Annually, November 2 is a painful and traumatic date for Palestinians and their allies around the globe. It marks the anniversary of Britain’s shameful issuance of the Balfour Declaration. In releasing the Declaration, Britain provided the 1st “legal” document sanctioning the creation of a new colonial project centered on Zionist aspirations for Palestine and their dream of a Jewish National Homeland. Certainly, the records show that as early as December 1914, the then British Prime Minister Liyod George and his cabinet had prolong discussions as to the fate of Palestine, which included participation and input from the Zionist leader Herbert Samuel, who had a seat due to being the President of the Local Government Board.

In his memoirs, Herbert Samuel’s states that he articulated a position in the meetings on behalf of the Zionist: “I mentioned that two things would be essential—that the state should be neutralized, since it could not be large enough to defend itself, and that the free access of Christian pilgrims should be guaranteed. ... I also said it would be a great advantage if the remainder of Syria were annexed by France, as it would be far better for the state to have a European power as neighbor than the Turk” (Herbert Louis Samuel, Grooves of Change: A Book of Memoirs, p. 174) The Cabinet’s agenda on the issue was influenced to a large extent by Samuel’s drafted memorandum, The Future of Palestine, which centered on promoting Zionist plans for the country by setting up a home for the Jewish people but doing so under British rule and protection. The issuing of the Balfour Declaration should be viewed from within the lens of
existing and on-going policy development with the participation of major pro-Zionist British politicians as well as Zionist leaders themselves. The Balfour Declaration issued on November 2, 1917, reads:

Dear Lord Rothschild.

“I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty’s Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to and approved by the Cabinet.

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.

I should be grateful if you should bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.”

Signed
Arthur James Balfour

The Declaration did not come out of a vacuum; rather it involved deliberate, and careful considerations and involvement of Zionist leaders in Great Britain and the US with a group lead by then Supreme Court Justice Brandeis offering specific wording and lobbying efforts directed at President Wilson and the State Department to gain their support. It was an international effort directed at securing a “legal” document that the Zionist needed to establish “claims” over Palestine. The final text was arrived at after many drafts and language changes sent back and forth between US and European Zionist leaders, as well as political operatives across the Atlantic. In looking at the short text, a mere 67 words, which “was weighed to the last penny-weight before it was issued.” Drafts travelled within and outside of England to arrive at the precise text.

At the time, for Weizmann it was critical to get the support of US President Wilson, which was achieved in a note sent on October 13, 1917, which was in large part due to the intense work of Brandeis and his dedicated Zionist group in America. In his important analysis of the Balfour Declaration J. M. N. Jeffries includes a number of quotes from people closely affiliated or had primary evidence of the process leading up to the final Declaration: “In his Zionism Mr. Leonard Stein says that it “was by no means a causal gesture. It was issued after a prolonged deliberations as a considered statement of policy.” In Temperly’s History of the Peace Conference in Paris, it states “before the British Government gave the Declaration to the World, it has been closely examined in all its bearings and implications, and subjected to repeated
change and amendment.” Mr. Nahum Sokolov, in his History of Zionism, another fundamental work writes, “every idea born in London was tested by the Zionist Organization in America, and every suggestion in America received the most careful attention in London.” Lastly, “The Balfour Declaration was in process of making for nearly two years,” writes Mr. Wise who was indeed in a position to know. “Its authorship was not solitary but collective.”

Many reasons are given for the British issuing the Balfour declaration with most not having anything to do with the reality of the political and geo-strategic considerations present at the time and influencing the unfolding events in Europe and the US. Even among British Jews, the Zionist plans were not agreed upon and two divergent camps were at odds in relations to Palestine and the issuance of the Balfour Declaration. This made the urgent need for the pro-Zionism camp to cement President Wilson’s support for the Zionist project so as to counter the assimilationist Jews led at the time by Edwin S. Montagu group in London. For Montagu and others, the Declaration threatened the status of Jewish communities in Europe and the US with the possibility of raising the issue of dual allegiance, a subject of intense debate. The draft changes arriving at the final reference we find at the end of the text that it provided protection for “the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country,” a nod to raised concerns by Montagu and others.

