

The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine From the Balfour Declaration until 1920

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The demographic composition of the area known as Palestine started to change in the early 20th century as result of the Zionist induced immigration. Although the culmination of the ethnic cleansing was with the implementation of Plan D or “Dalet” in 1948, which lead to the large scale exodus of the Palestinian, any discussion of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine will be incomplete if the critical period of 1917-1920 was not discussed. What is special about this period is that it marked the transfer of power from the Ottoman Empire to the British Empire, with the latter instituting policies with the view of creating a Jewish state in Palestine, which would lead eventually to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. This essay will take a closer look at this critical period, and analyze the British policies which led to the Nakba.

Even before the foot of any British soldier had set foot in Palestine, the fate of Palestine and its inhabitants, the overwhelming majority of them Palestinian Arabs, was decided by the British Government. On November 2nd 1917, Lord Balfour issued a declaration which became known as the Balfour Declaration. It read: “His Majesty's Government view with favor 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” [Emphasis added].

Right from the outset one can see the bias and even the racism. The Jews were defined as a people, which qualified them to political rights and some form of self-determination embodied in the use of the term “national home”, while the Palestinian Arabs, who at that point already had a distinctive national identity, were relegated to the status of “non-Jewish communities”. These were only to enjoy civil and religious rights, but not political ones. One should keep in mind that at that point, the Jewish population of Palestine did not exceed 8-9%.

The bias and racism of Lord Balfour were not covert. He openly said in a meeting in 1919: “Zionism, be it right of wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-old traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and the prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.”¹ Once again, the bias is clear; the Jews have

¹ As cited in Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist Arab Conflict 1881-2001*(New York: Vintage Books, 2001) at 75.

traditions that are age-old, have needs and hopes, while the Arabs can merely have desires and prejudices.

The ambiguity of the language used to describe the objective of this declaration was important. There is no definition of what a “national homeland” is. While the Zionists and their colonial British sympathizers understood it as a Jewish state, or some political entity short of a state, the British authorities assured the Palestinians that their interests will be protected.

In order to gain another form of legitimacy, the British, with the urging of the Zionist Movement, included an endorsement of the Balfour Declaration in the San Remo Conference Resolution of 1920, which was afterwards endorsed by the League of Nations. After that Britain was in control of the region, and after the Balfour Declaration and the San Remo Resolution, the ground was ripe to start working on fulfilling the vision of the declaration. This was a formidable task; how would a place be transformed into a “Jewish homeland”, when the Jews were a small minority. There was a need to transform this minority into a majority. This could happen only if more immigrants came, or if the Palestinians left, or were forced to leave.

The person who was selected for this job was Herbert Samuel, a ardent Zionist British politician. Herbert Samuel was appointed “High Commissioner of Palestine”, a position that he filled until 1925. He was the highest authority in the country, and was the one who designed and implemented the policies that later on lead to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. Other British Zionists also held key positions at the civil administration. Norman Bentwich, whose father was one of the founders of the Jewish National Fund, was appointed Attorney General, Albert Hyamason and Dennis Cohen- who was a former employee of the Zionist Organization- were in charge of immigration. Thus, right from the beginning the Zionists were able to consolidate their control of the key positions in the civil administration.²

Right after Samuel had assumed office in July 1920, he embarked on a policy that aimed at creating the political, legal and economic conditions that were necessary for the Zionist Movement to achieve its objective. The main two areas that would help boost the Zionist presence were immigration and land policies. Both were under the control of departments headed by Zionists.

On the level of land policies, Samuel's administration reopened the land registries that were closed since the British conquest in 1918 to allow land transactions. These were not enough because the majority of the Palestinians were reluctant to sell their land to the Zionist immigrants and their organizations. The civil administration therefore gave some Zionist

² Walter Lehn & Uri Davis, *The Jewish National Fund* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1988) at 46.

organizations land concessions that the Zionists used to enhance their position. Almost free Jewish immigration was allowed. Around one thousand immigration visas were issued every month.

These factors and policies (strong Zionist influence in the British colonial authorities, Zionist-friendly immigration and land policies) that were set at the critical juncture of 1920, persisted almost throughout the whole period of the British Mandate. Although they did not result directly in the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, they have lead to the creation of the tools and the environment that eventually led to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. The ethnic cleaning would not have been made possible if it was not for the colonial greed, racism and deception of the British Empire. Britain is therefore complicit in the ethnic cleansing and the tragedy of the Palestinian people. Its moral responsibility is the same as the responsibility of those who planned and carried out the ethnic cleansing.

Until today, the Palestinians are suffering from the results of these policies that contributed to the Nakba. And as a party that is complicit in the ethnic cleansing, Britain has the moral obligation to promote the rights of its victims, mainly the right of return of the refugees. Without allowing a genuine opportunity for the Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland, Israel with its supporters, and mainly Britain, should be shamed and reminded of their shameful deeds and immoral behavior.