

100 years since the Balfour Declaration

Part two

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This is the conclusion of a two-part article. The first part was published yesterday.

An indication of the political conceptions underpinning British imperialism's support for Zionism may be gleaned from the remarks of Winston Churchill in February 1920, just before he became Colonial Secretary. He praised what he called the "national Jews" of Russia, the bankers and industrialists, and excoriated the "international Jews."

Churchill backed Zionism as an antidote to Bolshevism and international communism, saying, "The struggle which is now beginning between the Zionist and Bolshevik Jews is little less than a struggle for the soul of the Jewish people."

He called for full backing for Zionism and declared that a British-protected Zionist state in Palestine "would from every point of view be beneficial, and would be especially in harmony with the truest interests of the British Empire."

In the event, Britain secured the support of its wartime allies—with the obvious exception of Russia. The 1920 San Remo Treaty, an outgrowth of the Paris conference, recognised Britain's seizure of Palestine, and in 1922, the League of Nations gave Britain Mandatory control over Palestine, west of the Jordan River.

East of the Jordan or Transjordan, now Jordan, would be ruled by one of the sons of the Hashemite Sherif Hussein of Mecca, under British "protection," as a reward for leading a revolt against the Turks—dividing Palestine into two small and impoverished entities.

The Mandate incorporated the Balfour Declaration, making it a legally binding international instrument subject to the League of Nations (and thus the imperialist powers), and obliging Britain to facilitate Jewish immigration and encourage settlement in Palestine. It cited "the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine" that formed "grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country."

It was the Mandate by the League of Nations, signed by the major powers, not the Balfour Declaration per se, that gave the seal of approval for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in terms of international relations and international law.

The Mandatory system was designed to give colonialism a more modern guise. Instead of simply dividing up the conquered territories between themselves, the victors, Britain and France, would act as "trustees" for "backward" peoples while supposedly preparing them for independence. This arrangement fully justified Lenin's claim that the League of Nations was a "thieves' kitchen."

While it also required that the rights of other sections of the population should not be prejudiced, the clear thrust of the Mandate for Palestine was the fulfilment of the Zionist programme. It was vehemently opposed by the Palestinians and the Arabs more broadly. Sherif Hussein of Mecca and other Arab leaders viewed the Declaration as a violation of Britain's previous commitment made in the McMahon-Hussein correspondence in exchange for launching the Arab Revolt.

The Mandate also provided for the establishment of a Jewish

Agency—tantamount to a government-in-waiting of the Jews in Palestine—to represent the Jewish people and advise and co-operate with the British administration. The Jewish Agency was dominated by the Labour Zionists, who wrapped their nationalism in a socialist colouration and harnessed Jewish workers to the yoke of the national bourgeoisie and its mission of carving out a capitalist state entity in Palestine.

After Britain took control of Palestine in December 1917, it began to allow immigration into the country in the face of bitter opposition from the Arabs. But immigration in significant numbers only began when the plight of the Jews in postwar Europe became truly desperate and after the US introduced laws barring entry to the Jews in 1922.

The first mass influx of refugees came from Poland in 1923-26 and then from Germany and Eastern Europe in 1933-36 as the Jews sought to escape Nazi persecution.

Britain prevaricated and repeatedly shifted its policies, supporting at one time the Jews, immigration into Palestine and Jewish nationalism and at another the Arabs and Arab nationalism.

The enormous influence of the October Revolution led a number of Palestinian Jews to form the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) in 1921. But the PCP was divided between the Jews who formed the majority and an Arab minority, and was subject to frequent splits. It was never able to counter either the Revisionists or the Labour Zionists. The Stalinist bureaucracy later used the PCP as an instrument of its own foreign policy needs. The nationalist twists and turns of Stalinism had a disastrous impact on the PCP, leading to its increasing disorientation and splintering into two separate parties, for Jews and Arabs.

After World War II, Britain proposed a bi-national state. When both Arabs and Jews rejected this and the terrorist activities of the Revisionists against both the Arabs and the British administration made Palestine ungovernable, Britain referred the conflict to the newly formed United Nations that had succeeded the League of Nations.

By this time Britain's status in world affairs had diminished, making it impossible to resolve the conflict on its own terms. The US and the Soviet Union supported the partition of Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state for their own purposes: Both saw it as a way of blocking Britain's position in the Middle East.

At the same time, millions of people around the world were appalled at the catastrophe that had befallen the Jews—many of whom were barred from entering the US and Britain and were still languishing in displaced persons camps in Europe. They therefore viewed the establishment of a Jewish state with sympathy.

The horrors of the concentration camps thus played a crucial role in Israel's birth. Furthermore, the accompanying rhetoric sought to equate Zionism with the labour movement, equality and socialism to legitimise it in the eyes of class-conscious workers.

The UN voted for the partition of Palestine in 1947, hailing it as a new and progressive entity dedicated to building a democratic and egalitarian society for the most cruelly oppressed people of Europe.

Now, some 70 years later, what is the historical and political record of Zionism?

Israel was founded in 1948 on the forcible expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their homes, transforming most of historic Palestine into the Jewish state of Israel and most Palestinians into refugees. This was not just the result of a war that led people to flee their homes but the explicit policy of the political antecedents of the present Likud government that was given the nod by Israel's founding father and first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, as Israeli historians have acknowledged. Those that remained became a Palestinian minority in Israel that faced increasing political economic, social and cultural discrimination.

