

The Balfour Declaration's Century of Turmoil

As Israel continues to occupy Palestinian lands and threatens a new war against Lebanon, much of this turmoil traces back to Great Britain's Balfour Declaration during World I, a century ago, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Great Britain's Balfour Declaration – a century ago – laid the groundwork for a Zionist state in the Middle East and led to the purging of millions of Palestinians from what became Israel, a human rights crisis that continues to roil the Middle East to this day.

I caught up with noted Palestinian human rights campaigner Mustafa Barghouti in San Francisco where he was lecturing on the Balfour Declaration, a letter from British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour published on Nov. 9, 1917, and promising a Jewish homeland. The letter came during World War I while Great Britain was at war with Turkey's Ottoman Empire.

In June 2002, Dr. Barghouti co-founded the Palestinian National Initiative, and currently serves as its Secretary-General.

Dennis Bernstein: What was the significance of the Balfour Declaration and what does it mean to the Palestinian people?

Mustafa Barghouti: The Balfour Declaration was a major historical crime committed against the Palestinian people. It was a crime that led to a series of other crimes, including the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people in 1948, when 70% of the population were displaced and forced to leave their country. There are still 6 million refugees spread all over the world. It led to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and Jerusalem in 1967.

But most importantly, the Balfour Declaration was a racist act that discriminated against 90% of the population of Palestine. It gave 10% of the population the right to a homeland and deprived the Palestinians of that right. The result is what we see today, which is a system of apartheid that is much worse than what existed in South Africa.

I believe the Balfour Declaration was also a crime against the Jewish people. It used the Jewish population to serve the colonial interests of the colonial powers of Europe at the time. It pushed the Jewish population toward Zionism. It put the Jewish people in contradiction with the Palestinians and with the

Arabs and created a situation of instability which has existed now for a hundred years.

Britain should apologize for its crime in Palestine and compensate the Palestinian people for the harm caused to them. At the very least, they should recognize the state of Palestine. Theresa May, the prime minister of Britain, added insult to injury by celebrating the anniversary of this declaration in the company of Benjamin Netanyahu. We responded with a fantastic rally in which 50,000 people gathered in the streets of London, occupying key locations for more than five hours.

I spoke in front of these people, as did Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labor Party, who could very soon become the next prime minister of Britain. I think we can clearly say that we control public opinion in Britain.

Dennis Bernstein: What the Balfour Declaration essentially did was take a land where people had been living for generations, centuries, and gave it to another people.

Mustafa Barghouti: Exactly. Britain had no ownership of Palestine and did not even govern Palestine at the time. They took the land of the Palestinian people and gave it to the Jewish people, who were a very small minority in Palestine.

At that time, Palestine was under Ottoman Turkish rule. Ninety percent of the population were Palestinians, whether Muslim or Christians, and ten percent were Jewish.

Balfour was not for the sake of the Jewish people as human beings, it was a case of using the Jewish people for colonial purposes. And it was in the interests of the colonial powers to push the Jewish to become Zionist, although at that time most of the Jewish people did not want Zionism.

The Balfour Declaration was a part of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided the Middle East between the French and British colonial powers. Proof that the Jewish people were used for colonial purposes came in 1956 when the British responded to the Egyptian decision to nationalize the Suez Canal by attacking Egypt through Israel. All of this led to the terrible crisis we see today. It was totally unjust, it was absolutely colonial and it created the system of apartheid we have to struggle against today.

Dennis Bernstein: Why do you suppose some of the key leaders in the anti-apartheid movement have said that the situation in Palestine is worse than it was in South Africa?

Mustafa Barghouti: In South Africa, there was never the segregation of roads that you see in the occupied West Bank, there were never the walls you have

here. In South Africa, settlements were not used to ethnically cleanse the population.

Israel takes away 87% of our water resources in the West Bank. A Palestinian in the West Bank is allowed to use no more than fifty cubic meters of water, while an illegal Israeli settler is allowed to use 2,400 cubic meters, 48 times more than a Palestinian.

The Israeli GDP per capita is about \$38,000 while ours does not exceed \$2,000.

But Israel obliges us to buy products at the Israeli market price. So we make much less money but have to buy products at their cost. In addition, they force us to pay for water and electricity at double the amount Israelis pay. If we happen to have to send a child to an Israeli hospital, we would be obliged to pay four times what an Israeli would pay.

If you look it up in the dictionary, "apartheid" is defined as "two systems of laws for two peoples living in the same place." That is exactly what Israel has created. Israeli citizens, even if they are illegal settlers violating international law, are treated with respect by the Israeli government, they have rights, they are ruled by civil law. While Palestinians are ruled by military law. They still use against us the Ottoman Turkish Law of 1911, the British Mandatory Law, the British Emergency Law, Jordanian law, Israeli law and 2,400 Israeli military orders. That is why you have things like administrative detention, which means they can arrest any Palestinian without even bringing charges. 56 members of our elected parliament were jailed by Israel, many under administrative detention. Imagine if the Mexican government came to the United States and arrested congress people and put them in jail without even charges!

Dennis Bernstein: People in custody are being subjected to torture, young people are being subjected to torture. This is an ongoing program. I am always stunned by the brutality and the acceptance of that brutality by the United States. If what is going on in Palestine is a form of ethnic cleansing, then we would have to indict the United States.

Mustafa Barghouti: It is unfortunate that US institutions are completely biased toward Israel. Without American support, Israel could not do what it does. The problem is that there are double standards. They speak about freedom, about democracy, about human rights...except when it comes to Palestine. It is as if we are not human beings. We speak about countries having to abide by international law—not having nuclear weapons, for instance—but Israel is above international law. That can only be described as a double standard.

In the long run, this is bad, not only for the Palestinians, but also for the Jewish people. The system of apartheid and racial discrimination run by the

Israeli government is absolutely incompatible with the history of the Jewish people, the people who suffered from the Holocaust, from anti-Semitism and the pogroms in Russia. They should not be oppressors, they should not be discriminating against other people. That is why it does not surprise me to see many wonderful Jewish activists supporting Palestine and the BDS movement. I don't think the Israelis can be free until the Palestinians are free.

Dennis Bernstein: Do you see the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement as an effective movement? It certainly contributed to ending apartheid in South Africa.

Mustafa Barghouti: Of course, it is very effective. It translates international solidarity with the Palestinian people into a material effect. But it must be stated that the BDS movement is not against the Jewish people and it is not anti-Semitic. It is a nonviolent form of action and freedom of expression. It is about individual rights. Those who have come out against BDS are positioning themselves against freedom of choice. If you don't want to boycott Israel, at least boycott settlement activities, which, according to United Nations Security Council resolution 2334, are a violation of international law.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
