

Celebrating the Balfour Disaster

A century ago, the U.K.'s Balfour Declaration set in motion the human rights disaster of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but – for opportunistic reasons – British politicians plan to hail it as a brilliant success, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

British Prime Minister Theresa May has announced that Britain will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration later this year. The Conservative Party leader addressed her party's "Friends of Israel" faction and declared that the Balfour Declaration was "one of the most important letters in history" while pledging that her government would celebrate it "with pride."

Her determination to do so is a clear indication that those who control national politics also control official interpretations of history. In the case of the Balfour Declaration's centenary, it is the ongoing alliance of Zionist special interests and British political power that is about to turn what has been a disaster for Britons, Jews and Palestinians alike, into a source of national pride.

I have told the story of the Balfour Declaration in documented detail in my book *America's Palestine*. Here is a brief synopsis: The November 1917 declaration was a World War I expedient undertaken by the then British government to enlist the aid of worldwide Jewry (mistakenly believed to be led by the fledgling World Zionist Organization) to the British side. In exchange the British government promised to create a "Jewish National Home" in Arab Palestine after the war. In so doing it sought to buy Jewish assistance with someone else's currency – that is, with territory then belonging to the Ottoman Empire.

Key members of the war cabinet in London, such as the Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, were believers in the myth of worldwide Jewish power, and on that basis were convinced that Jewish influence in Washington could help bring the United States into the war as a British ally, and at the same time keep their eastern front ally, the Russians, from leaving the war. Though the U.S. did soon enter the war, it had nothing to do with Jewish influence, and the Russians, now led by the Bolsheviks, proceeded to make a separate peace with the Germans.

At the end of World War I, the Ottoman Empire collapsed and Britain found itself in military control of Palestine. The government in London then proceeded to follow up on its promise to the Zionists. It did so by allowing the massive immigration of European Jews into Palestine. At this point the policy was driven

by a blend of religious and racist beliefs, along with imperial ambitions.

First there was the fact that the Jews were seen as European allies who would allegedly help secure a strategic part of the Middle East for the British Empire, and second there was a mesmerizing mythic belief that a Jewish National Home was somehow in line with the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. In the end none of this played out well for the British. In 1948, they were driven out of Palestine by both violently hostile Zionists and Arab nationalists. They left with their tails between their legs.

It appears that Prime Minister May and her party's "Friends of Israel" reject this history. Or, perhaps they don't care about documented facts because all that now matters is keeping for the Conservative Party the financial backing of the Zionist lobby. Such is democratic politics in the West.

A Disaster All Around

It is worth repeating that the consequences of the Balfour Declaration have proven to be disastrous. British hegemony lasted but 30 years and, as just mentioned, ended in an ignominious withdrawal. The Palestinians have suffered decades of dispossession and ethnic cleansing.

And the Jews, religious and secular, of the resulting state of Israel, now officially tied to the Zionist ethos, have been politically seduced and culturally converted to a racist ideology. Today, for many Jews, Zionism and Judaism are two sides of the same coin. One way you can demonstrate this latter point is by calling the ideology of Zionism into question. In doing so you will be labeled an anti-Semite.

Why has this situation come to pass? Certainly the history of European anti-Semitism, culminating in the Holocaust, has a lot to do with it. Anti-Semitism always constituted a threat for the Jews of the West. However, traditionally, that threat was mostly local. That is, even as the Jews of a particular shtetl in, say, southern Russia were being slaughtered, those elsewhere might be prospering. So, the danger was always there but only sporadically realized.

But then came the Nazis and the dimensions of the threat changed radically. As a result, there was a total breakdown of European Jewish life. And, for a significant number, the old Torah-based insights and philosophies that explained the world no longer sufficed.

So what did those Western Jews who managed to survive do in such circumstances? Their customary social order was gone. They were adrift in a world that did not make sense except in terms of its mortal danger. Under such conditions an applicable single idea that appeared to be historically logical could serve as a

life preserver – and that idea was Zionism.

Zionism seemed historically logical because it melded the historical success of the nation-state, which was after all the dominant political system of the age, with a biblical myth that rationalized a “Jewish state” in the Arab land of Palestine. To both the survivors of the Holocaust and to those Jews who had watched the destruction of European Jewry from afar (i.e., from such places as the U.S.), the whole package must have had an internal logic that was irresistibly comforting – promising permanent security in a Jewish national home.

While one can understand the seductive power of Zionism, it, like other exclusively racial or ethnic political ideologies, only led to predictable disaster. The truth is that it is impossible to create a state exclusively for one people (call them people A) in a territory already populated by another people (call them people B) without the adoption of racist policies by A and serious resistance on the part of B. Under such circumstances, for A, there can be no real security nor can there be anything like a healthy national culture.

The whole process has proved remarkably self-corrupting for Zionist Jews. It is ironic that now most Zionists are themselves anti-Semites. In this case the Semite targets are the Palestinians and the growing number of western Jews who have come to support their cause.

Thus, the plans to celebrate the centenary of the Balfour Declaration is based on an illusion that something awful is really something prideful. The only way you can pull this off is if you have the power to twist the entire historical episode into something it is not – and that is what Theresa May is planning to do.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest*; *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*. He blogs at www.tothepointanalyses.com.
