

Honoring The Balfour Declaration

by Michael Curtis

Harassed as she is by the constitutional and economic problems of Brexit, British Prime Minister Theresa May, like Margaret Thatcher a generation ago, is a lady not for turning. She is fully capable of stiffening the sinews and summoning up the blood of a ruler to meet and overcome the asinine legal challenge of Riyad al-Maliki, the so called Palestinian foreign minister. This dignitary in July 2016 at the Arab League summit in Mauritania stated he is planning to sue the United Kingdom over the Balfour Declaration issued on November 2, 1917.

The Arab leaders are no more likely to hear PM May utter the words, "From the bottom of my heart I apologize" for that Declaration than to hear the American president apologize to leaders of Latin America for the Monroe Doctrine, or the president of France for his country's role in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 by which Britain and France agreed on the future division of the Ottoman Empire that was allied to Germany in World War I.

What those Arab leaders did hear was a not so subtle call for the elimination of the State of Israel. Those leaders, some of whom have made friendly overtures to Israel, must have realized that a Palestinian leader genuinely interested in peace with Israel would not act in such a bellicose and aggressive manner rather than seek help in resolution of a final status agreement with Israel.

Maliki, disposing of or neglecting 100 years of complex Middle East history, argues a simple proposition in his biased incorrect view of relationships between Arabs and Jews. The

Balfour Declaration he holds was responsible for mass Jewish immigration into the British Mandate of Palestine. The immigration was at the expense of "our Palestinian people." The UK was therefore responsible for all the "crimes" committed since the creation of Israel in 1948.

Maliki called on Arab governments to prosecute the British government for publishing the Balfour Declaration "which caused the *nakba*, the catastrophe against the Palestinian people."

The argument is yet another element in the absurd Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood. Everyone will agree that the Declaration was a crucial step in the Zionist movement. But Maliki, ignoring historical development, overstates his case that on the basis of the Declaration, "this ill-omened promise," hundreds of thousands of Jews were moved from Europe and elsewhere to Palestine had lived for thousands of years on the soil of their homeland." The late Joan Peters would have been amused that the vague time period, thousands of years, at least is no longer "From time immemorial."

Those really interested in a peaceful solution of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the famous document, which was not a formal legal statement of policy, but a short letter of 67 words written on November 2, 1917 by the then British Foreign Minister Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, then honorary president of the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland.

Three points may be immediately made. The Declaration did not itself call for a Jewish state or make the creation of a Jewish homeland or state in Israel inevitable. Nor was British policy always supportive of such a development of Jewish sovereignty and statehood. Indeed, British actions, especially the 1930 Passfield White Paper, during the interwar period often restricted Jewish immigration into the disputed area.

The third factor is that other statesmen in the international arena had understood the situation and the persecution of Jews. On June 4, 1917, Jules Cambon, French Foreign Minister wrote to Nahum Sokolow, head of the executive of WZO stressing French support for Jewish immigration "into that land from which the people of Israel were exiled so many centuries ago."

Similarly, President Woodrow Wilson in October 1917 expressed approval of the draft text of Balfour and remarked that Jewish aspirations fitted his concept of national self-determination and democracy. Later, in 1922, the US Congress passed a resolution that a national home for the Jewish people should be established in Palestine.

Essentially, the Balfour letter is important for two assertions. Most important was that the British government "viewed with favor" the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and would use its best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object. Secondly, it also stated that nothing should be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, an entity still an administrative district of the Ottoman Empire, at that time.

Maliki ignores the reality that some Arab leaders were aware of Jewish immigration into the area and the benefit it brought, and the value of it. This is best illustrated by the Agreement of January 4, 1919 between Chaim Weizmann, head of British Zionist Federation, and Emir Faisal ibn Husain, head of the Arab delegation to the Paris Peace Conference which decided that provinces of the Ottoman Empire should be separated. Among other issues, it agreed to encourage and stimulate immigration of Jews into Palestine: "We will wish the Jews a most hearty welcome home."

In a letter of March 3, 1919 to Felix Frankfurter, then president of the Zionist Federation of America, Faisal wrote that the Arabs, "especially the educated among us," look with

the deepest sympathy on the Zionist movement . That movement like the Arab movement was national and not imperialist.”

The Balfour Declaration is an important document but the legal approval of a national Jewish home came not from Balfour but from international agreements, particularly the 1920 San Remo Conference and the 1922 British Mandate from the League of Nations, The San Remo Conference agreed to create a mandatory power that would put in effect the Balfour principle of a homeland for the Jewish people. This was to be done by Britain under the League of Nations Mandate.

Finally the UNGA resolution 181 of November 29, 1947 approved partition into two states, one Jewish, one Arab. The real catastrophe, the real *nakba*, was that the Arab and Palestinian leaderships rejected the partition plan, and an Arab state.

The motivation for the Balfour Declaration has been explained in a variety of ways political international, personal, but it was not penned by an individual ignorant of the Jewish dilemma. Arthur Balfour came from a well connected aristocratic family in Scotland, had a privileged background, well educated at Eton and Cambridge, and was financially independent. Though shy and diffident he was not a lukewarm dilettante but rather he had a long political career. Above all, he was influenced by his mother, an enthusiastic evangelical, had a keen knowledge of biblical stories and of the geography of the area of Palestine.

His concern for the Jewish people or the Jewish nation was real even if interrelated with concern for British political interests in the Middle East during World War I. The Palestinians would do well to honor the 100th anniversary of the Declaration.

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