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Zionism, anti-semitism, and the Balfour Declaration

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A complementarity between the anti-semitic desire to get rid of the Jews and the Zionist project of sending all Jews to Palestine seems ignored, for example, by Theresa May.

Close to a year ago, on 12 December of last year, PM Theresa May addressed the Annual Business Lunch of the Conservative Friends of Israel in these terms: “On November 2, 1917, the then Foreign Secretary – a Conservative Foreign Secretary – Arthur James Balfour wrote: “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, ...”

The PM read the whole text of the letter I will be getting back to later. She then went on saying: “It is one of the most important letters in history. It demonstrates Britain’s vital role in creating a homeland for the Jewish people. And it is an anniversary we will be marking with pride.”

The PM added: “Born of that letter, and the efforts of so many people, is a remarkable country.” A country, Israel, which the PM described as “a thriving democracy, a beacon of tolerance, an engine of enterprise and an example to the rest of the world for overcoming adversity and defying disadvantages.”

The PM then seized the opportunity of her speech to attack the Labour Party on the issue of anti-semitism. This came a few days after a similar event organised by Labour Friends of Israel: “I understand this lunch has a lot to live up to after the extraordinary scenes at the Labour Friends of Israel event. It began, unusually, with Tom Watson giving a full-throated rendition of Am Yisrael Hai. The audience joined in as his baritone voice carried across the hall. “Am Yisrael Hai – the people of Israel live.’ It is a sentiment that everybody in this room wholeheartedly agrees with. But let me say this: no amount of karaoke can make up for turning a blind eye to anti-Semitism.”

The PM went on taking pride in her own achievements as Minister and the achievements of her party and government in combatting anti-semitism (and conflating it with anti-Zionism). The PM’s speech thus rested upon what anyone who knows the true circumstances of the Balfour Declaration can identify as a blatant contradiction.

Edwin Samuel Montagu was the only Jewish member of the cabinet headed by David Lloyd George, to which Balfour belonged, and only the third Jewish minister in British history. Here is how he commented on the draft of the Balfour letter when he received it in August 1917: “I wish to place on record my view that the policy of His Majesty’s Government is anti-Semitic and in result will prove a rallying ground for Anti-Semites in every country in the world.”

Montagu commented that “it seems to be inconceivable that Zionism should be officially recognised by the British Government, and that Mr. Balfour should be authorized to say that Palestine was to be reconstituted as the “national home of the Jewish people”. I do not know what this involves, but I assume that it means that Mahommedans and Christians are to make way for the Jews and that the Jews should be put in all positions of preference and should be peculiarly associated with Palestine in the same way that England is with the English or France with the French, that Turks and other Mahommedans in Palestine will be regarded as foreigners, just in the same way as Jews will hereafter be treated as foreigners in every country but Palestine.”

He then added – ironically, as he probably believed it to be: “Perhaps also citizenship must be granted only as a result of a religious test.” This last sentence proved prescient indeed, as the granting of citizenship in the state of Israel was to become inseparably linked with religious identification as Jewish.

You may understand Edwin Montagu's worry about Muslims and Christians in Palestine – they constituted over 90% of the land's population at that time – but wonder why he viewed “the policy of His Majesty's Government” as “anti-Semitic”. The matter becomes clear if you read the whole text of his Memorandum to the Cabinet.

Referring to two publications of that time, the conservative paper *The Morning Post*, which will distinguish itself in 1920 by publishing a chapter of the notorious anti-Semitic forgery known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and a notoriously anti-Semitic contemporary weekly called *The New Witness*, Montagu wrote: “I can easily understand the editors of the *Morning Post* and of the *New Witness* being Zionists, and I am not in the least surprised that the non-Jews of England may welcome this policy.”

Montagu was thus putting his finger on the complementarity between the anti-Semitic desire to get rid of the Jews and the Zionist project of sending all Jews to Palestine. He knew very well this fact that PM Theresa May seems to ignore: that the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour himself was influenced by the anti-Semitic current known as “Christian Zionism”, the current that supports the “return” of the Jews to Palestine. The true goal of this support – undeclared in most cases but sometimes openly stated – is to get rid of Jewish presence in Christian-majority lands. Christian Zionists see in the Jews' “return” to Palestine a fulfilment of the condition of the Second Coming of the Christ, which will be followed by the Last Judgment condemning all Jews to eternal suffering in Hell, unless they convert to Christianity. This same current constitutes nowadays in the USA the staunchest supporter of Zionism in general and of the Zionist right in particular.

