

November 2, 2017, will mark the one hundredth anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, known in Arabic as *wa'd balfour*, the Balfour Promise. The Declaration appeared in a formal letter written by Arthur Balfour, then Foreign Secretary of the UK, to Baron Lionel Walter Rothschild, the wealthy banker and one of the most prominent Jewish leaders in Britain, with the request that Rothschild would communicate the contents of the letter to the British Zionist Federation.

The letter expresses the British government's support for «a national home for the Jewish people» in Palestine. Thus November 2, 1917, marks the official start of the Palestinian national tragedy, and the beginning of a hundred years of bloody wars, oppression, and occupation which continue today, more ferociously than ever. The Declaration was greeted by the Zionists, who had achieved the political support of the most important power of the day, as the triumphant achievement of their efforts to win Palestine. Palestinians and other Arabs, however, received it with deep anger and an equally deep sense of

## **Commemoration as Regeneration One Hundred Years After the Balfour Declaration**

**Jean Said Makdisi**

betrayal. It led directly to the gradual colonization of Palestine by European Jews and the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, and thus all the travails of the Palestinian people before and since. It was the formal start of one of the longest conflicts in recent times, one that has defeated many international efforts at conciliation, both well – meaning and otherwise.

There are bound to be many centennial commemorations of Balfour’s infamous letter, both within Palestine and elsewhere, and these will mark the century of national loss and bitter suffering that has been its result. But, the centennial marks at the same time a hundred years of stubborn resistance to, and rejection of, not only the Balfour Declaration itself, but also of the Zionist project which it affirms and the imperial context from which both sprang. The commemorations will therefore also express continuing anti – imperial sentiment, the unchanged will to independence and self – determination, as well as national resolve, pride and hope. It is the double nature of the centennial which will be most interesting to explore, and to understand.

Though the text of the Balfour Declaration is well known, I shall quote it at full for referential convenience:

Foreign Office,  
November 2nd, 1917.

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 would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours sincerely

Arthur James Balfour<sup>(1)</sup>

I have no intention in this paper of delving into the history of the events that led up to the Balfour Declaration or what precisely brought it about: there are dozens of scholarly histories of these events, written over the decades. For the sake of brief historical context, I shall only mention in passing the beginnings of the Zionist project of which the Balfour Declaration was the formal fruit, the role of Chaim Weizman and his friend Rothschild, the long, dark and bloody history of European anti – Semitism, or the Christian evangelical belief from which Zionism garnered support in the west. I shall not go into details of the political situation at the time, and the nefarious and secret 1916 Sykes – Picot agreement, which preceded Balfour’s announcement by more than a year, while World War I raged and the Ottoman Empire was suffering the last throes of its existence. I also do not wish to examine the Declaration itself, or the legal and cultural elements it expresses, though it will of course be necessary to refer to these in the course of my paper.

The source of the enduring political anger and indignation of the Arab world to both Sykes – Picot and the Balfour Declaration is clear: Aside from the obvious racism in both the substance and the wording of the Declaration, and the imperial arrogance of the great powers, both were flagrant violations of the terms of the Hussein – McMahon Correspondence, according to which Britain had promised independence to the Arab nation in return for

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(1) Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balfour\\_Declaration#/media/File:Balfour\\_portrait\\_and\\_declaration.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balfour_Declaration#/media/File:Balfour_portrait_and_declaration.JPG) v

its military support against the Ottomans<sup>(2)</sup>. That military support helped bring about the demise of the Ottomans, but, instead of keeping their promise, the British (and their imperial cohorts, the French) divided up the Arab lands of the old empire between themselves at the war's end.

I wish to focus in this paper on the act of commemoration and what it means: why do we commemorate not only this but all other moments of national importance, whether positive or negative? What does the act of commemoration signify? Why do people feel the need to go back in time from the present to past milestones, whether of national triumph or, as in this case, and the many that have followed, of national loss and even defeat?

And, more precisely, what practical use, if any, will be gained from commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the Balfour Declaration?

### **COMMEMORATIONS AND MEMORIALIZATION: Some General Comments**

Celebrating victories and returning year after year, decade after decade, to commemorate them seems to make obvious sense. It seems also to make obvious sense to build monuments to national victories – Nelson's column in London's Trafalgar Square seems to make sense; the Arc de Triomphe in Paris seems to make sense; all the triumphal monuments and celebratory arches in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome make sense. Even monuments to unitary national pain and tragedy make sense: after all, who can question the logic of commemorating and memorializing such horrors as the deaths of hundreds of thousands of soldiers in World War I, the Jewish Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, and so on? Surely it is a noble and useful exercise to keep the memories of these tragedies alive, not to allow

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(2) See Ussama Makdisi, *Faith Misplaced: The Broken Promise of U. S. Arab Relations: 1820 - 2001*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2010) p. 127, and Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 157 ff.

them to fade away into oblivion, to stop time from washing them away?

