Majesty's Government" as "anti-Semitic". It becomes clear when you read the entire memorandum.

Quoting two newspapers of the time, the conservative daily *The Morning Post*, which would distinguish itself in 1920 by publishing a chapter of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the famous literary forgery fabricated to discredit the Jews, and a notoriously anti-Semitic weekly called *The New Witness*, Montagu wrote: "I can easily understand that the editors of the *Morning Post* and the *New Witness* are Zionists, and I am not at all surprised that non-Jews in England can rejoice in this policy."

He thus drew attention to the link between the anti-Semitic desire to get rid of the Jews and the Zionist project to send all Jews to Palestine. He knew very well one thing that Prime Minister Theresa May seems to be ignoring: the British Foreign Minister Arthur Balfour himself was influenced by the anti-Semitic current known as "Christian Zionism", which supported the "return" of Jews to Palestine. The real purpose behind this support – mostly undeclared but sometimes clearly avowed – was to get rid of the Jewish presence in the countries with a Christian majority.

For the Christian Zionists, the "return" of the Jews to Palestine fulfilled the condition of the second coming of Christ. And this was to be followed by the Last Judgement, where all the Jews would be condemned for eternity to the sufferings of Hell if they do not convert to Christianity.

Moreover, when he himself was prime minister between 1902 and 1905, Arthur Balfour promulgated the Aliens Act of 1905, the purpose of which was to prevent immigration to Britain of Jewish refugees fleeing the deadly anti-Semitism that was rampant in the Russian Empire.

Gilbert Achcar

The centenary of the Balfour Declaration: a century of dispossession and resistance in Palestine

On 2 November 1917, the British Minister for Foreign Affairs, Arthur Balfour, addressed a letter to Lionel Walter Rothschild, a prominent member of the Jewish community in Britain and the main source of finance for the Zionist movement. This letter, known as the "Balfour Declaration", is a key moment in the history of Palestine, since for the first time the government of a great power pledged to support the Zionist movement, then in a small minority in the Jewish communities. The Balfour Declaration sealed the alliance between Zionism and imperialism, at the same time as it sealed the fate of the Palestinians: they were symbolically dispossessed of their land by a colonial power which attributed it to a movement many of whose leaders did not conceal their intention to physically dispossess them. For the writer Arthur Koestler, with the Balfour declaration, "One nation solemnly promised to a second the territory of a third."

A symbolic dispossession paving the way for physical dispossession

By this letter, Balfour provided the official support of the government to the project of establishing a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, then under Ottoman administration: "His Majesty's Government envisages favourably the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will make every effort to facilitate the achievement of this objective, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may undermine either the civil and religious rights of non-Jewish communities existing in Palestine, or the political rights and status of Jews in any other country. I would be obliged if you would bring this statement to the attention of the Zionist Federation. Â»

A century of dispossession

To remember, 100 years later, the British promise, reminds us that for the Palestinians, the fight against dispossession did not begin in 1967, after the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, or even in 1948, at the time of the creation of the State of Israel. The process of dispossession spans over a century and, contrary to the mythology maintained by the Zionist movement and its allies, Palestinian resistance preceded the first Arab-Israeli wars, including the Great Revolt of 1936, defeated jointly by the British and the Zionist armed militias.

Structural discrimination

The Balfour Declaration enshrined in international diplomatic language the denial of the national rights of the Palestinians, since only their "civil and religious" rights are mentioned, and they are qualified, by a euphemism destined to deny their identity, as "non-Jewish communities." The 700,000 Arabs of Palestine (more than 90 per cent of the population) were reduced to the status of residents without political rights, which later validated the thesis of the Zionist leaders according to which Palestine was "a land without people". Fifty years later, the Israeli leader Golda Meir declared, with regard to the territories occupied by Israel: "How could we give back these territories? There is no one to give them back to."

To remember, 100 years later, the British promise is thus to understand that the oppression and the colonial discrimination suffered by the Palestinians are not an accident, but the product of a long history. The Palestinian resistance to this long-term process has never ceased, even though we must recognise that the national movement is now experiencing a historical crisis and that the Palestinians are facing a considerably weakened relationship of forces. One thing is certain: Israeli apartheid is a structural phenomenon, which can only be abolished if the very foundations of the State of Israel and its role as the outpost of Western imperialism in the region are analysed, denounced and fought.

Julien Salingue

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