Balfour's Shadow

Balfour's Shadow

A Century of British Support for Zionism and Israel

David Cronin

PlutoPress
www.plutobooks.com

First published 2017 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 9944 7 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 9943 0 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0107 4 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0109 8 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0108 1 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

Contents

Introduction

Boris Johnson has described the Balfour Declaration as 'bizarre', 'tragicomically incoherent' and 'an exquisite masterpiece of Foreign Office fudgerama'.[1] He is correct. Britain's 1917 pledge to help build a 'national home for the Jewish people' in Palestine struck a false balance. Despite resolving to respect the rights of everyone concerned, it accorded incoming settlers a higher status than the indigenous people. The world's pre-eminent power was sponsoring a project aimed at establishing a Jewish state in a land where most of the inhabitants were Arabs.

The irony is that Johnson has added to the incoherence. About a year after his critique of the declaration was published – in his 2014 biography of Winston Churchill – Johnson, then London's mayor, led a trade mission to Israel and the occupied West Bank. During his trip, he hailed the Balfour Declaration as 'a great thing' that 'reflected a great tide of history'.[2] Since then, Johnson has been appointed foreign secretary, a post held a century ago by Arthur James Balfour. Johnson has not repeated his 'fudgerama' claim since taking up that job.

Other Conservative politicians have publicly rejoiced in what William Hague has called the party's 'unbroken thread' of support for Zionism since the days of Balfour (such support is by no means confined to the Tories).[3] Visiting Jerusalem in 2014, David Cameron said the Balfour Declaration was the 'moment when the state of Israel went from a dream to a plan'.[4] Towards the end of 2016, Theresa May – Cameron's successor as prime minister – praised the declaration as 'one of the most important letters in history' and gave a commitment to mark its centenary 'with pride'. May is the latest in a series of British political leaders to prefer myths to reality. A sober assessment of events leads to the unavoidable conclusion that the Balfour Declaration enabled the mass dispossession of Palestinians, an injustice that persists. Rather than recognising that fact, May has celebrated Israel as 'a thriving democracy, a beacon of tolerance, an engine of enterprise'.[5]

Britain's relationship with the Zionist movement has not always been harmonious. At one crucial juncture in the 1940s, Britain was treated as the arch-enemy by some Zionist paramilitaries. The British administration in Jerusalem was even the target of Zionist bombing.

Viewed in its totality, the relationship has nonetheless proven to be resilient. That is despite the fact that the Zionist movement does not need Britain in the way it did 100 years ago. Then, convincing Britain to back the colonisation of Palestine was deemed to be vital by leading Zionists, notably Chaim Weizmann (later Israel's first president). With the USA now transferring billions of dollars in military aid to Israel each year, the notion that Zionists once pinned so much hope on receiving a brief letter from the British government might appear quaint.

The significance of the Balfour Declaration lies not only in its carefully weighed, though misleading, words – arguably, it lies more in the follow-up action. Soon after the letter to Walter Rothschild was dispatched, work began on laying the foundations of the coveted 'national home'. When the declaration's core tenets were enshrined in the League of Nations mandate under which Britain ruled Palestine between the two world wars, the 'home' began to take a discernible shape. It was not a place that made all its residents feel welcome. A pattern of discrimination against Palestinians developed – in access to land, employment and more besides. It led to the Nakba – Arabic for 'catastrophe' – the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians around the time of Israel's foundation in 1948.

Boris Johnson is one of the many British politicians and diplomats to have voiced reservations about either the manner in which Zionism was embraced or whether the embrace was prudent. Yet the embrace has remained sufficiently tight for Britain to either directly crush resistance to the Zionist project – as occurred during the 1920s and 1930s – or, in more recent decades, to endorse Israeli repression.

The roles have, in some respects, been reversed. About 50 years ago, Britain supplied the tanks on which Israel would rely heavily during the Six-Day War of June 1967. Today, Israel designs the drones that are officially regarded as critical to Britain's future 'defence'. Yet it is not simply a case of a retailer turning into a customer. The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, which began in 1967, has been treated as a business opportunity by Israel. The arms and surveillance equipment

that Israel exports around the world have been tested out on the victims of that occupation. By supplying the hardware used in the initial invasion of those territories, Britain helped the Zionist colonisation project to enter into a new phase. There is a logic behind how Britain buys in bulk the products invented by its protégé and seeks to adapt them for its own ends.