Yet, as I worked on this paper and read about the historical backgrounds of such memorials I discovered that some of these monuments, though dedicated to a unified national experience, and therefore apparently uncontested in nature, had to negotiate and overcome cultural and political conflicts to come about.

The true meaning of all memorials may be more complex and multifarious than they appear. And of course, the same is true of commemorations.

What does it mean to commemorate such an event as the Balfour Declaration, the promise of one people to another to give away the land and history of a third people over whom neither the promiser nor the promised had at the time any control, not even that based on imperial conquest? Why do we return year after year to remember one of the most painful and destructive events in modern Arab history, one that has led to so much bloodshed, so much misery, so much suffering?

The first, easiest and most obvious answer to the question is that not everyone remembers, and they need to be reminded, especially as more and more time passes and the meaning of the event itself recedes further and further into the past and away from the direct memory of its victims, so that the connection between past cause and present suffering is in danger of being lost in the fog of time. A year or two ago, a local Lebanese television station marked the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration with a series of unrehearsed and informal interviews with students of the public Lebanese University. As the reporters walked around the campus, they stopped several students, chosen apparently at random, and asked them what they knew of the Balfour Declaration. Shockingly, almost all of those interviewed on camera expressed total ignorance and bewilderment. Now of course I know that this was hardly a scientific or even vaguely well – established sample, nor do I doubt that the piece may have been later edited to make a point. Still, it was shocking to hear university students – even if in reality there

was only a handful of them – in a country so affected, so often devastated by the Israelis, expressing ignorance of the origin of the conflict in the midst of which they – and their parents and grandparents before them – had grown up. How, I asked myself, could even one Lebanese student have studied Arab history and geography and literature enough to be accepted into university, and still not know about the Balfour Declaration? What did that say about school curricula, endless political discussions on television ‘talk shows,’ not to mention the huge amount of commentary on ‘the internet revolution,’ which presumably has brought knowledge to all who seek it?

But the question of why we wish to commemorate is not just to remind, certainly not merely to passively remember. There are deeper and more important reasons. Actuating memory, stopping at memorial stations along the way, challenges the notion that time inevitably and relentlessly moves forward, like a mighty river that washes away the past carrying its debris – memory – towards the open ocean of forgetting. Some scholars point out that there is something specifically modern about memorializing and commemorating. We belong to an age in which memory, and especially national memory, as well as national forgetting, is used as an instrument of nation building, or of power. In her book *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Jenny Edkins says of research already done on the connection between political trauma, time and memory: «from work on collective or cultural memory it is argued that many forms of memorialization function to reinforce the idea of the nation»<sup>(3)</sup>. Several scholars of memory studies have written on this, and some of us can confirm it through personal experience.

The origins of the long and bitter Lebanese civil war that began in 1975 can be traced to sparks from the Balfour Declaration. The forces of the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation had taken up residence in

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(3) Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p. xiii.

Lebanon and had been confronted militarily by some Lebanese militias while supported by others. After the massive Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Palestinian forces were evacuated from Lebanon, but the Lebanese militias carried on their battles until a peace settlement was reached in 1990. In 1992, an amnesty was declared by the Lebanese Parliament, in which sat most of those who had conducted the war and were the principal beneficiaries of the amnesty. The Lebanese public was exhorted to forget the years of violent division and move forward hand in hand in the spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness to rebuild the country and the nation. There was some logic to this. To go back and sort the guilty from the innocent, those who should be held accountable from those who should not would take years, decades probably, and prolong the bitterness of the war. Better to move on, it was said, and forget the past. Special emphasis was laid on the rebuilding of the national army, which had splintered during the war, and the disarming of the militias.

The fifteen – year war had killed or maimed hundreds of thousands of citizens – the estimate of those killed is somewhere between one hundred and fifty and two hundred and fifty thousand – destroyed thousands of homes, schools, factories, farms, businesses, and cultural landmarks, as well as dozens of villages, not to mention the country's infrastructure. It had also led to the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, and to the emigration of many hundreds of thousands more. Of the many who were kidnapped at barricades or from their homes, 18,000 remain unaccounted for to this day. The national amnesia called for by the amnesty law and the rhetoric that accompanied it was inevitably fatal to the proper rebuilding of the state, which by the end of the war had crumbled into chaos. Today, almost thirty years later, the country continues to suffer the political, social and economic disarray which might have been avoided, or at least lessened, by bringing about true reconciliation based on an honest pursuit of truth – telling and justice.

