

## ***PALESTINE: A CENTURY ON FROM THE BALFOUR DECLARATION***

### **Review by Stephen McCloskey**

Cronin, D (2017) *Balfour's Shadow: A Century of British Support for Zionism and Israel*, London: Pluto Press.

Macintyre, D (2017) *Gaza: Preparing for Dawn*, London: Oneworld Publications.

Two books from accomplished journalists reflect on the historical origins of the colonisation of Palestine and how this has played out to disastrous effect in the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in the 1948 *Nakba* (Catastrophe) (*Aljazeera*, 2017) and their subsequent displacement and dispersal across the Middle-East and beyond. Today, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) provides services and aid to 5.2 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip and West Bank, including East Jerusalem (UNRWA, 2018). These services have come under threat and the humanitarian status of these refugees made even more precarious by the announcement by the Trump administration that it is to withdraw \$300m (£228m) in funding from the UN agency, which is around one-third of its total annual budget (Beaumont, 2018). Contrast US contributions to UNRWA with the sum of \$3.3 billion allocated to Israel in military aid over the coming year (Webb, 2018) and we have some idea of how world powers have aligned in the Middle-East conflict over the past century.

David Cronin is a Brussels-based Irish journalist who writes regularly for *The Electronic Intifada*, and his book meticulously traces the role played by successive British governments, Labour and Conservative, in supporting the Israeli occupation of Palestine in return for lucrative trading relations, particularly in arms. His book is framed by the November 1917 Balfour Declaration in which the then British Foreign Secretary signed a letter to a leading aristocrat and Zionist, Walter Rothschild, committing

Britain to the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The letter is worth quoting in full:

*“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 views with favour the establishment in Palestine of the 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,*

*Arthur James Balfour”* (Cronin, 2017: xii).

Far from seeking to make amends for the century of oppression that followed Balfour, the British prime-minister, Theresa May, praised it as ‘one of the most important letters in history’ and committed to mark its centenary ‘with pride’ (ibid: 1). But why did Britain commit itself to the Zionist project when, as Cronin suggests, Balfour was ‘arguably an anti-Semite’ who supported anti-immigration legislation in 1903 to stop Jews fleeing programs in Russia from entering Britain (ibid: 5). His motivation in supporting the declaration seems to have been driven by a desire to ‘see Europe emptied of Jews’ (ibid: 6) although Britain had neither moral nor legal authority to

commit Palestinian territory to the Zionist federation. But as a British Conservative, William Ormsby-Gore, put it at the time: ‘the Zionists are the only sound firmly pro-British, constructive element in the whole show’ (ibid: 11). Cronin summarises the British position on Palestine thus: ‘The Balfour Declaration then, was really a product of both wartime expediency and imperial machinations’ (ibid: 11). What followed Balfour was the establishment of a British Mandate for Palestine (1923-1948) designed to implement the Declaration which saw rapid increases in the Jewish population to 170,000 by 1931 (ibid: 34) and the expulsion of 8,700 Palestinians from 22 villages (ibid: 25).

Occupation brought with it ‘institutionalised racism’ (ibid: 40) and lower pay than Jewish workers (ibid) which fed into a Palestinian rebellion in 1936. The response to the rebellion included the establishment of 13 detention camps in which Palestinians could be held without charge or trial for indefinite periods (ibid: 44). This practice continues today under ‘Administrative Detention’, with the Israeli human rights organisation B’tselem finding that between 2015 and 2017, 3,909 administrative detention orders were issued by the Israeli Defence Force (B’tselem, 2017). In the period of the British Mandate ‘extra-judicial executions became almost routine’ (Cronin, 2017: 52) and 6,000 Jewish police were armed by the British government (ibid: 53) while a media silence kept the British public in the dark concerning the occupation. Cronin describes Britain as ‘the midwife’ to the mass expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians in 1948 (ibid: 78) with around 160,000 remaining trapped inside the new state of Israel to ‘a system of military rule between 1948 and 1966’ (ibid: 82).

The period after the war was characterised by increasing arms sales to Israel, particularly from Britain with Centurion tanks used in the 1967 war with Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The 1967 war is called the *Naksa* (setback) when 400,000 Palestinians were displaced and 850 sq km of Palestinian land confiscated (ibid: 98-99). It was a Labour government that sold 100 tanks to Israel between 1967 and 1969 and the Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, said in May 1968 that: ‘The survival of Israel as a separate state is a

fundamental aspect of our Middle East policy’ (ibid: 100). As Israel started to acquire a nuclear arsenal, ‘Britain does not appear to have applied any serious pressure on Israel to come clean about its nuclear activities’ as a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (ibid: 109).

*Balfour’s Shadow* manages to succinctly cover key milestones in the century since Balfour with a spare and well researched narrative/analysis that, through the 1970s onward, saw burgeoning trade relations between the European Economic Community (EEC) and Israel through a free trade agreement (ibid: 114). It was also characterised by Britain’s side-lining of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and ‘unheroic’ endorsement of the highly partisan United States (US) support of Israel maintained by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (ibid: 113). This partisanship culminated in the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords which Cronin quotes Edward Said describing as ‘an instrument of Palestinian surrender’ (ibid: 131) and he himself says ‘turned the PLO leadership into the enforcers of the Israeli occupation’ (136). Under Oslo, Israel retains near exclusive control of Area C, representing 60 percent of the West Bank, including law enforcement, planning and construction. This has denied Palestinian construction rights and contributed to 600,000 colonists living in 200 settlements in the West Bank (White, 2016).