Does the legacy of Arthur James Balfour matter in the era of Donald John Trump? The short answer is: yes. Israel's settlement activities have been one of the hot topics in the first few weeks of the Trump presidency (at the time of writing). The expansion of those settlements illustrates how the colonisation project that Balfour applauded in 1917 has never ceased. With Trump and his hard-right entourage now installed in the White House, there is a strong possibility that the project will accelerate.

Balfour could not have foreseen all of the project's consequences. He died in 1930 – 18 years before the State of Israel came into being, implicitly claiming that it held the title deeds to the 'Jewish national home'. Balfour did, however, know of the main risks entailed in building that 'home'. As this book demonstrates, he and his peers were fully aware that the pursuit of Zionist objectives endangered the fundamental rights of Palestinians, regardless of the caveats inserted into his declaration.

Israel's top politicians and diplomats continue to invest a great deal of energy towards maintaining strong relations with Britain. They do so in the expectation that their British counterparts will be receptive. Many Zionists of the twenty-first century still crave the respectability brought by endorsement from big players in global politics. Balfour casts a very long shadow.

I
Laying the foundations

The foundations of Israel were laid in London.

In November 1917, Arthur James Balfour, then Britain's foreign secretary, signed a letter that was just three sentences long. The brevity of the document did not detract from its impact.

Addressed to the aristocrat Walter Rothschild, it was a letter of support to the British Zionist Federation. It declared that the government viewed 'with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people' and promised assistance to realize that goal.

Through this declaration, Balfour set in train a process whereby colonisers would be treated as superior to the native population. A caveat – that 'nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine' – was really an insult. While Jews scattered across the world were accorded the status of belonging to a nation, Arabs living and farming on the land under discussion were merely described as 'non-Jewish communities'. The idea that they could constitute a nation was not entertained.

The declaration was very much a product of its time. Currying favour with the Zionist movement to establish a Jewish state in Palestine was deemed advantageous to Britain's strategy during the First World War. Balfour said as much during the war cabinet meetings at which the surrounding issues were discussed. In early October 1917, he inferred that Britain should try to win the sympathy of the Zionist movement before its enemy, Germany, did. At that meeting, he was given the go-ahead to take the 'necessary action'.[1] The war cabinet returned to the theme on 31 October 1917; the minutes of that meeting record Balfour as claiming 'it was desirable that some declaration favourable to the aspirations of the Jewish nationalists should now be made.' Balfour is reported to have claimed:

> The vast majority of Jews in Russia and America, as, indeed, all over the world, now appeared to be favourable to Zionism. If we could make a declaration favourable to such an ideal, we should be able to carry on extremely useful propaganda both in Russia and America.[2]

Rumours and conspiracy theories about Jewish influence were influential in that era. Mark Sykes, a politician and diplomat who was considered a leading expert on the Middle East, had contended that Britain could not win the war if what he called 'great Jewry' was against it.[3] Robert Cecil, then the parliamentary secretary of state for foreign affairs, had remarked: 'I do not think it is easy to exaggerate the international power of the Jews.'[4]

The declaration's supporters have, however, long propagated the myth that Balfour was acting benevolently in offering a haven to persecuted Jews. Far from being a benevolent individual, Balfour was a man of imperial violence; that was proven by his stint as chief secretary in Ireland between 1887 and 1891. When a protest was held in Mitchelstown, County Cork, against the prosecution of the political leader William O'Brien, Balfour ordered police to open fire. Causing three deaths, the incident earned him the nickname 'Bloody Balfour'.[5]

Balfour should not be regarded as a saviour of the Jewish people; arguably, he was an anti-Semite. As prime minister, he pushed for a tough anti-immigration law in 1905 for the express purpose of stopping Jews fleeing Russia's pogroms from seeking refuge in Britain.[6] The Aliens Bill of that year allowed Britain to refuse refugees entry if they were deemed 'undesirable'. While the law was being debated, Balfour voiced fears about 'an alien immigration that was largely Jewish'. It would 'not be an advantage to the civilisation of the country,' he contended, to 'have an immense body of persons' with a different religion to the majority and 'who only intermarried among themselves'.[7] It is not as if Balfour discarded his prejudices towards Jews as his connections to the Zionist movement got stronger. In 1917, the same year as his eponymous declaration, he claimed that the persecutors of Jews had a 'case of their own'. Because a Jew 'belonged to a distinct race' that was 'numbered in millions, one could perhaps understand the desire to keep him down,' Balfour stated.[8]

Balfour's backing of the movement to establish a Jewish state in Palestine is not irreconcilable with his apparent anti-Semitism. Indeed,

he dropped strong clues that his support for Jewish settlement in Palestine may have been motivated by a desire to see Europe emptied of Jews. In his introduction to a Nahum Sokolov book, Balfour praised Zionism as:

