



The Balfour declaration, a 100 years later the use and abuse of the politics of memory

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Benjamin Netanyahu and Theresa May recently met for a private dinner to celebrate what has long been perceived as the first document to support the birth of Israel: the Balfour Declaration. While celebrations were taking place both in London and Jerusalem, protesters were marching on the streets both in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. They were expressing, through slogans and chants, their anger for the celebration of a document that has always been perceived by the Palestinians — and the Arab world in general — as a betrayal of their national existence.

This analysis traces the direct consequences of these events on the new political climate of the region—a climate that is steadily bridging the gap between Israel and many Arab states while, simultaneously, leaving the Israel-Palestine question in a state of suspended animation. The historical relevance of the Balfour Declaration will be analysed in order to understand its importance and its possible effects on the current situation.

The Balfour Declaration, written in 1917, contained a vague reference to the demands of key Zionist groups and — even if there was not clear support for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine — the 67-word-long letter expressed the sympathy of the British crown for ‘the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.’ Clearly this 100-year-old document is still very divisive and is important to understand why is it so in the current situation facing Israel and Palestine. In order to do so, it is necessary to consider both the historical path that led to today’s problems and the different perspectives involved.

Jewish intellectual, Arthur Koestler, announced that the Balfour Declaration was ‘one of the most improbable political documents of all time.’ Nevertheless the Declaration is widely regarded as a milestone in the creation of the state of Israel, and it is divisive not only between Israelis and Palestinians but even within Israel itself. For instance, several Arab members of the Knesset protested this year because of the celebrations that were taking place for the centenary of the document. The main criticism is related to the fact that the Balfour


Declaration was meant to guarantee the 'Civil and Religious rights' for the 'existing non-Jewish communities of Palestine' but it did not support any political nor national right for them. The criticism is therefore related to the perception that this document placed the other communities in second rank when compared to the Jewish community. Hence, the celebrations are seen by the Israeli Arabs and by Palestinians as an insult to their history of struggle for their national rights. In order to fully understand this position it is important to consider some other important documents such as those belonging to the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon and his correspondence with Sheriff Hussein of Mecca in 1915. Before the Balfour declaration, Britain, through McMahon, had already promised Palestine to be part of a unified Arab state, 'guided' and 'advised' by the British only. Therefore, the Balfour Declaration is relevant not only for Israel and the Palestinians, but even the other Arab countries in the region, like Saudi Arabia, which felt betrayed by the British government and have always argued against the validity of the Balfour Declaration.

Israel was not created in 1917, but years later, in 1948. So, the real historical relevance of the Balfour Declaration, as well as that of other historical documents, is much different than what demonstrations and celebrations would make the international public believe. It seems more likely that these events created a climate for opposing claims of Palestine and Israel. The opposition between the real historical relevance of the Balfour Declaration and the use of memory as a tool to ignite conflicts is what should concern both parties.

Furthermore, amid all these controversies, there is a new political climate in Palestine. The agreement between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas appears to be stronger than expected. On 01 November 2017, Hamas returned political and administrative control of the Gaza Strip to PA, with apparently no particular problem. Moreover, Hamas, in a document signed in May 2017, accepted the definition of the boundaries of the Palestinian territories as those of 1967.

The Palestinian domestic situation is not the only one changing and there are significant developments unfolding throughout regional politics. For instance, the position of the Arab Gulf states — among the staunchest supporters of the creation of a Palestinian national state — have taken a slightly different direction over the past few years. On one hand, Israel's relations with the Gulf countries have improved: economic cooperation between the parties, which can be seen as a possible path to avoid future conflicts, has increased. On the other hand, also the positioning vis-à-vis Palestinian groups has developed, an example being that when several Arab states in June 2017 requested Qatar to cut all the ties with a number of terrorist groups, they included Hamas. Such a request is self-explanatory of the new Arab Gulf perspective on Palestinian politics.

These facts are even more relevant if connected, in a long-term perspective, to the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which saw, for the first time, Saudi Arabia recognising the necessity of the two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. Such an initiative, endorsed by the Arab League in



2007, is evidence to a long-standing commitment of the different parties to work for a realistic peaceful coexistence in the region.

What is, then, the relation between the celebration for the Balfour Declaration and the contemporary political situation? While there are some improvements in relations between the Arab states and Israel, historical animosity has been revived by the celebration and has endangered the small but relevant achievements of a long diplomatic engagement. What emerges is that historical documents and their content should be treated carefully, and even more so in such a historically controversial area. If not, the consequences could become part of the long list of prejudicial facts that spoil decade-long efforts towards coexistence.