

Boris Johnson, believe it or not, once made an incisive comment.

The comment related to the 1917 Balfour Declaration. Through that declaration, Britain supported the establishment of a so-called Jewish national home in Palestine, while pretending that it would not harm the indigenous people of that country.

Boris Johnson stated: “Another way of putting it might be that the British government viewed with favour the eating of a piece of cake by the Jewish people, provided that nothing should be done to prejudice the rights of non-Jewish communities to eat the same piece of cake at the same time.”

According to Johnson, the declaration was “bizarre”, “tragicomically incoherent” and an “exquisite masterpiece of Foreign Office fudgerama.”

Boris Johnson’s comment should be placed in its proper context.

The comment appeared in his fawning biography of Winston Churchill.

When the comment is read carefully, it becomes apparent that Johnson was not really concerned about the rights of Palestinians -- or “non-Jewish communities” as he described them, quoting the Balfour Declaration itself.

He was more concerned about how the Balfour Declaration undermined a previous commitment that Britain had given to the creation of what Johnson called a “big new Arab state” that would incorporate Palestine.

The result of these conflicting commitments was, according to Johnson, a “mess that Churchill had to clear up.”

I will touch on the question of how Churchill cleared up this particular mess shortly.

For the moment, I would like to keep the focus on Boris Johnson.

It may not surprise you to hear that Boris Johnson avoids drawing attention to how he once described the Balfour Declaration as “bizarre”.

Marking the 100th anniversary of the declaration in November 2017, Boris Johnson praised it as “an historic event, which led to a giant political fact.”

That “giant fact” was the foundation of Israel.

And according to Boris Johnson, Israel’s foundation was “one of the most stunning political achievements” during the 20th century.

Let us examine a little how this “stunning political achievement” came about.

It came about through decades of brutality against the Palestinians.

Much of the brutality was inflicted by Britain.

The Balfour Declaration was, as you probably know, signed by Arthur James Balfour, Britain’s foreign secretary during the First World War.

After the war ended, Balfour was adamant that the principle of self-determination then championed by America’s president Woodrow Wilson should not apply in Palestine.

Balfour argued that the Palestinians should not even be consulted about how Zionist colonisation would affect them. Zionism was, according to Balfour, rooted in “age-old traditions” of “far profounder import than the

desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.”

The Balfour Declaration was enshrined in the League of Nations mandate, under which Britain ruled Palestine between the two world wars.

Britain's support for Zionism soon had a discernible impact.

In 1920, Herbert Samuel became the first British high commissioner for Palestine.

Samuel was a staunch Zionist and his appointment drew consternation among many Palestinians.

They were right to be worried.

Samuel introduced measures to allow acquisition by the Zionist movement of land on which Palestinians had lived and farmed for generations.

Entire villages were bought up by colonisers in the Galilee region. When the people living in those villages refused to move, their complaints were overruled by Samuel's administration.

Large-scale evictions thereby received the green light from the British authorities.

Not surprisingly, the British and their Zionist allies encountered much resistance.

Faced with unrest in the early 1920s, the aforementioned Winston Churchill, then Britain's colonial secretary, recommended that a “picked force of white gendarmerie” should be formed and dispatched to Palestine. It would be comprised of men who had previously served in

the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries -- crown forces based in Ireland during its war of independence.

The Black and Tans remain despised in Ireland to this day for their vicious conduct.

Among their many crimes were that they shot dead my great grand-uncle Patrick Hartnett, who was a postman in County Limerick, and burnt down much of the town where I grew up in County Dublin.

While researching my book *Balfour's Shadow*, I found a 1938 Colonial Office document urging that "Black and Tan methods" should be avoided in Palestine. The appeal came a little late, to put it mildly.

Britain had been employing ruthless Black and Tan-like in Palestine for about two decades at that point.

Douglas Duff served with the Black and Tans in Galway before heading to Palestine as a recruit in the gendarmerie set up on Churchill's initiative.

Douglas Duff was an overt racist, who wrote about encountering "lesser breeds" in the Middle East. Duff rose through the ranks to become a police inspector in Jerusalem.

He has been immortalised in the phrase "duffing up", a euphemism for torture. Duff's memoirs indicate that he may have been a pioneer of that odious practice called waterboarding.

The British acknowledged in official reports that colonisation was leading to the mass eviction of Palestinians from the land on which they lived and farmed. Yet the British authorities continued facilitating the development of Zionist colonies, even approving plans to provide them with weapons.

