

The Balfour Declaration: A Talk by Francis Clark-Lowes at the University Of Sussex, 5 November, 1997

Introduction:

I am not a specialist on the Middle East, but I have lived there for ten years, and I am well acquainted with the question of Palestine. However, I have not had time to check on everything that I say today. In essence I believe it to be correct; there may be some errors in the detail for which I plead your indulgence. I am going to speak about the background to, and the consequences of the Balfour Declaration. I am not going to address the question of possible solutions in my presentation, but I am very willing to talk about these in the discussion afterwards.

Background:

Palestine is a country comprising 10,435 square miles, that is one and a half times the size of Wales. It consists of fertile coastal plains, a hilly region, the Jordan Valley, which is well below sea-level, and the Southern Desert (the Negev). The last of these comprises nearly half the area of Palestine, and most of it is uncultivable. Most of remainder of the country can in principle be cultivated or used as pasture, and was so used long before the Jewish immigration started.

For many centuries Palestine was part of the Ottoman empire, and for administrative purposes was divided between the Sanjak of Jerusalem in the south, the southern part of the Vilayet of Beyrout in the west, and an area surrounding and including Jerusalem, which came under direct rule from Constantinople. The majority of the population was Muslim, but there were also small Jewish communities and a larger Christian (mainly Syrian Orthodox) one (c 10%).

Zionist immigration into Palestine, fuelled by pogroms in Eastern Europe, started on a very small scale during the 1890's, and gained impetus from the Zionist Congresses which started, under Theodore Herzl's leadership, exactly 100 years ago. By the outbreak of the First World War it is thought that there were around 600,000 Arabs and 80,000 Jews living in Palestine, but the number of the latter decreased substantially during the war. A British census of 1918 gave an estimate of 700,000 Arabs and 56,000 Jews, that is the Arabs comprised, according to this estimate, 92% of the population.

When the First World War broke out, Britain, France and Russia were ranged against Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and at the beginning of the war Italy. The Ottomans had for a long time been in terminal decline, and so it was not surprising that the two largest imperial powers, Britain and France, as well as imperial Germany, were eagerly awaiting the spoils should they win the war. But in order to win the war both sides courted two very different, but related peoples, the Jews and the Arabs. At the turn of the century Herzl had already attempted to interest the German Kaiser in the idea of a German protectorate for a Jewish homeland in Palestine; he had also negotiated with the British with the same aim in mind. Both Germany and Britain now saw advantages in wooing the Zionists. As far as Britain was concerned, this would have the advantage that the Jewish lobby in America would then swing the USA government onto their side in the war. There might also be considerable financial advantages to supporting the Zionist cause. The Arabs, on the other hand, were eager to throw off the Turkish yoke, and aspired to independence.

It was in this complicated situation that three contradictory undertakings were made by the British Government. The first of these was an undertaking to recognise the right of the Arab peoples of the Levant and the Arabian peninsula to independence. On July 14, 1915, Sherif Hussein of Mecca, as spokesman for the Arab cause, approached Sir Henry McMahon, British High Commissioner in Cairo, with the offer of support for the British campaign against the Turks in return for assurances of Arab independence within a large swathe of territory, including Palestine. A correspondence took place over the next two years which gave the required assurances.

Subject to the above modifications [concerning small pockets of what is now Turkey, Syria and Lebanon], Great Britain is prepared to recognise and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions within the limits demanded by the Sherif of Mecca.

The most well-known outcome of this agreement was Colonel Lawrence's successful campaign to oust the Turks from the Hejaz and Greater Syria. It will be remembered by those who saw the film or read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that Lawrence of Arabia was bitterly disillusioned when he arrived in Damascus, set up a provisional Arab government, and was then informed that there were other plans for the area.

This was because simultaneously, in 1916, with almost unbelievable unscrupulousness the British, French and Russian governments were secretly negotiating a carve-up between themselves of the defunct Ottoman empire. They concluded what was called the Sykes-Picot agreement under which, among other

things, Palestine and Transjordan (now Jordan) would be given to Britain and the remainder of Syria (what is now Syria and Lebanon) would go to France. The negotiators clearly knew what they were doing because they tried to square the hole by talking of further negotiations with the Sherif and so on. He remained in ignorance, of course, that he was being committed to new and unequal negotiations until, following the Bolshevik Revolution in November, 1917, the new communist government of Russia published the contents of the agreement to which the tsarist government had been a party.