As far the reasons behind issuing the Declaration, the then Prime Minister LIoyd George, whose legal firm Lloyd George’s law firm Lloyd George, Roberts and Co. represented earlier Zionist interest when the discussion focused on Uganda as a possible homeland, testified before the Royal Commission in 1937, that “stimulating the war effort of American Jews was one of the major motives” for issuing the Balfour Declaration. In addition, the British Declaration was intended to counter the changes brought about by the overthrow of the Czar and the decrease in “bitterness of the Jews in Russia”, who were increasingly turning toward supporting more revolutionary changes and less inclined to continue to support the war effort.

Certainly, the British had considerable interests in the region from protecting their colonial positions in Egypt (occupied and administered since 1882), access and control of the Suez Canal, newly discovered oil fields, commercial and military advantages in the region as well as broader links to other imperial possessions and lastly considerations against major powers having similar designs or contestation.

To a great extent, the British thought of a Jewish National Homeland in Palestine as constituting a buffer state to protect imperial interests in the region with particular emphasis on Egypt, a critical gate to the empire’s vast trade networks and territories. In comparison to India, which is thought to have a set of natural buffer zones in the north, Egypt with its strategic position lacks
such protection and as such constituting a buffer state allied or incubated by Britain would provide for strategic protection. All along the British were thinking and planning from a colonial vintage point with the newly thought of state set-up to serve an imperial purpose in the East:

“It is a curious fact that no other nation in Europe either now or in the past, has known our distinction between ‘Colonial’ and ‘Imperial’ policy. Colonial policy in the strict sense, meaning the government of a country inhabited by people of the same origin as the people at the central seat of government, is hardly known to Europe. What Europe calls colonies are either mere ‘plantations,’ as they used to be called in England, succursales of the central firm, or Imperial possessions, like India. We alone among nations have known how to combine the Greek idea of a colony, a daughter state, reproducing in other conditions the mentality of the mother state, with the Roman ideal of political unity.

... Nothing is more certain than that if Palestine becomes part of the British Empire it would never be colonized by any real sense by the sort of Englishmen who have made Canada and Australia. The only possible colonists of Palestine are the Jews. Only they can build up in the Mediterranean a new dominion associated with this country from the outset in Imperial work, at once a protection against the alien East and a mediator between it and us, a civilization distinct from ours yet imbued with our political ideas, at the same stage of political development, and beginning its second life as a nation with a debt of gratitude to this country as its second father.” (Walid Khalidi, From Haven to Conquest, pp. 132-133)

Thus, the Balfour Declaration has to be situated on the one hand within the broader British colonial designs intended to create buffer zones to protect its interests and on other hand the Zionist leadership machination to secure a “legal” foothold in Palestine. As such, Zionism and the Zionist project wereincubated and born in the colonial womb and functioned within its epistemic foundations.

The British promise made to the Zionist has to be examined within the broader strategy laid-out by Herzl some years earlier. Certainly, the Declaration itself while approved by the British Government was for all intended purposes a Zionist written document involving more than Englishmen in its authorship. The document then gets adopted by the British Cabinet and made the effective policy of successive governments.

Indeed, being a Zionist written and debated document, a critical question as to the Balfour Declaration’s significance for the Zionist settler colonial project must be asked. Answering this question takes us back to August 29-31, 1897, and in particular Theodor Herzl declared intent of his movement “to obtain for the Jewish people publically recognized, legally secure homeland in
Palestine.” (Leonard Stein, Zionism, p. 62) The Balfour Declaration served as the first public document sanctioned by the major powers at the time and establishes the needed framework for securing an internationally sanctioned foothold in Palestine.

Even before issuing the Balfour Declaration, Weizmann was already at work announcing on the 20th of May 1917, “while the creation of a Jewish commonwealth is our final ideal... the way to achieve it lies through a series of intermediary stages... Under the wing of this Power (Great Britain), Jews will be able to develop and to set up the administrative machinery which, while not interfering with the legitimate interests of the non-Jewish population, will enable us to carry out the Zionist scheme.” (Nahum Sokolow, The History of Zionism, p. 56) However, from legal and historical perspectives serious problems are present in the Balfour Declaration.