In 1936, a major Palestinian revolt erupted.

Grattan Bushe, a legal adviser to Britain's Colonial Office, responded to the revolt by warning that "repression by force is repeating the mistake which was made in Ireland". His warning was ignored; military commanders were assured that they could take "whatever measures are necessary".

On the false pretext of urban renewal, the British demolished the Old City in Jaffa, leaving its residents homeless.

Charles Tegart, a police officer who had previously headed Britain's "security" forces in India, was tasked with giving tactical advice on how the revolt could be crushed.

On his recommendation, a huge barbed-wire fence, complete with that era's most advanced surveillance technology, was erected along part of Palestine's frontier.

Tegart's fence - as the project was known - cost around £2 million, a gigantic sum for that era. Tegart advocated too that a register should be compiled for villages with "bad reputations".

As it happened, the British had already begun work on such a register. In May 1939, more than 100 men were rounded up in Halhul, a village near Hebron, on the excuse that it had a bad reputation.

Eight men died from heat exhaustion after being held in an open air pen. The British authorities tried to blame their deaths on the weather but also admitted that the men were not given adequate food or water for a number of consecutive days.

State archives even refer to how Britain established a concentration camp near Sarafand al-Amar, a village on Palestine's coastal plain. I

hasten to add that it was the British themselves who described the facility as a “concentration camp”.

The Sarafand camp was used for the mass incarceration of those alleged to have taken part in the 1930s rebellion.

In the latter stages of that revolt, Bernard Montgomery, a high-ranking officer in the British Army, instituted a shoot to kill policy. According to Montgomery’s order, anyone who assisted a rebel should be treated as a rebel.

Such commands gave British soldiers carte blanche to terrorise Palestinians with impunity.

About 5,000 Palestinians were killed between 1936 and 1939.

Relative to population size, that was a higher casualty rate than the casualty rates caused by Israel during the two uprisings - or intifadas - which began in 1987 and 2000 respectively.

As part of efforts to crush the 1930s revolt, Britain hired members of the Haganah, the largest Zionist militia in Palestine and a forerunner of today’s Israeli army.

The result of Britain’s collaboration with the Haganah was that many of the forces who drove up to 800,000 Palestinians from their homes a decade later had received British training. Britain had, therefore, prepared the groundwork for the Nakba, the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

Nakba means catastrophe in Arabic.

It was through this catastrophe that the State of Israel was formed.

So when Boris Johnson called Israel's birth a "stunning political achievement" he was, in effect, dancing on the ruins of Palestinian villages that were depopulated by force.

Most of Israel's crimes throughout that state's history have either been enabled by Britain or had a direct, if often sneaky, British involvement.

British governments have tended to view Israel as a vehicle for advancing their interests in the Middle East, even to do their dirty work.

That was dramatically so in 1956, when Britain and France persuaded Israel to attack Egypt. The attack was launched because Britain and France felt that their interests in the region had been damaged by the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser and his decision to nationalise the Suez Canal, which was located on a key shipping route between Europe and India.

The 1956 offensive involved Israeli massacres in Gaza that have been omitted from a number of books on the Suez affair. They have, in effect, been airbrushed out of history by many historians.

In June 1967, Israel went to war against its neighbours once again. The military occupation of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Gaza and the Golan Heights which commenced that summer persists to this day.

The occupation was facilitated by hundreds of battle tanks that Britain exported to Israel before war was declared. The British embassy in Tel Aviv was pleased by feedback from Israeli generals about how those tanks performed better than had been expected.

Israel has provided a violent sense of continuity by basing the occupation on rules imposed by the British when they administered Palestine. Invoking such rules, it should be stressed, does not absolve Israel from its routine violations of international law.

Britain's policies on the Middle East have become increasingly shaped by the US in recent decades. Ronald Reagan resorted to the kind of duplicity that subsequent American presidents have replicated.

Reagan boosted military aid to Israel, while portraying Palestinians as the obstacle to peace. Margaret Thatcher echoed him by branding all armed opposition to Israel as terrorism.

Thatcher was the first British prime minister who undertook an official visit to Israel. During her stay, she gushed about how Israeli democracy was "flourishing".

Tony Blair has been demonstrably worse.

During his decade in Downing Street, Blair turned Britain into a subcontractor for Israel's occupation.

British prison guards, for example, oversaw the detention of Palestinians locked up in the West Bank.