«After traumatic events,» writes Jenny Edkins «there is a struggle over memory. Some forms of remembering can be seen as ways of forgetting: ways of recovering from trauma by putting its lessons to one side, refusing to acknowledge that anything has changed, restoring the pretense. »<sup>(4)</sup> In 1995, on the twentieth anniversary of the beginning of the war, and as a formal gesture of remembrance and reconciliation, the Lebanese government decided to create a monument dedicated to the memory of all the victims – on all sides – of the war, as though to definitively mark its end. An international competition was announced and victory fell to a Franco – American artist named Armand Fernandez. It was said that the authorities, as divided as ever, could not agree on where to put his creation, named by him «The Hope for Peace,» so it ended up languishing on the international highway near the Ministry of Defense, as cars and trucks zoom by, utterly ignoring it. The huge sculpture, the design for which had been offered earlier to the French, the Americans, the Israelis, and refused by each of them before it was accepted by the Lebanese<sup>(5)</sup>, shows stacks of tanks and other weapons baked into a massive concrete structure. Though opinion was divided between lukewarm praise and scathingly mocking reviews, the general public paid little if any attention to it, and it did nothing to improve or in any way change the mood in the country.

Despite the amnesty, and the attempts to erase the past by creating token memorials, the Lebanese war remains alive in the memory of those who lived it, whether fighters or non – combatants: it was never put to rest, however much those who were responsible wished to make it go away. A new and genuine effort to challenge the official forgetting, and to memorialize the war has come today from the private efforts of individuals. They fought for years to preserve a large and badly damaged building located in one of

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(4) Ibid., p. 16.

(5) «‘Hope for Peace’ Monument in Yarze, Lebanon». *Amusingplanet. com*, Monday, August 10, 2015. Viewed on November 2, 2016.



the hot spots of the war and scheduled for demolition. Named *bayt beirut*, (the house of Beirut) it is presently being converted into a living museum of memory<sup>(6)</sup>. Thus were official efforts to create oblivion overcome by private initiative, and the insistence of citizens on actively preserving memory – on their own terms – rather than complying with its obliteration.

Lebanon of course is not the only country in which remembering – or forgetting – national traumas, or finding fitting ways to memorialize them, have been deeply problematic. Jenny Edkins describes in detail the complex history of such official memorial monuments as the Cenotaph in London, the Vietnam Wall in Washington DC, and the various memorials and museums dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Jewish Holocaust. She shows the difficult stages each of these had to be negotiated, and analyzes the various and sometimes contradictory and deeply emotional response to them by the families of those being memorialized, cultural critics, governments, and other authorities<sup>(7)</sup>.

Sometimes, however, a formal monument, raised almost spontaneously and without much debate, can directly and simply embody the direct memory of a national tragedy. During the April 1996 Israeli attack on Lebanon, named by them «Operation Grapes of Wrath,» Israeli artillery shells were fired directly into the open – air courtyard of a UN Compound near the village of Qana, claimed by some to be the site of Christ’s first miracle at the famous wedding. Around 800 unprotected civilians who had in a panic fled neighbouring villages had taken refuge in this compound, which was supposed to be a safe haven. The Israeli attack took place as the refugees milled around in the open air courtyard. More than a hundred people were killed outright – many of them torn to shreds – and an additional hundred or more, plus some Fijian soldiers of the UNIFIL, suffered injuries, mostly

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(6) Mimi Kirk, «The First Public Memorial to Lebanon’s Civil War». *Citilab. com*. July 14, 2016. Viewed on November 2, 2016.

(7) Edkins, Chapters 3 and 4, p 57 - 175.

horrific. Later, funerals for the victims took place in their own villages, but in the end all the bodies were buried in one place, with a unifying formal structure, which has become almost a shrine. Lines and lines of graves recall the images of the huge national cemeteries for fallen soldiers, such as Arlington National Cemetery outside Washington DC, or the memorial to those thousands killed in the Normandy landings in France, with their rows of identical crosses spread out before the viewer as a painful and visual reminder of the price of war. The Qana cemetery is of course much smaller, but it is more direct and personal as the families of the victims live nearby and often visit it, as do most visitors to the south of Lebanon. Indeed, after the liberation of South Lebanon in 2000 from the brutal 28 year military Israeli occupation, thousands of Lebanese, Palestinians and foreign visitors made what became almost a ritual tour of the liberated areas, and this always included a stop at Qana.

Sometimes national memorials are created by individuals who, it seems, felt the trauma as a deeply wounding or otherwise extraordinary personal experience. A glance at the enormously long list of wartime autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and even novels and volumes of poetry, proves this without a doubt: each writer wishing to record and witness his / her personal effect of the national traumas.

