POLITICS TODAY

Britain’s Undefined Palestine Policy: From the Balfour Declaration to the Gaza Ceasefire

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The UK's ambiguous position on Palestine continues to raise questions.



Keir Starmer, the UK's Prime Minister. — Photo by Anadolu Images.

Historically, Great Britain was one of the most powerful countries and dominant actors during the 17th and 18th centuries, as the Ottoman Empire was weakening. After the Industrial Revolution, Britain emerged as a dominant world power in economics, commercial routes, politics, maritime, and the military. Depending on its power and resources, England began acquiring colonies in different parts of the world, such as Africa, North America, the Middle East, and India.

As the global colonial race accelerated, formidable rivals such as Italy, France, and Germany emerged. Changes in the social, political, and other dynamics within the international system caused Britain’s dominant position to falter, as it did for

other empires and superpowers throughout history. Notably, the rise, development, and spread of nationalism throughout the world led to rebellions against colonial rule and struggles for independence in countries under colonial British rule.

This applied to the Middle East. After World War I, a number of uprisings broke out under the influence of pan-Arabism in countries that Britain shared with France under the Sykes–Picot Agreement (1916). When the Arab nationalist movement emerged in Palestine between 1936 and 1939, Britain's situation became even more difficult. This was because Britain had promised to establish a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine in the 1917 Balfour Declaration and thus had to contend with two distinct national and political groups in the region.

The White Paper

According to Professor Pappe, a leading Israeli scholar on the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948, Palestine under British mandate was governed by the British, desired by the Zionists, and claimed by the Hashemites until the 1920s. After the 1920s, London placed a greater emphasis on efforts to establish a federal state and undertook initiatives such as the Passfield White Paper.

The British Empire presented the "Balfour Declaration" in 1917, which promised to give Jews a national homeland in Palestine, as a pragmatic political option for its interests in the region. When it could not cope with Jewish immigration, the Empire was forced to pursue a "policy of appeasement" toward both the Arab and Jewish populations. However, another important factor influencing Britain's decision to leave the region amid Jewish attacks on British authority was the regional situation and geopolitics.

By 1947, threats from Germany and Italy had been eliminated. London had maintained control in Egypt and the Suez Canal and no longer needed a buffer state like Palestine. This also led to a gradual decline in Britain's inclination to establish a two-state federal system or a Palestinian state.

A more cautious policy in the region

After Israel's establishment in 1948, Britain pursued a more cautious policy in the region because the U.S. was increasingly settling in the Middle East, and Britain did not want to provoke Arab countries' reactions. After losing its decisive role in the region to the U.S., especially following the "Suez Crisis" (1956), Britain deviated from its pro-Arab policies and began supporting Israel to control its rising power.

Having lost its regional leadership to the U.S., some of Britain's actions and policies during this period were shaped by competition with Washington. In this context, Britain's policy on Palestine was largely shaped by the policies of larger and rival powers, as in the past, following the 1957 Eisenhower Doctrine. After this historical turning point, London tried to design a Palestine policy that would break the U.S.'s regional hegemony.

Breaking away from the U.S.

Despite this, a historical analysis reveals that Britain is more aligned with U..S regional policy and has supported Jewish settlements in opposition to Arab interests. Initially, British policymakers followed an integrated regional policy with the U.S. However, especially after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, Britain has not hesitated to criticize American policy toward the Middle East and often Israel's actions and its policy toward Palestine.

For example, the U.K. has occasionally criticized Israeli violence due to actions that harm the "Middle East Peace Process," as well as the First and Second Intifadas. Furthermore, the 2007 Foreign Affairs Committee Report of the British House of Commons warned the British government against establishing relations with organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas.

A Turning point: October 2023

As time went by, Britain's shift towards a pro-Arab stance and opposition to the pro-Israeli American Middle East policy raised concerns in Tel Aviv. In a 2017 House of Lords meeting, it was decided that London would not align with the U.S. in the region and would develop its own unique Middle East policy.

In 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May rejected U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to declare Jerusalem the "unified capital of Israel" and move the U.S. embassy there. This rejection was interpreted as a departure from British foreign policy efforts to establish a unique presence in the Middle East.

The Israeli army's invasion and destruction of Gaza following the Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023, and its genocide against the Palestinian population were condemned by the international community. Like many other Western capitals, the British government announced that it would recognize Palestine as a state.

However, the UK's ambiguous position on Palestine continues to raise questions. Although London strongly opposed the Israeli authorities' establishment of more

settlements in the West Bank in 2019 and beyond, and criticized the Gaza massacre, the UK's military and technological relations with Tel Aviv have continued thanks to the Jewish lobby's influence on the British parliament, which we also see at the U.S. Congress.

Stressing the importance of two-state solution

Following the "Sharm el-Sheikh Declaration," spearheaded by the U.S. in September 2025, which ensured the ceasefire in Gaza, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer made a statement saying, "What is happening will only end if there is a two-state solution," and pointing out that his country (the U.K.) was working with the U.S., Arab countries, and European countries behind the scenes for the ceasefire.

As a result, Britain's Palestine policy has been unclear, complex, and incomplete from the past to the present. This is due to periodic differences, the historical background, and strategies shaped by the occasional coordination and competition with the U.S. various factors have also influenced this policy. Britain promised the Jews a state in the region with the Balfour Declaration (1917), which gained ground in the region after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

However, Britain expected the U.S. to return to its isolationist policy after World War II and was greatly surprised when this did not materialize. After losing its dominant position in the Middle East to the U.S. in 1958 with the Eisenhower Doctrine, London tried to take a more pro-Arab stance on the Palestinian issue by cooperating with the U.S. However, it often struggled to successfully implement this policy and faced constant dilemmas due to its continued support for Israel.

#gaza genocide #israel #gaza #united kingdom



Mehmet Babacan

Mehmet Babacan completed his PhD in 2025 at Bursa Uludag University with a thesis on Jerusalem and Palestine studies. He works as an independent researcher. He has various national and international publications about Turkish foreign policy, Israeli-Palestinian relations, US Middle East policy, and other regional foreign policy issues. Babacan has also served as a “Researcher” in YOK (Council of Higher Education) and EU projects.