The third undertaking was made in a private letter, with no juridical status, to Lord Rothschild, the representative of the World Zionist Organisation, dated 2nd November, 1917, that is 80 years ago last Sunday. The text of Lord Balfour's declaration was as follows:

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

The promise of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine was not, of course, inconsistent with the Sykes-Picot agreement, but it made no sense whatsoever in terms of the assurances of independence by which the Arabs had been persuaded to join the war against Turkey. How could such deception as well as such a cynical disregard of the rights of the indigenous people of that part of the world have been contemplated? Edward Said, the well-known Palestinian Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, sees Balfour as a paradigm case of the kind of unconscious prejudice about Arabs and other orientals which he wishes to elucidate in his brilliant book *Orientalism*. He quotes from a speech in parliament made by Balfour on another subject which illustrates well the kind of thinking which could lead to such dishonesty:

Is it a good thing for these great nations - I admit their greatness - that this absolute government should be exercised by us? I think it is a good thing. I think that experience shows that they have got under it far better government than in the whole history of the world they ever had before, and which not only is a benefit to them, but is undoubtedly a benefit to the whole of the civilised West. ... We are in Egypt not merely for the sake of the Egyptians, though we are there for their sake; we are there also for the sake of Europe at large.

In other words, Egyptians (and so Arabs) are a great people, so long as we rule them. What is not said, but this is surely implicit, is that we must therefore deceive them, and that such deception is quite justified, because we are doing it for their own good. I believe that this mentality is not dead. It is what ensures the continuing international, and especially American support for the state of Israel, a country whose record on human rights issues vies, in my view, for a place among the worst in the world.

Consequences:

Once the war was over the Sykes-Picot plan went into operation. Britain was awarded Palestine as a mandate under the League of Nations, and was therefore put in a position to redeem the promise made by Lord Balfour. British administrators soon began to doubt the wisdom of that promise, as increasing numbers of Jews started to immigrate and buy up the land from absentee landlords in Beirut and Cairo. The Palestinians, who rather like the clansmen of Scotland during the clearances, were having their land sold over their heads, began to organise a resistance, and there were riots. The British administration placed restrictions on the immigration of Jews, on the grounds that their increased numbers did indeed “prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”. Notice, by the way, the phrase “non-Jewish communities”. They sound like minorities, don’t they? As we have seen, at the time of the Balfour declaration these non-Jewish communities accounted for 92% of the population of the country. Had they been asked, the overwhelming majority of this population would have opposed further Jewish immigration, but they were a subject people, and the only way they could make their feelings felt was to riot. The situation has not changed much.

The Second World War was, of course, a turning point. The Nazis set about systematically exterminating any people whom they did not like, among them six million Jews. In the post-war atmosphere of guilt and horror about this part of the holocaust, it was felt that the moral case for Zionism was unanswerable. What few if any asked was why the massive infringement of the rights of one people should justify the same against another. And bear in mind that that other people had played no part whatsoever in the extermination of the Jews, whereas some of those who supported the Zionist cause had blood on their hands. If anyone had had to pay the price, it should have been them. Why wasn’t Bavaria cleared of most of its population to make a homeland for the Jews there? But Palestine was considered to be the spiritual home of Judaism and so the rights of the people who had been living there for many centuries were ignored. This was

easier to do because these people were “orientals” in Edward Said’s sense, a sort of quaint, loveable (or not so-lovable according to your taste) under-race.

A terrorist war (sorry, a liberation war) was waged against the British mandate authorities by various Jewish organisations, involving among other things the blowing up of the King David Hotel in which 100 British, Arab and Jewish people died. The British, now under a Labour government which was in the process of dismantling the Raj in India, eventually washed their hands of the “unworkable” mandate and handed the problem over to the United Nations. On 29 November, 1947, that is fifty years ago this month, following strong pressure by the US on a number of smaller nations, the international body voted to partition Palestine between a Jewish state, comprising 56% of the territory, an Arab state, comprising 42% of the land, with Jerusalem (2%) remaining a city under international jurisdiction. The Arabs totally rejected the partition and having failed to fight it diplomatically, prepared to do so militarily. They were being asked to accept a situation where the Jews, who at that time comprised 30% of the population of Palestine and only owned around 8% of the land, were to be given well over half of it. The Zionists, on the other hand, accepted the plan. Moshe Menuhin, a Jew who eventually left Palestine because he believed that “the development of political Zionism ... implied wars of injustice and the degeneration of Judaism”, wrote a book entitled *The Decadence of Judaism in Our Times* in which he had this to say about the Zionist position:

The fanatical Jewish political nationalists, of course, accepted partition with alacrity, for the Partition Plan was merely a foothold for the full realisation of *Eretz Israel* as predatory Ben Gurion and Menachem Begin had envisioned it all along, openly and unashamedly, quoting the Bible and preparing for the bloody ‘redeeming’ and ‘ingathering’.