Some individuals take this need to remember to astonishing actions. A book of photographs relating to the September 11 attacks on New York, shows pictures of people who apparently felt the event so deeply that they needed to inscribe the memory on their own bodies, to carve the indelible memorial on their own skin, to cut it into their very flesh. One picture shows a man with his back to the camera. A coloured tattoo of a weeping man apparently being comforted by angels covers his entire back. At the top of the picture is a short text written in decorative script: 'Never to be Forgotten,' and at the bottom is written: 'September 11 – 2001.' Another man photographed with his back to the camera, has a similar full – backed

coloured tattoo. The words ‘All Gave Some, Some Gave All,’ followed by five names – I guessed them to be firefighting colleagues of the man – surround a picture of smoke pouring out of the World Trade Center just after the planes hit the twin buildings. Many other pictures of bodies with tattoos, not all full backed, some on fore – arms, sides or backs, appear in the same book, and tell of personal losses. One tattoo on a muscular fore – arm shows the explosions, the towers on fire and reads: ‘To my darling wife Irma: I survived. 9. 11. 01.’<sup>(8)</sup>

The moment in the past which these individuals and publics wish to remember, whether with official sanction or not, is relived in the present, and the smooth passage of time is stalled.

## FIRST REACTIONS TO AND EARLY COMMEMORATIONS OF THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

The text of the Balfour Declaration was made public in the British press on November 8, 1917 to enthusiastic acclaim. **The Daily Express** greeted it with the banner headline «A State for the Jews,» while the Times and the Morning Post headlined «Palestine for the Jews. » **The Observer** celebrated the Declaration: «There could not be at this important date a more just or wise move. » Palestinians and other Arabs also first knew of it on the same day, November 8, 1917, when it was published in the Cairo daily *al muqattam*.<sup>(9)</sup>

(8) *The Landscapes of 9/11: A Photographer's Journey. Photographs by Jonathan Hyman.* Edward T. Linenthal, Jonathan Hyman, and Christiane Gruber. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013). Inset of pictures between p 124 - 5.

(9) Bayan Nuwayhed Al Hout,

فلسطين: القضية، الشعب، الحضارة: التاريخ السياسي من عهد الكنعانيين حتى القرن العشرين (1917) (*Palestine, The Cause, The People, The Civilization: The Political History from the time of the Canaanites until the Twentieth Century* (1917). (my translation) Beirut: *Dar al istiqlal*, 1991. p. 472 (my translation from the Arabic as translated in the text).

Aside from these press reports, the Declaration was not published as an official document for several years: even when General Allenby and his army made their triumphal entry into Jerusalem on December 9 1917, no mention was made of the Declaration, or the fate awaiting Jews and Palestinians in the land<sup>(10)</sup>.

Still, though it was not yet an official document, the immediate Zionist reaction in Europe was to proclaim it joyfully as a triumph throughout the area, even distributing it as leaflets from airplanes over cities in Germany and Austria. They celebrated the news in Eastern Europe from Poland to the Black Sea<sup>(11)</sup>. The Egyptian Jewish community reacted joyfully to the news.<sup>(12)</sup>

The Zionists in the United States also celebrated, and the issue of Palestine became the thorniest aspect of the Arab – American relationship throughout the century, as it is to this day. From the beginning, Arabs saw American support for the Zionist cause as a contradiction to the widely celebrated American political rhetoric of freedom, democracy and self – determination. The historian Ussama Makdisi quotes from a letter written by a Palestinian American surgeon, Fuad Shatara, a member of the Palestine Antizionism Society, to the US Secretary of State at the time, Robert Lansing. Pointing out that Zionism contradicted President Wilson’s ideas of self – determination, Shatara wrote: «We do not claim what does not belong to us. We merely demand the right to our homeland. We beseech (sic) you to come to our defense as a champion of right and justice».<sup>(13)</sup>

Not everyone reacted as surely, however. It took some people time to understand just what was at stake, not only in the Declaration itself, but also

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(10) Ibid., p. 472.

(11) Ibid., p 472.

(12) Khalidi, op. cit., p. 255.

(13) Makdisi, op. citp. p. 131.

in the the Sykes – Picot Agreement which had just been made public by the Bolsheviks, as the western promise of independence and self – determination was brought into question. This was true on both sides of the divide. Edwin Montagu, the single Jewish member of the British government at the time, and thus a colleague of Balfour, viewed the Declaration with suspicion and opposed it with fervour. Balfour, he believed, had acted out of anti – semitic motivation: in providing a «national home for the Jewish people» in Palestine, Balfour was ensuring the demise of the Jewish community in Britain<sup>(14)</sup>. On the other side, a discussion took place in Cairo between Faris Nimr, editor of the daily *Al Muqattam*, and Rashid Rida, the Islamic thinker and early enemy of Zionism. Nimr argued that it was still possible to achieve Arab independence despite the treachery of the British and French, while Rida rejected this argument in no uncertain term. «Freedom and independence», he wrote, «have but one meaning, the opposite of which is enslavement»<sup>(15)</sup>.

