# Palestine in Britain: Sovereignty and Diplomacy After Balfour

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In February of this year, Theresa May announced that Britain would not apologise for the Balfour Declaration, an event that marks Britain's role in the creation of Israel and the violent displacement of the Palestinians. Rather, May urged that Britons should feel pride in its hundred-year anniversary. Palestinian ambassador to Britain, Manuel Hassassian, said he had received a letter confirming the British position: "The answer came in a written letter to the (Palestinian) foreign ministry that the apology is refused" (*Middle East Eye*, 2017). May's proposal that the 2 November 2017 should be a day of balanced celebration is a diplomatic act that continues to perform Britain's Eurocentric engagement with the Palestinian struggle, and despite holding a position of ambassador, Palestine's sovereignty is not recognised.

Within international relations, diplomacy is traditionally regarded as the practices through which nation-states or officials authorised to act in the state's name mediate their interests and their needs. Diplomacy is something that states perform and it is performative: through enacting diplomatic practices states are constituted as such. The availability and promise of diplomacy presents Palestinians with two difficulties, the first is to do with the lack of access to the performative roles and rituals of statehood and the second, draws on Sam Opondo's critique of diplomatic rituals being haunted by their colonial past.

**The Performative Diplomacy of a Non-State**

Der Derian's genealogy of European diplomacy demonstrates how nation-states engage in diplomatic practices to mediate estrangement and alienation. States engage in diplomacy to perform an approximation to international order. Diplomatic practices and processes become the tools through which states indirectly satisfy their ability to perform international order. Feldman explores how national minorities emerge as a threat to the stability of international order within this logic of diplomacy, precisely because they disturb the order through which recognised states mutually exchange their recognition. State actors desire international recognition because it provides access to these practices that are constitutive of the international order (Feldman, 2005, p. 219-225). Without such access to the rituals of legitimacy associated with the state, actors cannot perform this order. Rather, the performativity of such lack of access constitutes these actors as unruly, as precisely non-sovereign. Palestinian leadership do not have access to the normal diplomatic practices that allow actors to perform their authority and legitimacy. The performative effects of this lack of access, I argue, is the continued ability to disregard, ignore, and infantilise the claims made by Palestinian leadership. Whereby within the international sphere they are treated as sub-sovereign or pseudo-sovereign, and thus their demands are not taken seriously.

Palestinian leadership has faced this exclusion from the time of the Balfour Declaration. Rashid Khalidi describes how during the British Mandate that "Palestinians did not have any form of organised access to the supposedly uncontested, 'neutral,' and universally accepted forum that a state […] provides to a polity" (Khalidi, 2006, p.43). The British high commissioner was the highest authority– there was no parliament or any other elected nationwide representative body.[1] Unlike other countries in the region who had some access to the institutions of self-rule, Khalidi explains Palestinians were a new polity emerging without being allowed any of the attributes of stateness (ibid., p.38). Whereas the Jewish Agency was awarded recognition and was given access to perform its diplomatic

practices before the League of Nations, and in various capitals around the world, Palestinians had no such international standing. Israel was able to take over the levers of the administrative structure left behind by the British Mandate with ease and perform their legitimacy on the international sphere (ibid., p.43). While Palestinian leadership struggled to disentangle themselves from the legal and constitutional constraints imposed by Britain (ibid., p.47). That inability to fully enact sovereignty remains, and diplomatic gestures or encounters, such as Palestinian leadership's attempt to achieve recognition at the United Nation or the UK Parliament's vote on recognising Palestinian statehood are further performances of non-statehood, through which the status of sovereignty is denied.