In the ensuing war, in which the Palestinians and their Arab supporters were hopelessly outmatched by more disciplined and well-armed Zionist forces the boundaries of the Israeli state had effectively been greatly extended even before its proclamation on 14 May, 1948. Here is how Sami Hadawi, a Jerusalemite born in 1904, described the circumstances of the foundation of Israel:

... instead of waiting until the United Nations Palestine Commission prescribed in the Partition Resolution took over authority from the British Mandatory, and in turn handed over such authority progressively to the leaders of the Arab and Jewish states, the Zionists proclaimed the state of Israel on May 14, 1948 [that is, the day before the mandate ended] and faced the world with a *fait accompli*. By this date they had already seized

territory beyond that assigned to the Jewish state. Instead of having jurisdiction over 56% of the territory of Palestine, the Israelis occupied 77%; instead of Jerusalem being internationalised, the greater part of the Holy City was Israelized and declared the capital of the Jewish state; instead of Arabs being permitted to remain in their homes and country to lead a normal life, nearly one million men, women and children - Moslems and Christians - were forcibly expelled and dispossessed.

In fact, what actually emerged as the *Jewish State* on May 14, 1948 was anything but the state planned for under the Partition Plan. The new state of Israel was the product of brute force, created in violation of the principles of the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the very resolution under which the Israelis now claim sovereignty.

The truth about the dispossession of the Palestinians, which included the massacre of over 250 Palestinians at Deir Yasin on April 9, 1948, has now been fully confirmed by Israeli historians such as Ilan Pappé. Among others, Yitschak Rabin, considered by many as a dove, admitted in his autobiography that he was effectively ordered by Ben Gurion, and obeyed that order, to carry out the expulsion of the Palestinian population of Lydda. But it is still claimed by many Zionists and their supporters that the Arabs ran away, and that they thereby forfeited the right to their land. Here is what the well-known psychotherapist, Erich Fromm, who was Jewish, had to say on the matter in 1958:

It is often said that the Arabs fled, that they left the country voluntarily, and that they therefore bear the responsibility for losing their property and their land. It is true that in history there are some instances - in Rome and in France during the Revolutions - when enemies of the state were proscribed and their property confiscated. But in general international law, the principle holds true that no citizen loses his property or his rights of citizenship; and the citizenship right is *de facto* a right to which the Arabs in Israel have much more legitimacy than the Jews. Just because the Arabs fled? Since when is that punishable by confiscation of property and by being barred from returning to the land on which a people's forefathers have lived for generations? Thus, the claim of the Jews to the land of Israel cannot be a realistic political claim. If all nations would suddenly claim territories in which their forefathers had lived two thousand years ago, this world would be a madhouse.

The six-day war of 1967 was simply the logical conclusion of 1897, 1917 and 1947; in it the remainder of Palestine came under Israeli control. Effectively that

remains the case. The pre-1967 borders, plus annexed East Jerusalem and the adjoining large area of the West Bank which has been added to Jerusalem in order to change its demographic make-up, comprise Israel, a state in which the law discriminates in numerous ways against its non-Jewish population, often on the basis of biblical teaching, as Israel Shahak has shown.

By now I sense that some of you will be feeling that I am laying it on a bit thick. We are talking about events which may be regrettable, but they are not reversible, and about policies which stem inevitably from that history which cannot now be changed. What use is there in raking up the past now? Surely it is time for the Jews and Arabs to make peace and live together (or not together) in tranquility. Israel is right to worry about its security; look at all the awful terrorist attacks which have occurred over the years. If the Palestinian leadership would stop these, then all would be well.

I'm afraid it would not be. Israel is now engaged in a feverish effort to create further irreversible facts on the ground. The possibility of the so-called "two-state" solution has, in my personal opinion, been virtually excluded by the building of settlements throughout the West Bank and the construction of Israeli roads linking them. Jerusalem is undergoing what can only be called ethnic cleansing. The so-called peace process is being drawn out by the Israelis well beyond the deadlines agreed to at Oslo, with the aim of buying more time to create facts on the ground. And incidentally, don't think that matters would be seriously different under a different government. There is no doubt in my mind that the aim of the majority of Israelis is colonisation of the whole of Palestine and at the very least the taming of the Palestinians into a docile cheap workforce, living in native reservations or bantustans and controlled by a puppet Palestinian regime.