The shadow of Tony Blair looms large over the final forty pages of the book: first as a young member of parliament who joined Labour Friends of Israel in 1983: then as a co-author of the Iraq War described as ‘the worst crime committed so far this century’ (ibid: 151); then as an arms seller to Israel (£22.5 million in 2005 alone) (ibid: 150); then as supporter of an Israeli offensive in Lebanon that cost 1,000 lives (ibid: 149); and then in 2007, without a hint of irony, he was appointed a ‘Peace Envoy’ to the Quartet on the Middle-East comprising the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia (ibid: 151). The scale of miscalculation in his appointment gives some indication as to the lack of sensitivity of the world’s leading players to the problems of the Middle-East, many of whom can be sourced to their direct intervention.

Blair is also a prominent presence in Donald Macintyre's *Gaza: Preparing for the Dawn*, which gallops through the one hundred years of history examined by Cronin in the first chapter and then settles into a detailed and, at times, revealing account of Israel's policy toward the beleaguered coastal enclave. Macintyre concentrates on the effects of Israel's siege of Gaza, which was intensified after Hamas won free and fair Palestinian elections in 2006. In the previous year, Israel unilaterally withdrew its settlements from Gaza, the real purpose in which it is suggested here, was 'to consolidate Israel's grip on the West Bank' (Macintyre, 2017: 50-51). Israel used a security imperative for the withdrawal and, yet, '162 Israelis and foreign workers were killed in the five years before disengagement compared to 140 in the ten years afterwards' (ibid: 66). But it was the 2006 Palestinian election which was 'the turning point – arguably the turning point – in Gaza's fortunes over the next decade' (ibid: 81). Fed up with corruption in the Fatah movement, Palestinians voted Hamas into 74 out of 132 seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council (ibid: 81). The US and its allies refused to accept the result and, through the imposition of external pressure on the Palestinian Authority, reinforced divisions in the PLC.

The Quartet demanded that Hamas renounce the use of arms, recognise Israel and end its rejection of the Oslo Peace Accords – 'a remarkably tough line' according to Macintyre – which ensured that Hamas was frozen out of international diplomacy in the Middle-East. It further ruptured the Fatah – Hamas split into civil war and ultimately resulted in Hamas controlling the Gaza Strip and the Fatah, the West Bank. The resultant isolation of Hamas and Gaza was exacerbated by Israel's intensified siege imposed, again, on the ubiquitous basis of security, and subsequently condemned as 'collective punishment' by Amnesty International (2008). Israel has compounded the humanitarian suffering created by the siege by launching three wars on the territory from 2008-14 which have claimed the lives of 3,745 Palestinians and wounded 17,441 (Euromed Monitor, 2018). A decimated infrastructure, polluted water supply, crippled economy, dependence on aid and poor sanitation led the International Committee of the

Red Cross to alarmingly state that ‘a systemic collapse of an already battered infrastructure and economy is impending’ (ICRC, 2017).

Successive Israeli governments regularly justified the wars on incoming missile attacks from Hamas or other Islamist groups based in Gaza. But the Israeli Defence Force’s Brigadier General Shmuel Zakai, who headed IDF operations in Gaza to 2004 said:

“You cannot just land blows, leave the Palestinians in Gaza in the economic distress they’re in, and... expect that Hamas will just sit around and do nothing. That’s something that’s simply unrealistic” (Macintyre, 2017: 151).

But the wars proved popular in Israel which perhaps reflects the paucity of media reportage inside Israel and, as Macintyre suggests, these conflicts were used to divert public attention away from corruption allegations and other government failings (150). The fact that the US, European Union and its member states have so obediently followed the Israeli line on Gaza and the West Bank has become one of the main faultlines in international diplomacy today.

Macintyre uses local voices based on an extended reporting period inside Gaza to tell the story of the siege, wars and descent into humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. He makes clear that it is largely the result of the failings of international diplomacy and the self-interest of world powers prioritising lucrative trading links with Israel over the humanitarian needs of Palestinians. However, I am left somewhat uneasy with his account because it reproduces some of the Israeli lexicon of war: ‘Target killings’ (34), ‘Targeted assassination’ (40) and ‘Collateral death’ (38). On pages 156-157, he recalls the killing of a Palestinian mother in front of her children and the ‘semi-hysterical laughter’ of the unit that killed her as they recalled her children seeing her ‘smeared on the wall’. Macintyre puts this down to a ‘nervous reaction’ and ‘delayed shock’ (ibid: 157) which is hard to fathom given the litany of human rights abuses carried out by Israeli troops and

documented by the former combatants group Breaking the Silence (2018). Moreover, Macintyre's book was published before the upheaval caused by the Trump presidency moving the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and the commencement of the 'Great March of Return' in Gaza in March 2018 (*Aljazeera*, 2018). Finally, the contrasting tones of the two books is best captured by Macintyre's interviewing Tony Blair (*ibid*: 98) for his reflections on the Quartet in its response to the 2006 Palestinian elections after he left his 'Peace Envoy' role and, my recollection that David Cronin tried to carry out a citizen's arrest on Blair in 2010 (Beesley, 2010). Macintyre's interview with Blair seemed to bestow some credibility on his shambolic role as 'Peace Envoy' whereas Cronin, far from seeking an interview, would have sought justice for Blair's victims in Iraq.

Both books have value in shedding light on the Middle-East conflict but I suspect Cronin's account will have the more enduring value as it takes us back to the origins of the colonisation of Palestine and the shameful complicity of Britain through the Balfour Declaration.

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