**The Coloniality of Diplomatic Practices**

Opondo presents a crucial critique of European diplomacy, as the processes through which the alterity of the Other are mediated into a knowable subject. The diplomatic practices through which international recognition is performed, requested and awarded explains Opondo "remain silent on the foundational violence and ongoing exclusions that create the conditions of possibility for such practices" (Opondo, 2012, p.46). In *Orientalism*, Said offers a full account of Balfour's performed knowing of the Oriental, through which the strange or foreign are produced as knowable through the authoritative practices of British statesmen. Balfour denies the possibility that the Orientals have a history or past of self-governance. In his address to the House of Commons he exclaims, "You may look through the whole history of the Orientals in what is called, broadly speaking, the East, and you never find traces of self-government" (Said, 1979, p.32). The Other is denied access to mediate for themselves, as colonial knowledge performs the Other has having no agency and thus not able to speak or act for themselves (ibid., p.33). They are denied self-rule and denied access to mediate their own estrangement. Opondo explains that:

"to begin to assess the political implications of thinking the diplomatic beyond prevailing forms of recognition, we must heed modern diplomatic thought's intimate involvement with mediation practices, identities and cultural expressions that are elitist, Eurocentric and geo-philosophical in a statist sense" (Opondo, 2012, p.50).

His works encourage us to critique the coloniality of modern day diplomacy and the presuppositions around identity and sovereignty that regimes of recognition promulgate (ibid., p. 194). His critiques provoke awareness of the diplomatic habits through which the British perform their own imperial legacy through their invitation to extend international recognition. As such, when British parliamentarians debate, discuss and vote on Palestinian sovereignty within the House of Commons, as they did in 2014 we remain critical that through these practices, gestures and stylised discussions sovereignty will emerge. The House of Commons debate stresses the importance both of territorial sovereignty and the diplomatic ritual of awarding recognition. Some MPs argue that recognition should be awarded in order to assist Palestinian leadership to negotiate for a two-state solution. We also hear that international recognition should only emerge through bilateral negotiations between Israel and Palestine. One MP is also frustrated that in not recognising Palestine Britain does not perform its own autonomy from Israeli influence (HC Deb 13 Oct. 2014, cc. 61-231). The emphasis in these discussions is that by performing diplomatic practices in the name of the state, sovereignty can be achieved.

**Conclusion: A Bodily Performance of Communal Sovereignty**

By way of conclusion, we might move to consider alternative forms of demanding recognition that shift the ritual of diplomacy away from relying on those modes of recognition that already produce Palestine and Palestinians as non-sovereign, as pseudo-actors or as conditioned through an imperial legacy. Expressions, manifestations and performances of the *body* that do not fit so easily into statist diplomatic rituals may offer an alternative departure point from which to think about Palestinian sovereignty. Fierke has observed ways in which expressions of the self might reach the international, with hunger strikes for example, as acts of self-sacrifice that respond to power imbalances (Fierke, 2012, p.229). Opondo looks at the musical performances of Fela Kuti, whose genre of Afro-beats and satirical critique subvert the diplomatic order in its attempt to sanitise history. Fela's work, "superimposes the surpluses of an excretory system upon statist, elitist and Eurocentric visions of the world" and challenges the privileged place of European diplomacy with the lives and abjected practices of excluded peoples (Opondo, 2012, p.54; 56).

We may look at Palestinian hunger strikes as one example of an alternative departure point from which to consider sovereignty. How does the body defy regimes of intelligibility but also offer an expanded reach of solidarity and sovereignty. In April 2017, 1,500 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons began a hunger strike to improve their carceral conditions and to protest against administrative detention. Thousands of supporters in Palestine, such as family members and former prisoners, and activists around the world have acted in solidarity with the hunger strikers. The body of the prisoner exudes historical injustice, performs dignity and invites open solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for recognition. In a conversation with her father, a former prisoner and hunger striker, Shahd Abusalama explains the physicality of the battle over the prisoner's body, such as the *zonda,* the device used to force-feed the strikers, which "looked like it had just been dipped in sewage," as the prison guards did not clean it between uses (Abusalama, 2017). In 2017 this former prisoner stood with other Palestinians in refusing food: "Every day, he goes to a tent in Gaza that has been erected in solidarity with the hunger strikers" (ibid.). The strike ended on the 27 May 2017, as an agreement was reached and the prisoners solidarity committee stated that it was a "victory for the Palestinian people and the prisoners in their epic defence of freedom and dignity" (Abunimah, 2017). Here the body might express freedom and dignity in a way that will not be mediated by statist diplomatic practices, but that may be performative of an extended notion of sovereignty available to the Palestinian people.

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**Notes**

[1] During the Ottoman Empire Palestinians had elected deputies in 1877, 1908 and 1912 and 1914. (Khalidi 2006, p.41).

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