A recent headline in the Jerusalem Post said it all: "Suicide bomb in Jerusalem. Nobody hurt." I suppose it is true that you probably don't feel much when the car which you have driven to the predetermined destination blows up as arranged, with you inside it. But what about the pain before it blew up. Leaving aside the agony of facing your own death, what anger, or despair, or fanaticism, if you like, but certainly not cowardice, as is so often claimed, could bring someone to do such a thing. Shall we imaginatively remove the mask from this faceless one and consider what he might have experienced in his short life? Let us suppose Ahmad was born in 1964. In 1967 he remembers being herded out of his house at gunpoint, and forced to move into a refugee camp in the West Bank, where he has lived ever since. His parents remind him every day of the beautiful farm where they used to live. The house has been demolished and a nearby Jewish settlement has expanded over their land. No compensation has ever been

paid; the land was acquired under a law which allows the Israeli Government to take over any land which is abandoned by its non-Jewish occupants, a process known as redemption of the land of Israel; (in Bosnia it was called ethnic cleansing, if I remember rightly.) One of his much older brothers was killed in that war, and his father was wounded so that he could no longer work. Another of his brothers, his boyhood playmate, was some years later arrested on suspicion of involvement in terrorism and died in mysterious circumstances in the notorious Ansar III camp in the Negev. He looked forward to marrying his cousin in Jerusalem, but it became more and more difficult to visit her family, and he knew that under Israeli law she would be obliged to join him in the camp if they got married; he would not be allowed to move to Jerusalem. She got tired of waiting for him and went to England to study. In order to renew her residence permit to allow her to continue to live in the land of her ancestors, she knew that she must return within a year to Jerusalem. On arrival at Tel Aviv she was arrested because of her connection with Ahmad, and therefore failed to renew her pass on time. After long interrogation and torture (legal under an adaptation of the British madatory defence (emergency) regulations) she was returned to England where she now lives. Then Ahmad himself was arrested and he was also tortured in order to find out whether his story tallied with that of his cousin. After that he started to study at Bir Zeit university but much of the time his classes could not take place because of restrictions placed on the university by the Israeli military authorities and a deep sense of despair descended on Ahmad. Even if he did succeed in his studies, what future had he in his own country? The thought of becoming a terrorist and hitting back at the cause, as he saw it, of his misery was the only thing which gave him a sense of his own worth. But he was also swayed by his father who said that violence only led to further violence. What really sent him over the edge was when he saw an Israeli soldier making fun of his handicapped father as he tried to pass a check point into Jerusalem. After that nothing could detain him, something had snapped in him. It was not difficult to get in touch with Hamas, and the rest we know. This may have been the “nobody” who was not hurt that day in Jerusalem.

The story is fictional, but from what I have read, and from talking to many Palestinians, I have to say that it is in no way fanciful. And it could be told in many other, and equally terrible ways. I agree with Ahmad’s Dad; violence does breed violence, but I cannot condemn terrorism if I do not also condemn the social injustice which often lies behind it. It is curious, isn’t it, that we accept that a man who kills another because that other has taken his wife has committed a *crime passionnelle*, and should be treated with a degree of leniency; but a man who kills another because that other has taken his country away is a mere terrorist who doesn’t even deserve the dignity of a fair trial.

So this, my friends, has been the outcome of the Balfour Declaration. How have we allowed it to happen? Two words give the answer: Orientalism and Holocaust. The first has allowed us to relegate the Palestinians to an under-race who mysteriously object and behave in unpredictable ways when their land is taken away from them. The second has elevated the Jews to a kind of super-race who hold a blank moral cheque in their hand, signed by the Western World. The attitude expressed by these words accounts for the strange imbalance whereby endless enthusiasm is shown in the US and Europe for the setting up of Holocaust Study Centres (the emphasis being, of course, on the Jewish Holocaust), while any discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian question is liable to be dismissed as somehow not quite decent, if not definitely politically incorrect. The difference between the Jewish and the Palestinian holocausts is that the latter is happening now, and we could do something to change it if we wanted to. But then that would be involving oneself in the dirty world of politics; it is much easier to talk about past abuses than present ones. And anyway, who are the Palestinians?

Just in case I have not already dispelled the idea that I harbour deeply ingrained prejudice against the Jewish people, let me now pay tribute to those Jews who have recognised the full horror of what is happening and have done all in their power to oppose it. Two names come to mind immediately, Uri Davies, who describes himself as an anti-Zionist Israeli Jew and was at one time head of the PLO office in London; and Israel Shahak, an Israeli biologist who as a side-line writes the most devastating critiques of Israeli policy. There are, of course, many others, such as the American polymath Noam Chomsky, the Israeli lawyer Leah Tzemel, the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, the Guardian reporter David Hirst, not to mention those such as Albert Einstein, one-time Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, Moshe Menuhin and Erich Fromm who are now no longer alive. Even Sigmund Freud, though favourably inclined to the idea of Zionism, wrote to Einstein on 26 February, 1930:

... I do not believe that Palestine will ever become a Jewish state, and that the Christian or the Islamic world will ever be prepared to leave their shrines in Jewish hands. It would have seemed more comprehensible to me to found a Jewish fatherland on new, historically unencumbered soil. ... I can muster no sympathy whatever for the misguided piety that makes a national religion from a piece of the wall of Herod, and for its sake challenges the feelings of the local natives.