Britain also provided much of the finance and personnel to set up a European Union "policing operation" for Palestine. Its purpose has been to ensure that police working for the Palestinian Authority cooperate with Israel -- in other words that some Palestinians serve the interests of their oppressor.

This week Blair was a "star attraction" at the conference on Palestine hosted by Jared Kushner - Donald Trump's son-in-law - in Bahrain.

There is a nauseating logic behind why Kushner would want to recruit Blair.

Immediately after stepping down as prime minister in 2007, Blair became what the mainstream press called a "peace envoy" for the Middle East.

In that role Blair launched a number of initiatives supposedly designed to prime pump the Palestinian economy. The philosophy behind those initiatives can be compared with Jared Kushner's "Peace to Prosperity" agenda.

Blair's objective was to pursue an economic development model that would benefit a few entrepreneurs, while leaving intact the occupation and its attendant cruelties.

He even requested that Israel make its military checkpoints a little less intimidating for tourists travelling between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Israel could keep a chokehold around Palestinian life so long as it would make things a bit more pleasant for Western visitors.

For a number of years, the British elite has displayed a determination to increase business with Israel.

According to official data, trade between Israel and Britain is worth almost £4 billion per year.

For some reason, Theresa May has cited even higher figures. She has claimed that total annual trade between Britain and Israel comes to £9 billion.

Britain is Israel's number one destination for trade in Europe, May said during December 2018.

In February this year, Britain's trade secretary Liam Fox signed a new agreement with Israel. Its aim is to ensure that business with Israel will not be damaged by Britain's departure from the European Union.

Britain's politicians have tried to portray the economic relationship with Israel as benign. Among other things, British government ministers have

celebrated how the National Health Service frequently uses Israeli medicines.

Yet there is a more sinister side to this relationship.

Britain's embassy in Tel Aviv has established the so-called UK-Israel Tech Hub. Its official aim is to boost cooperation between Israeli and British entrepreneurs.

The UK-Israel Tech Hub is headed by Haim Shani. He is a significant player in Israel's arms industry.

In 2012, Haim Shani was appointed a director of Israel Aerospace Industries, a company making drones and other weapons that have been used in major attacks on Gaza.

Last year, Buckingham Palace announced that it was making Haim Shani an honorary officer of the Order of the British Empire.

Given all the horrors Britain has brought to the world, few titles can be more disgusting than Order of the British Empire -- even if it is prefixed by the bewildering term "honorary officer".

Yet Haim Shani seemed to take pride in the award. Enabling war crimes seems to be a guaranteed way of earning respect among the upper echelons in British society.

Following Operation Cast Lead, the Israeli attack on Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009, Britain's then foreign secretary David Miliband made something of a confession. It was "almost certain," Miliband said that British weapons had been used in that offensive.

More than 10 years later, Britain is continuing to supply Israel with weapons.

Newly-released data shows that the British government approved arms deals with Israel worth at least £14 million last year.

One of the authorisations for transferring military equipment was granted a few days after Israel massacred more than 60 protesters in Gaza during May 2018.

That illustrates how British statements of “concern” about the situation in Gaza are hollow and hypocritical.

As well as selling arms to Israel, Britain has attracted considerable investment from Israel’s war industry.

Elbit Systems, another leading Israeli weapons maker, has announced its intention to treat Britain as an “actual home market.”

Elbit has stated that it owns five companies in Britain. They include one in Shenstone, near Birmingham.

Furthermore, Elbit is actively involved in Europe’s largest drone programme. Known as Watchkeeper, it has been commissioned by the British Army.

The programme’s objective is to supply Britain with remote-controlled killing machines modelled on those which Israel has used while attacking Gaza.

It must be stressed that the British government does not represent the British people.

The Conservative Party’s card-carrying members comprise only a tiny fraction of the British population. Yet they are the only people who have a say in selecting your next prime minister.

Boris Johnson - who I may have mentioned earlier - has been openly hostile towards the Palestine solidarity movement.

Boris Johnson has said that he “could not think of anything more foolish” than boycotting Israel. With typical charm, he has described advocates of a boycott as “ridiculous, snaggle-toothed, corduroy-wearing lefty academics.”

If Boris Johnson insults you, then there is a strong likelihood you are doing the right thing.

The call to boycott Israel has been made by Palestinians who have experienced decades of apartheid and occupation.

I have every confidence that ordinary British people will listen to the voices of the oppressed, regardless of what Boris Johnson might say.