In Palestine, from the time the Declaration was first announced until the end of World War II the Zionists celebrated November 2 as a national holiday. On the other hand, though Palestinians and other Arabs had been combating Zionism well before the Balfour Declaration<sup>(16)</sup>, the annual commemoration of what became known as «Balfour Day» began later, in 1921. A general strike throughout Palestine was called on November 2 1921, and was repeated every year after that until 1947. «Shops were closed, newspapers printed with black borders, and buildings were decorated with black crepe».<sup>(17)</sup>

But aside from the dedicated annual commemoration, other forms of protest took place. Historians point to the gradual transformation of the

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(14) Ibid., p 129.

(15) Ibid.. p. 130.

(16) Khalidi P. 119.

(17) Tamir, Sorek, *Palestinian Commemoration in Israel: Calendars, Monuments and Martyrs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). p 25

traditional festivities of *el Nabi Musa* (a procession from Jerusalem to what was supposed to be the tomb of Moses), which was said to have begun by Salah al – Din during the Crusades, from a religious to a national occasion in the period following the announcement of the Balfour Declaration. Though most participants in the *nabi musa* celebrations were Muslim, many Christians had, as they caught onto what was happening in their country, eventually joined the procession, as did Palestinians from villages, towns and cities far from Jerusalem. The well known Jerusalem educator Khalil Sakakini wrote in his *yawmiyyat* diary: «Until now the Muslim and Christian holidays were religious, but last year and this year they appear to be national holidays». <sup>(18)</sup>

In other ways also Palestinian Muslims and Christians shared equally and cooperatively in the protests, transcending the religious to the national. Under the heading «*al ijtima' alkabir fi yaffa,*» the daily Jaffa newspaper *filastin* records on November 2, 1923, a meeting that took place in the Great Mosque of the city, when Christians joined Muslims in «the jihad for saving the country». <sup>(19)</sup>

An article in the paper *Suriyya al Junubiyya*, on November 27, 1919 reports on a speech given by Sir Herbert Samuel in the London Opera House marking the second anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, and then responds: «Our country is Arab, Palestine is Arab, and Palestine must remain Arab». <sup>(20)</sup>

A special 4 – page English language edition of *filastin*, addressed to the author of the Balfour Declaration was published on Wednesday March 25, 1925, with the banner heading:

A Special Edition in English issued on the occasion of the visit to

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(18) Quoted in Sorek, p. 22.

(19) Ibid., p. 25.

(20) Quoted in Khalidi, p. 166.

Palestine of LORD BALFOUR, (sic) the statesman with whose name is associated the Declaration which to the Arabs signifies the death knell of all the hopes they cherished when the victorious British armies entered their country in 1918<sup>(21)</sup>.

The entire four pages of the paper are devoted to an angry response not only to the Declaration itself, but to everything that had happened in the eight years since, including the peace treaties that followed the end of the war, including the establishment of the Mandate by the League of Nations. The first sub – section of the paper is headed: *J'Accuse*, in a clear reference to the famous 1898 article by Emile Zola on the anti – semitism of the Dreyfus affair, which so disgraced the French government at the time. The Palestinian accusations in *filastin* are directed at : 1) the British Government, 2) the League of Nations, 3) the mandate government of Palestine, which is accused of «pursuing with open eyes a policy which, by granting a favoured position to the Jewish minority, is unjust to the Arab majority in Palestine. »

It is impossible to even begin to summarize the contents of this special edition of *filastin*, or the details to which it refers, nor is it my intention to do so. I wish merely to establish these beginnings of Arab reactions to the Balfour Declaration, as it became ensconced in the national memory, as time passed from the early responses and commemorations to the forthcoming centennial commemorations.

### AS TIME PASSED

As time passed, the unity of the early protests gave way to the division and distrust which grew and persist to this day. The signs of mourning – the black borders on newspapers, the black crepe on the buildings – that accompanied the first commemorations gave way over the years to a different tone. As Sorek shows in his book, Balfour Day became more about anger

(21) Wikipedia File: *Filastin (La Palestine)* March 25th 1925. Wikimedia Commons, en. wikipedia. org, viewed on October 16, 2016.

and resolve than shocked sadness; it became more a call to political action than merely protest and mourning. And as political action and organizing to combat Zionism and British imperialism replaced mere emotional protest and rejection, so did rival attitudes towards how to proceed.