> a serious endeavour to mitigate the age-long miseries created for western civilisation by the presence in its midst of a body which is too long regarded as alien and even hostile, but which it was equally unable to expel or absorb.[9]

Rumours of Russia

The rumours of Jewish influence were taken especially seriously when they related to Russia. There was a perception that numerous Russian Jews were communist. *The Times* went even further by alleging that the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin and 'several of his confederates are adventurers of German-Jewish blood and in German pay, whose sole objective is to exploit the ignorant masses in the interests of their employers in Berlin.'[10] By siding with the Zionist movement, Britain's elite felt it could win a majority of Russian Jews over to its side. A 1917 telegram from the Foreign Office to British envoys in Petrograd read:

> We are advised that one of the best methods of counteracting Jewish pacifists and socialist propaganda in Russia would be to offer definite encouragement to Jewish nationalist aspirations in Palestine. [The] question of Zionism is full of difficulties but I request your views in the first instance as to whether declaration by the Entente of sympathy with Jewish nationalist aspirations would help or not insofar as concerns [the] internal and external situation of Russia.[11]

Another senior figure in the Foreign Office, Ronald Graham, treated speculation as fact. In October 1917, he briefed Balfour about 'the very important role the Jews are now playing in the Russian political situation.' Although 'these Jews are certainly against the Allies and for the Germans, almost every Jew in Russia is a Zionist,' he claimed. If Britain convinced Russian Jews that the success of Zionism depended on 'the support of the Allies and the expulsion of the Turks from

Palestine, we shall enlist a most powerful element in our favour,' Graham added.[12]

Earlier in 1917, Britain's war cabinet had approved a memorandum detailing some of its key military objectives. One goal identified was to ensure 'continuity of territory or of control both in East Africa and between Egypt and India.'[13] Palestine was located close to the Suez Canal, which Britain relied on for shipping to and from many of its imperial 'possessions', as well as to coveted oil resources in Persia.

Chaim Weizmann was the leading Zionist in England at this time. Originally from Belarus (then part of the Russian Empire), he was a chemist, who taught at Manchester University and headed the British Admiralty Laboratories from 1917 to 1919. His scientific knowledge proved valuable to the British arms industry during the war. At a time when acetone (an important ingredient of cordite) was in short supply, Weizmann devised a method of manufacturing the solvent with maize. Rather than being paid for his breakthrough by the British government, he is reputed to have asked David Lloyd George, the then prime minister, for help in advancing the Zionist project.[14]

Weizmann was introduced to Lloyd George by C.P. Scott, editor of *The Manchester Guardian*. More a lobbyist than a journalist, Scott used the editorial section of his 'liberal' newspaper to support Zionism. Some of Scott's comments about Palestine's indigenous inhabitants verged on the racist. A 1917 leader described Palestinians as being 'at a low stage of civilisation' and containing 'none of the elements of progress'. In turn, Lloyd George arranged for Weizmann to see Balfour (as it happened, Balfour had had a previous conversation with Weizmann during a 1906 visit to Manchester).[15]

The Balfour Declaration was the product of discussions between Weizmann, a few other Zionists and the British government. Weizmann had appeared certain that Britain would become the main sponsor of his movement for months, if not years, prior to the declaration being published. At a May 1917 Zionist gathering in London, he said:

> Palestine will be protected by Great Britain. Protected by this power, the Jews will be able to develop and create an administrative organisation which, while safeguarding the interests of the non-Jew population, will permit us to realise the aims of Zionism. I am

> authorised to declare to this assembly that His Majesty's government are ready to support our plans.[16]

Various drafts of the statement which Balfour eventually signed were considered by both sides. Scholars have pored over each draft, analysing, for example, how one advocated that Palestine be 'reconstituted' as the 'national home' of the Jewish people, whereas the final version merely envisaged a 'national home' being established in that country. Bearing in mind subsequent events, the differences between the various drafts appear less significant than they probably looked to those directly involved in the negotiations. Nahum Sokolov, one of the Zionists involved in the drafting, had his wish of having a declaration that would be 'as pregnant as possible' fulfilled. He wanted a statement that would be concise and express Britain's 'general approval' of Zionist aspirations.[17]

Unknown in international law, the phrase 'national home' has been attributed to Max Nordau, a founder of the World Zionist Organization. At an 1897 conference in Basle, he advocated that Zionists find 'a circumlocution that would express all we meant' but avoid provoking the Turkish rulers of Palestine. Nordau proposed 'national home' – *Heimstätte* in German – as what he called a 'synonym for "state"'.[18] The minutes of the key war cabinet meeting on Halloween in 1917 also acknowledge as much, albeit in a circuitous fashion. Balfour is recorded as explaining that a 'national home' meant:

> some form of British, American or other protectorate under which full facilities would be given to the Jews to work out their salvation and to build up, by means of education, agriculture and industry, a real centre of national culture and focus of national life.