Indeed, when he was Prime Minister himself, between 1902 and 1905, Arthur Balfour promulgated the 1905 Aliens Act, whose aim was to stop the immigration to Britain of Jewish refugees fleeing the murderous anti-Semitism that was thriving in the Russian Empire. The direct continuity between this fact and the letter of which PM May is proud, could not escape Edwin Montagu's understanding. The Jewish Minister was particularly aware of the fact that the Zionists were counting on the anti-Semites for the fulfilment of their project of establishing a Zionist state in Palestine.

The clear gaze of Theodor Herzl

None is clearer on this actually than Theodor Herzl himself, the founder of the Zionist movement and the author of its manifesto, *Der Judenstaat* (*The State of the Jews*), which was translated in English as *The Jewish State*. In the preface to that book, Herzl stated most bluntly the following: “Everything depends on our propelling force. And what is our propelling force? The misery of the Jews.”

Herzl continued in the same vein and with even greater bluntness in the introduction to his book, addressing the “assimilated” secular Jews of Western Europe who wanted to get rid of poor Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe and whom he did not hesitate to describe as “anti-Semites of Jewish origin” with no pejorative intention:

“The ‘assimilated’ would profit even more than Christian citizens by the departure of faithful Jews; for they would be rid of the disquieting, incalculable, and unavoidable rivalry of a Jewish proletariat, driven by poverty and political pressure from place to place, from land to land. This floating proletariat would become stationary. Many Christian citizens – whom we call Anti-Semites – can now offer determined resistance to the immigration of foreign Jews. Jewish citizens cannot do this, although it affects them far more nearly; for on them they feel first of all the keen competition of individuals carrying on similar branches of industry, who, in addition, either introduce Anti-Semitism where it does not exist, or intensify it where it does.

The ‘assimilated’ give expression to this secret grievance in ‘philanthropic’ undertakings. They found emigration societies for wandering Jews. There is a reverse to the picture which would be comic, if it did not deal with

human beings. For some of these charitable institutions are created not for, but against, persecuted Jews, they are created to despatch these poor creatures just as fast and far as possible. And thus, many an apparent friend of the Jews turns out, on careful inspection, to be nothing more than an Anti-Semite of Jewish origin, disguised in the garb of a philanthropist. But the attempts at colonization made even by really benevolent men, interesting attempts though they were, have so far been unsuccessful. ... These attempts were interesting, in that they represented on a small scale the practical fore-runners of the idea of a Jewish State."

The new project devised by Herzl in replacement of the failed "philanthropic" colonial enterprises that he mentioned was to shift from benevolent actions to a political endeavour integrated into the European colonialist framework, aimed at the foundation of a Jewish state that would belong to this framework and reinforce it.

For this, Herzl realized that Christian anti-Semites would be his project's staunchest supporters. His main argument, in the section entitled "The Plan" of his book's second chapter, is the following: "The creation of a new State is neither ridiculous nor impossible. ... The Governments of all countries scourged by Anti-Semitism will be keenly interested in assisting us to obtain the sovereignty we want."

All that was needed was to select the territory upon which the Zionist project would materialize:

"Here two territories come under consideration, Palestine and Argentina. In both countries important experiments in colonization have been made, though on the mistaken principle of a gradual infiltration of Jews. An infiltration is bound to end badly. It continues till the inevitable moment when the native population feels itself threatened, and forces the Government to stop a further influx of Jews. Immigration is consequently futile unless based on an assured supremacy. The Society of Jews will treat with the present masters of the land, putting itself under the protectorate of the European Powers, if they prove friendly to the plan."

Toward the end of his book's last chapter, where he explained the "Benefits of the Emigration of the Jews", Herzl reassured those he addressed that the governments will pay attention to his scheme "either voluntarily or under pressure from the Anti-Semites".

You can now understand why Edwin Montagu denounced the Balfour Letter project as the product of collusion between the Zionist movement and British anti-Semites; why he stated categorically that "the policy of His Majesty's Government is anti-Semitic and in result will prove a rallying ground for Anti-Semites in every country in the world."
Abysmal record

David Lloyd George's cabinet tried to assuage Montagu's concerns about the fate of the Palestinian non-Jewish majority and the fate of the Jews who were unwilling to become colonial settlers in Palestine by adding to their pledge to "use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement" of the object of "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" the provision that it was "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."

We know the abysmal record of the British government in keeping with these two provisos that were in complete contradiction with the central pledge of the infamous letter as well as with its true spirit.

That PM Theresa May, a century later, could find in the infamous Balfour Declaration a matter of pride while stating her satisfaction at her party's and government's stance against antisemitism is indeed a reason for dismay at the low level of historical knowledge of Her Majesty's present government and their speechwriters.

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[Open Democracy](#)

Delivered at the conference “The Balfour Declaration, One Century After” organised by the Centre for Palestine Studies at SOAS, University of London, on 26 October 2017. This talk is partly based on [a paper](#) that was posted on Jadaliyya on November 3.

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