Tamir Sorek traces the evolution of the annual commemorations in Palestine. Even as the European colonizers began pouring into the country, and the British mandate took stricter and tighter control of Palestine, divisions grew among Palestinians as to how to organize in order to handle the situation. As they confronted not only Zionist ambitions but also British imperialism, rival leaderships grew up. These are described in all the national histories. The 1936 – 39 revolt – or «revolution» as most Palestinians call it – was severely put down by the British and led to the arrest and exile of most of the Palestinian leadership, and the outlawing of the Executive Committee which had called for the revolt. «The demoralizing effect of this institutional breakdown was worsened by the violent factional clash among Palestinians»<sup>(22)</sup> Division and disagreement in Palestinian ranks and among the leadership, as well as of Arab leaders, has been seen as one of the greatest obstacles towards Palestinian freedom and self – determination. Bayan Nuwayhed al Hout makes this point clearly at the end of her book on Palestinian history till 1917:

The relationship between the cause of Arab unity and the Palestinian cause is an historic, and determining one.... Whenever the goal of Arab unity is in decline, there is a parallel decline in the status of the fight against Zionism... and whenever progress is made towards Arab unity, there is a parallel strengthening of the battle against Zionism<sup>(23)</sup>.

Arab reactions to the Balfour Declaration were, and remained for decades, as angry as the Palestinian ones. Fervent protests occurred in the

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(22) Ibid. p 27.

(23) Al Hout, op. cit., p 491. My translation.



wider Arab world as well as Palestine, especially in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon. Older people, students in secondary schools and universities at the time, remember taking part in repeated demonstrations in Beirut in the 1940s and fifties; as they marched out of their campuses on to the streets of the city, they chanted «*falastin 'arabiah, li tasqut assahyounia,*» (Palestine is Arab: down with Zionism).

This indelible memory is surely one of the reasons for the continuing commemoration: returning to the beginning brings us face to face once again with the united front of the Palestinian and Arab reaction to the Balfour Declaration, a unity that is sorely missed today.

### **Reconstructing Memory: Some Theoretical Thoughts**

The commemoration of the Balfour Declaration, then, recalls the beginning, the founding date of the history of war and loss, that has been the bane of the people of the Arab mashriq for the last hundred, and especially the last fifty, years. But it also places the event in the context of a much longer history, and marks the continuing refusal of the Balfour Declaration and everything for which it stands.

In an essay entitled «On Anniversaries,» Konrad Kostlin writes that «[a]ny and all founding dates... seem to merit commemoration. The focus is on beginnings.... » But Kostlin claims that there is a specifically modern aspect to commemorations, and that the study of what he calls «the culture of remembrance» has today become an important topic of research. «Anniversaries seem inevitable and somehow necessary in modern societies. They serve as hooks for ideas, as apologies for reflection, as catalysts for creativity. » He continues: «Anniversaries... follow certain patterns. They try to simulate, to copy the beginning by performing it as a repetition.... The repetition brings into relief the legitimacy of whatever is so celebrated by displaying its continuity and staging its fidelity to its founding principles

and original obligations... Anniversaries and jubilees recall the beginning and its order of events in an act of repetition....<sup>(24)</sup>

Kostlin's essay is basically concerned with ethnographic studies, but some of his ideas cast an interesting light on the meaning of the forthcoming centennial of the Balfour Declaration:

The talk of epochs, scales, liminalities and ties, transitions and crossings sketches a plausible sense of the conjunction of time. The focus of the anniversary, however, is squarely on an impression of continuity. Such a seemingly plausible construction of continuity may even be related to the recent renaissance of ethnic consciousness among young and old nations alike: the rediscovery of the nation and national identity invokes an impression of duration<sup>(25)</sup>.

As Palestinians and other Arabs remember the Balfour Declaration, they inevitably evoke not just the passage of time and the events it brought, but also, as they mark that first founding date, they re – establish the memory of what existed before it. Memory, and especially the memory of Palestine as it was before it was violently changed, is an integral and fundamental aspect of the Palestinian struggle to reclaim their land and their history. Palestinians cling to the memory of their society, the physical landscape of the country, the nature of their cities, before all was thoroughly changed, and before they themselves lost control over their own lives. Thus they re – live their own history as a continuum, regaining control over the time that has elapsed since 1917. They invest the lost past not just with mournful sadness and anger, but with life and reality, and they look to the future, however doubtful it might appear, with the faith that the past cannot be robbed of its essence, or eliminated.

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(24) Konrad Kostlin, «On Anniversaries». *Cultural Analysis*, Volume 13, 2014. Viewed online, October 10, 2016.