First, the text is dated November 2, 1917, and was announced publically in the press on the 9th of the same month. At the time of issuing, Palestine was not under British control and the Ottomans were the sovereign power having all the rights and responsibilities accrued therein in the territory. The British entry into Jerusalem did not occur until the 11th of December 1917, a month after the Declaration was issued. Indeed, Great Britain, colonial and imperial as it maybe with complete disregard to indigenous rights, promised to a third party a territory it had no control over nor did it have ownership over it.

Second, the Declaration was “authored” and issued by the British Government to a private non-state actor having no sovereign claims or rights to the territory being granted at the expense of the overwhelming majority of the population including a sizable Jewish Palestinian community among them who opposed Zionism on a religious grounds.

Third, the Balfour Declaration addressed to Lord Rothschild, a British citizen, who at the end of it was asked to share it with the Zionist Federation, assuming the British Zionist Federation. Leaving aside all the parties involved in the drafting, what we find is that the actual text, the person and group being addressed are all subjects of the government that is extending an offer of a national home for them without any having the sovereign capacity to receive or dispose of it under international law, even the colonial part of it. Furthermore, the implication that Lord Rothschild and the Zionist Federation are granted a national home implies the lack of such national home or belonging for them as British citizens.

Fourth, the defining character of 97% of Palestine’s population is the fact that they are not Jewish; thus the eraser of Palestinians begins immediately with this Declaration and continues to the present. Fifth, by extending only civil and religious rights to the 97% of the population while giving recognition to national rights to the Zionist effectively set the course for future conflicts and curtailing the rights to self-determination for the foreseeable future.
Sixth, the Declaration was not content with extending national rights to the Zionist in Palestine but also made sure to protect the rights and political status of all Jews around the world while refusing such protection for the Palestinians living in the land being given away. In summary, the Balfour Declaration created Zionist “legal facts” on paper that then were mobilized to create colonial facts on the ground by encouragement and supporting Zionist Jewish immigration, building settlements and eventual dispossession of the Palestinians.

By means of the Balfour Declaration and in the years following WWI, representatives of the World Zionist Organization were included and became parties to negotiations and agreements pertaining to the status of Palestine and other parts of the Arab World. Furthermore, the Balfour Declaration was incorporated into the Mandate of the League of Nation granted to Great Britain over Palestine, which made it possible to facilitate the Zionist project under auspices of the newly constituted internationally protected system. Finally, as another anniversary of the Balfour Declaration comes upon Palestine living the colonial nightmare, we must be reminded that the British, Europe, US and Zionism are collectively responsible for the past and continued Palestinian dispossession despite claims to the contrary. The time for remedying the past is now! Free Palestine is a state of mind before it can become a reality on the ground.
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Dr. Hatem Bazian Retweeted

Doug Henwood
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Fascinating. @neeratanden tells @CoreyRobin that she wasn’t at Dem platform hearing on Israel. Here she is:

UPCOMING EVENTS

Palestine De-Colonial Summer School (http://www.hatembazian.com/events/palestine-de-colonial-summer-school/)

August 1
Istanbul, Turkey

MOST RECENT

El-Sissi: Israel’s Man in Cairo (http://www.hatembazian.com/content/el-sissi-israels-man-in-cairo/)

Islam is Responsible Mantra (http://www.hatembazian.com/content/islam-is-responsible-mantra/)

Remembering Muhammad Ali: “Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee.” (http://www.hatembazian.com/content/remembering-muhammad-ali-floating-like-a-butterfly-sting-like-a-bee/)

Ramadan: A De-Colonial Centering Moment (http://www.hatembazian.com/content/ramadan-a-de-colonial-centering-moment/)
AFFILIATION

American Muslims for Palestine (http://www.ampalestine.org/)
Muslim Legal Fund of America (https://www.mlfa.org/)
Islamic Scholarship Fund (http://islamicscholarshipfund.org/)
Zaytuna College (http://www.zaytunacollege.org/)
Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project (http://www.irdproject.com)
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