Balfour added that 'it did not necessarily involve the early establishment of an independent Jewish state.' But he hinted that such a state could be formed 'in accordance with the ordinary laws of political evolution.' Leonard Stein, a Zionist and Liberal Party politician who wrote a bulky tome on the declaration, has confirmed that 'the conception of the eventual emergence of something in the nature of a Jewish state or commonwealth was, in fact, in the air when the declaration was published.'[19]

The golden key

The ambiguities in the declaration did not stop the Zionist movement from exploiting its potential. Weizmann stated as much when he wrote 'we ought not to ask the British government if we will enter Palestine as masters or equals to the Arabs.' In his words, 'the declaration implies that we have been given the opportunity to become masters.'[20] Weizmann was far less coy than his friends in government. During a public event in London, he said that 'a Jewish state will come about' and called the Balfour Declaration 'the golden key which unlocks the doors of Palestine.'[21]

Despite how it paid lip-service to civil rights, the declaration's effect was to formalise an alliance between the British Empire and a movement motivated by a sense of supremacy. Weizmann summarised the outlook of Zionists by stating: 'There is a fundamental difference in quality between Jew and native.'[22] (Perhaps it should be remarked that some of the politicians he courted used language that was even more pejorative. Lloyd George's war memoirs, for example, refer to the presence of 'nigger policemen' in Jerusalem.[23])

Britain had no moral or legal authority to make pledges on Palestine in November 1917. Palestine was not one of its imperial 'possessions' – British forces did not capture Jerusalem until a month after the declaration was published. Yet that did not stop the British government from acting as if it owned Palestine and, therefore, was entitled to dictate the country's future.

On occasion, Balfour acknowledged that he had negated the rights of Palestinians. Corresponding with George Curzon, a former viceroy of India who went on to succeed Balfour as foreign secretary, he admitted in 1919 that Britain's stance on Palestine was at odds with the broad commitment given by key players in global politics following the First World War to the idea of self-determination. Britain would make no attempt to consult indigenous Palestinians, Balfour stated, adding:

> The four great powers are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.[24]

The idea that the 'national home' would be nurtured under joint Anglo-French stewardship – what some called a condominium – was briefly entertained. It was swiftly rejected by the British government. Lloyd George, in particular, was eager to keep France out of Palestine. Following the loss of a 1917 battle in Gaza, he approved plans for a large-scale operation to capture Palestine. 'The French will have to accept our protectorate; we shall be there by conquest and shall remain,' he stated. Instructed by Lloyd George, Mark Sykes told his French interlocutor François Georges-Picot that British suzerainty in Palestine was the only stable option. To bolster his case, Sykes pointed to Britain's 'preponderant military effort', its 'rights' to Haifa port and to railways in the country and to the preference which leading Zionists had expressed towards Britain being in charge.[25]

Weizmann constantly tried to present control of Palestine and support for Zionist colonisation as being in Britain's own interest. Sometimes, he exploited rumours about Jewish power while doing so. Making friends with 'the Jews of the world', he claimed would be something that 'matters a great deal, even for a mighty empire like the British.'[26] On other occasions he resorted to flattery – like when he told Robert Cecil that 'Jews all over the world trust Great Britain and look to this country as a liberator of Palestine.'[27] A consistency can be discerned, nonetheless. His case rested on the assumption that Palestine would be a loyal dominion for Britain provided that large-scale Zionist settlement could occur there. 'England does not seek Palestine,' he stated in 1917, either ignoring or oblivious to how Lloyd George did indeed have his eyes on the country. 'It is of value to her only if we are strong there.'[28] The following year, he wrote to William Ormsby-Gore, an MP who later became colonial secretary, that 'we consider a British Palestine and a Jewish Palestine practically identical.'[29]

Understanding how Britain wished to have an obsequious population in Palestine is not difficult if the broader historical context is taken into account. One year before the Balfour Declaration was issued, Britain had suppressed a rebellion in its nearest colony, Ireland. Balfour was among the many British politicians to have been directly involved in both the questions of Ireland and Palestine. So the prospect of having a 'little loyal Jewish Ulster in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism' – to use the words of Ronald Storrs, a governor of Jerusalem – undoubtedly appealed to them.[30] Zionists were perceived as being