(25) Ibid.

Arab reaction to both Sykes – Picot and the Balfour Declaration were by definition collective, nationalist ones: there could be no reading of either of these imperial outrages as affecting only individuals. Although felt by every Palestinian as a personal experience, the problem of Palestine is not in the end a private and personal one, but collective. From the beginning, to which Palestinians return every year, decade after decade, repeating the exercise with renewed feeling for something that may otherwise have been forgotten, the meaning was understood to be necessarily collective. It seems clear that just as the Balfour Declaration gave a huge political and moral boost to the Zionist movement, at the same time it helped create and strengthen Palestinian nationalism, and especially Palestinian national resistance.

But traumatic collective memory writes Jenny Edkins, «is not the same as every day memory».<sup>(26)</sup> She shows that governments and our general understanding of politics is played against a sense of «linear time:» that is, time that moves progressively in a straight line from past to present to future. All of history is thus contained in this uncomplicated version of time, easily manipulated and organized into the narrative that suits them by those who speak in the name of the nation, and try to control it: not just politicians, but also historians. This linear time, writes Edkins, is interrupted by «traumatic time. » Just as individuals constantly and obsessively return to the memory of their traumatic experience, which they thus morbidly relive, nations do the same. But the public trauma as lived by individuals, who have suffered the real pain, cannot be resolved and absorbed into healthy individual memory: this is not permitted. Governments need to remain in control of the national memory and its narrative, so they co – opt the trauma, including the personal traumas suffered by the dead and wounded victims and their families, by reconstructing and absorbing them. They do this in the form of public ritual ceremonies (such as the British Queen’s annual celebration of

(26) Edkins, op. cit., p. xiii.

Remembrance Day at the Cenotaph) and monuments dedicated to the fallen, claiming the national trauma was in fact a heroic one dedicated to such national ideologies as freedom, justice, democracy, etc. This is understood by many of the individuals involved. Edkins quotes from the famous poem, *Dulce et decorum est...*, by the great English poet, killed during WWI, Wilfrid Owens. Describing the horrible death by gas of a young man on the battlefield with unromantic and horrifying realism

*... His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth – corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues...  
Owen, with bitter contempt, rejects  
The old Lie; Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori».<sup>(27)</sup>*

## RETRIEVING AND RECREATING MEMORY AND IDENTITY

Understood in this context, the function of the continuing commemoration of the Balfour Declaration as I see it is not just to remember it, but to recreate the fresh collective and unifying reaction, the fresh indignation of the moment when it was first announced. Palestinians and other Arabs – and many people around the world who have rallied to the Palestinian quest for justice – have over the last century stood up loudly against it, in demonstrations, poems, books – novels, biographies, histories, memoirs – films, works of art, as well of course as direct action. They thus continued the hope that its violent and unjust effects could be undone, not in actuality of course, but in adding to the strength and power of the national imagination,

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(27) Translated from the Latin: It is sweet and proper to die for one's country.

and thus the hope that the history of oppression, defeat, division and loss which has marked the years since Balfour could be reversed.

Ernest Renan wrote that «defeat and mourning have greater importance for the national memory than victories».<sup>(28)</sup> Perhaps this explains why the various commemorations marking the Palestinian calendar of memories seems to concentrate on massacres, lost battles, and other hugely sad events.

Laleh Khalili makes this point in her book *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration*, which provides a vivid and moving history of the dozens of occasions and individuals memorialized in, and therefore embodying, the Palestinian national narrative as they are celebrated in the Palestinian lands occupied in 1967, as well as in the Palestinian refugee camps of Lebanon. She analyzes the origins of these memorial events, which include, of course the Balfour Declaration, and how they have come to be established<sup>(29)</sup>. She emphasizes the degree to which massacres and other sad events tend to dominate the story. Palestinian identity as it is being handed down from generation to generation is thus tied up with this history of suffering.

Surprisingly, in the April 1919 entry in his diary, during the *nabi musa* festival, Khalil Sakakini, wrote that Muslim holidays in Palestine are «exciting» and create «enthusiasm and energy, «while Jewish ones were» created as memorial days for tragedies». He then added: « A nation whose holidays include only crying has no future». The irony of what Sakakini wrote a hundred years ago is precisely that, though of course the Jewish narrative to this day always, and to great effect, evokes the suffering and pain of the Jewish people, the Palestinian narrative has tended to do the same. The great difference between them is that while the world is well aware and constantly reminded of the Jewish tragedy, those who are aware

(28) Quoted in Sorek, p. 24.