These people restore our faith in the power of the human spirit to rise above blind prejudice and recognise that human rights should apply equally to all people and that no people are inherently inferior or superior to any other. Some

of my Palestinian friends will protest at my inclusion in the above list of Jews who have not renounced their Israeli citizenship. By definition, they would say, such people are supporting racism, since the Israeli state specifically exists for the benefit of Jews only. I cannot go so far. None of us are ideologically clean; we all make choices based on where we are coming from. What an honest person tries to do is to be as consistent as possible in the beliefs that s/he holds; those who recognise that it is inconsistent to believe in our common humanity and at the same time to support Zionism are to be welcomed, especially if they come from a Jewish or even Zionist background, regardless of their nationality.

I would like to end with a quote from Edward Said in his book *Peace and its Discontents*, published after Oslo in 1995, because it is what I would have like to have replied, had I been clever enough, to all those students at the freshers' fair who implied that there must be right on both sides:

The US and Israeli line has it that all parties to the Palestinian-Zionist struggle must not dwell on the past since, as some liberal Israelis have put it, it has been a struggle between right and right. This of course is the biggest distortion of all, and has been a central pillar of belief in the tactics of Peace Now and the so-called moderate Labourites. I fail to see how we are supposed to equate the 'right' of a largely European people to come to Palestine, pretend that it was empty of inhabitants, conquer it by force and drive out 70 per cent of its inhabitants, with the right of the native people to resist these actions and try to remain on their land. It is a grotesque notion to suggest parity in such a situation and then also to ask the victims to forget about their past and plan to live together as inferior citizens with their conquerors. The proposition is especially galling since it comes from a movement that claims quite openly never to have forgotten its own history of persecution, and indeed allows itself every crime against the Palestinian people because it says it is living under the shadow of past persecutions.

That is the end of my talk. Before we move on to questions and discussion, may I draw your attention to a number of matters.

- If you are interested in joining a Palestine Society at Sussex or at Brighton, please congregate on my right and on my left respectively at the end of the meeting. We need 15 signatures and the minimum subscription of £3 each to form a Sussex Society; for Brighton we simply need twenty signatures initially. See me about the Sussex society and Anna Randby about the Brighton one.

Active consideration is also being given to the setting up of a town branch of Palestine Solidarity Campaign.

- There are a number of handouts, reference material and books and other variagated matter for sale at the table. Three of the handouts specifically relate to the Balfour Declaration, an open letter to Tony Blair from Afif Safieh, the Palestinian General Delegate to the UK and Director of the Office of Representation of the PLO to the Holy See, a letter in the Financial Times recently from Edmund O'Sullivan, and what I call a fantasy entitled "The Rodriguez Declaration". Help yourselves to these. If you are interested in joining PSC there are forms there to do so. You may also wish to consider subscribing to the International Campaign for Jerusalem newsletter; details will likewise be found on the table. Two Palestinians, Samar Alami and Jawad Botmeh are at present serving twenty years as Category A prisoners for the bombing of the Israeli embassy and Balfour House in 1994. To put it at the very least, there is considerable doubt about their guilt, and if they are guilty, very grave questions about the nature and length of the sentence for attacks in which I think I am right in saying no one was even injured. You can read more in the handouts on the table.

- Two dates have already been arranged for you diaries. The first is a meeting on 26 November at 7.30 p.m., venue still to be arranged, but probably in town. Speaker Khalid Khalil of the Association of Forty. This relates to the many more than forty Arab villages in Israel which are not recognised by the Israeli goverment, and therefore lead a precarious existence without basic public services. The populations of these villages stand to be evicted at any time, and their houses demolished. The other date relates to the fiftieth anniversary of the Partition Resolution at the United Nations which falls on Saturday, 29 November. The 50 Years Campaign in London has arranged a candlelight vigil from 5 to 7 p.m. in Whitehall opposite Downing Street. They are, however, keen to encourage similar local events in other localities. If anyone has any thoughts on this, please bring them up in the discussion.

- Lastly, the Vice-Chancellor, Gordon Conway, will tomorrow give a talk on "Islamophobia" in his capacity as Chair of the Runnymede Trust; venue the Meeting House quiet room, time 6 p.m.