One of five states (Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria) carved out of the former Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire, Israel was surrounded by hostile states, with few natural resources and little water, and isolated from the wider regional economy. The Arab regimes refused to trade with Israel and boycotted those companies that did so. Such a tiny capitalist state was never economically viable. This is one of the reasons why successive governments sought to expand Israel's borders, leading to bitter warfare and enmity with its Arab neighbours and repeated economic crises.

Israel has fought numerous wars, included major conflicts with neighbouring Arab states in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973; invasions of Lebanon in 1978, 1982 and 2006, and attacks on Gaza in 2006, 2008-9, 2012 and 2014.

It was initially kept afloat by the Diaspora, which contributed \$200 million a year before 1967 and a massive \$700 million a year in the following six years. Today, Israel receives more than \$1.5 billion a year from private US donations. In the 1950s, German reparations money provided another important source of finance: \$125 million a year before 1966.

But by far the largest economic assistance has come from the US government. While before 1967, Washington provided very little, about \$50 million a year, this rose to a massive \$3 billion a year by 1986 (split between \$1.2 billion economic and \$1.8 billion military assistance), plus some \$500 million a year in aid from other parts of the US budget or in some cases, off-budget. Last year, the outgoing Obama administration agreed to provide \$3.8 billion a year for 10 years, making Israel the highest per capita recipient of US aid in the world.

US military assistance to Israel came only after Israel became stronger than all the Arab armies, and ruled over the Palestinian population. It increased after every military intervention and suppression of the Palestinians, before and after the Oslo peace talks and their collapse.

Its purpose is to ensure Israel's military superiority as a US garrison in the oil-rich region. In effect, Israel replaced Britain after its withdrawal in the late 1960s from "East of Suez" as the policeman of the Middle East on behalf of US imperialism.

Israel has openly defied numerous UN resolutions and repeatedly breached international law in relation to the West Bank and Gaza, illegally occupied since 1967. It has appropriated territory to itself, including East Jerusalem, Syria's Golan Heights, and land and villages for more than 200 settlements in the West Bank. Its armed forces have violently suppressed any manifestation of protest by the Palestinians and carried out numerous incursions into Palestinian cities. Israeli troops and Zionist settlers killed more than 2,000 Palestinians, the great majority unarmed civilians and many of them children in the first intifada that started in 1987, at least 4,500 in the second intifada between 2000 and 2005, and around 235 in the third intifada or "stabbing intifada" in 2015-16.

The Israel Defense Forces have demolished homes, destroyed farms, uprooted olive groves, closed roads and instituted curfews, crippling the Palestinian economy and bringing people to the brink of starvation. The conditions for the vast majority of those who live in the Gaza Strip, separated off from Israel by means an electrified barbed wire fence and

blockaded by Israel for the last 10 years, and latterly by Egypt, resemble a giant concentration camp.

Within Israel itself, the government conducts a policy towards Arab Israelis reminiscent of the apartheid regime. Netanyahu is set to introduce a package of laws that would further undermine their position. The proposed Nationality Law would define Israel as belonging to a global Jewish nation rather than its citizens, ending the pretence it is a liberal democracy. It would also downgrade the status of Arabic, spoken by one fifth of Israel's population and require the courts to give considerable weight to Jewish religious law and Jewish heritage.

The expansion of the settlements, the murderous war against the Palestinians and the discrimination against Israel's Palestinian citizens have come at an enormous cost to the Israeli working class. Market-based reforms, privatisations, cuts in social benefits, the raising of the pension age, cuts in corporate taxes and income taxes for the rich, anti-trade union laws, restrictions on the right to strike and a ban on strikes in the public sector have brought unremitting misery, unemployment and poverty to increasing numbers of workers and their families.

While GDP per capita has risen, the benefits of growth have gone to a few while real average wages per capita have fallen. In 2015, the average CEO pay was 44 times the average wage (NIS 9,592) and 91 times the minimum wage (NIS 4,650). One-third of workers earn the minimum wage or less.

Nearly one in five families, whose income is less than 50 percent of the median family income in Israel, are officially poor. The poverty rate among Israeli Palestinians is about three times that of Jewish Israelis, where the highest poverty rate is found among ultra-Orthodox Jews.

These outcomes are a far cry from the safe haven, free from oppression, discrimination and inequality, that the creation of Israel was meant to offer Jews in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust. They flow inexorably from the Zionist project of establishing a capitalist state based on the dispossession of another people and maintained by war and repression abroad and social exploitation and inequality at home. Such a state is incapable of providing the foundations for establishing social justice and equality, even for its own citizens.

Every national movement in the Middle East, Africa and Asia has failed to resolve the fundamental social, economic and political problems confronting the mass of working people. The Zionist state that the Balfour Declaration and the subsequent machinations of the major powers spawned has been a terrible and failed experiment. Its continuation promises only further oppression for both Palestinians and Israelis, and further wars.

The only way out of the current impasse is the development of a political movement to unite Arab and Jewish workers and intellectuals in a common struggle against capitalism and for the building of a socialist society. This is the only way to redress the historic injustices suffered by the Palestinian workers and peasants, and end the oppression and war fuelled by the profit drive of international capital and the Israeli and Arab national ruling cliques.

The creation of a United Socialist States of the Middle East would remove the artificial borders imposed by imperialist intrigues that presently divide the peoples and economies of the region, and enable its rich resources to be utilised for the benefit of all.

Concluded



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