(29) Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

of the Palestinian tragedy are far fewer, to the degree that the Palestinian story and the Palestinian people themselves have not only been ignored, but thoroughly denied. Indeed, several European countries have passed laws that denying Jewish suffering is a serious and punishable offense, while on the other hand in many countries, especially in the west, Palestinian suffering and major events in their catalogue of pain and loss – – such as the nakba or catastrophe of 1948 – – are on a regular basis denied, and the Palestinians slandered with the most blatantly racist and vicious depictions of their nature.

One of the points about the Balfour Declaration which many historians dwell on is the total disregard not only of the wishes but also even the identity of the Palestinian people. In using the phrase «the existing non – Jewish communities in Palestine», Balfour dismisses with a metaphorical wave of his verbal wand their name and identity. They are dismissed into a negative existence: they are described not as who they are, nor in terms of their own history and culture, but only in terms of who they are not.

This dismissal has become almost a tradition. A couple of examples will do here. A well – known statement was made by Golda Meir in 1996<sup>(30)</sup>. Notoriously, she asserted that Palestinians do not exist. «It was not as if there was a Palestinian people in Palestine and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist».<sup>(31)</sup>

A more recent example occurred during the 2012 American Presidential campaigns, when a televised debate took place between the Republican Party nominees Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich. They were asked by the moderator how peace was to be brought to the Middle East. Romney responded by first representing the Palestinians not as those resisting colonization and imperialism, but as a bloody, violent, war – loving people,

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(30) Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*. New York: Times Book, 1979. p. 4 - 5.

(31) <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.654218>, viewed on October 17, 2016.

who raise their children to hate Jews, apparently for no particular reason other than their evil, hate – filled nature. The Palestinians, he said, have to want peace, as the Israelis so earnestly do. To show their desire for peace, he said, Palestinians have to stop sending «thousands of rockets» from Gaza into Israel, and also to stop using «schoolbooks that teach how to kill Jews». But Gingrich went even further than Romney. Asked to comment on his claim in a previous statement that «the Palestinians were an invented people,» he responded:

Technically, there was an invention in the late 1970s. Prior to that they were Arabs, and many of them were either Syrians, Lebanese, Egyptians or Jordanians<sup>(32)</sup>.

These extraordinary words, this extraordinary illogic, this extraordinary and almost comical absence of historical knowledge or even of common sense, were stated not by an ordinary, uneducated person, but by a man who had earned a BA from Emory University, and then an MA and PhD in modern European history from Tulane University. He even briefly taught history and geography at a state college. He went on to be elected to Congress, and was re – elected ten times, serving as Speaker of the House. At the time he made this amazing statement, he was running for the most powerful office in the world. Recently, his name was being touted as one of the candidates being considered as Secretary of State by the President – Elect, Donald Trump.<sup>(33)</sup> This is of course not the place to diagnose how such a statement from a graduate of distinguished universities and a man who held such high office was possible, but we can surely ponder its background and its meaning privately.

As Laleh Khalili shows in her extraordinary book, the actual remembering of even the most devastating moments of modern Palestinian history,

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(32) YouTube: Republican Presidential debates, January 27, 2012.

(33) <http://www.biography.com/people/newt-gingrich-9311969>, viewed on December 18, 2016.

establishes identity, and re – affirms the reality and presence of a people whose history and very existence has repeatedly been denied. At the end of her book she writes:

[N]ationalist commemoration proffers durable and powerful forms of remembering that can be borrowed and appropriated by the dispossessed. Commemoration provides a medium through which those who are often silenced and marginalized can at least express that they exist<sup>(34)</sup>.

Commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, that single and fateful document written on November 2, 1917, will hopefully be dramatically revived in the public memory, and will do much more than express the mere existence of the Palestinian people. People from the area and beyond will hopefully be faced with a series of lectures, exhibitions, films, conferences, symposia, concerts – and of course public demonstrations – to discuss and remember the date so important to the unhappy history of the region: a unified memory will be restored, and a unified hope for the future rekindled. The unity of the Arab world will at least on the surface be revived: it is almost impossible to imagine that even those Arab states that have veered into acceptance of the Israeli occupation and its inhumanity will not be involved in the centennial commemorations. A new sense of time will be created in which the last hundred years will seem to telescope into themselves and appear as a single stretch, a single moment of despair, conflict, war, immense violence and loss, but also and at the same time a moment of resistance to and *sumud*, or steadfastness, in the face of injustice.

From that point, politics will continue, and power will continue to play its vicious game, but humanity, freedom and justice will be remembered once again as a common goal. The direct simplicity of the Palestine cause as it

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(34) Khalili, *op. cit.*, p. 226 - 7.



appeared at the time of the Balfour Declaration will be revived and relived as a confrontation between imperial arrogance and national liberation.

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