**Lord Warner hosts PRC for Parliamentary event on ‘Palestine and the Balfour Declaration’**

Palestine Return Centre

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<https://prc.org.uk/en/post/3783/lord-warner-hosts-prc-for-parliamentary-event-on-palestine-and-the-balfour-declaration>

The Palestine Return Centre (PRC) organized a parliamentary meeting in the Houses of Parliament on the 20th of November titled “Palestine and the Balfour Declaration”, hosted and chaired by Lord Norman Warner, a cross-bench peer, and a Labour health minister between 2003 and 2007.

The speakers at the event included Salma Karmi-Ayyoub, barrister and legal consultant for the Palestinian human rights organisation Al Haq; Bernard Regan, author of The Balfour Declaration: Empire, the Mandate and Resistance in Palestine, and John Rees, historian, broadcaster and campaigner. He is a Visiting Research Fellow at Goldsmith’s, University of London and a National Officer of the Stop the War Coalition.

Each speaker approached the topic of Palestine and the Balfour Declaration from a specialist angle. Bernard Regan provided the context of the creation of the Declaration, focusing on the discussions that took place in the cabinet around the time of its foundation. Regan drew attention to Britain’s main objective in the Declaration; that is the pursuit of Britain’s imperial interests rather than a concern for the welfare and safety of the Jewish population. Regan described the Declaration as a “marriage of convenience between the British and Zionism,” while emphasizing that the decision to create the Declaration was not unanimous.

John Rees further highlighted the presence of alternative voices, pointing out that supporters of Israel would like to portray the creation of its state as “inevitable or uncontested. But the Balfour Declaration allows us to see that the establishment of Israel was neither of those two things.” Indeed, John Rees drew attention to the fact that the Declaration was contested at the highest level in the cabinet by Edwin Samuel Montagu, the third practicing Jew to ever serve in the British cabinet. Montagu’s prophetic remarks that the Zionist project would lead to a displacement of Palestinians, and that there would be a backlash against the Jewish population, were not listened to – not least due to the anti-Semitic attitudes in the cabinet. John also highlighted that British policy wasn’t only backing the Zionist project. T.E. Lawrence was apparently promising the same land to the Arab population in order to advance their project in the Ottoman Empire, illustrating Britain’s method of using any indigenous population to advance their imperial policies – which to this day causes instability and shifting alliances in the Middle East.

Salma Karmi-Ayyoub used her platform as an opportunity to reflect on what she found to be the root causes of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and stressed that there is a need for a paradigm shift in our way of thinking about Israel;

“We should move away from the notion that Israel is a state that is guilty of numerous human rights abuses, towards the notion that Israel has an unlawful regime.”

Karmi-Ayyoub highlighted that the root of the conflict comes down to contradictions between the right of Palestinian people for self determination and the ‘Jewish Project’; the privileging of Jews over other populations in order to create a Jewish majority state. The ‘problem’ arises with the indigenous population, which resulted in ethnic cleansing and a wholesale of Palestinian property. The consequence is thus the maintenance of a regime of racial discrimination of Palestinians inside both historical Palestine and the occupied territories.

Salma Karmi-Ayyoub made a key reference to a 2004 International Court of Justice report[i], which issued an advisory opinion that Israel’s building of a barrier in the occupied Palestinian territory is illegal, that construction must stop immediately and Israel should make reparations for any damage caused. Although these are important recommendations, and Israel is de facto seen as having an unlawful regime, Karmi-Ayyoub suggested that the legal community must go a step further and explicitly state that the occupation itself is illegal, and as an extension of Israeli government practices, would make Israel an illegal regime.

When a regime is deemed ‘unlawful’, international law dictates that states are obliged to not recognize the regime, and work to end it. However, practical UK foreign policy actively supports the arms trade, supports settlement produce, and, crucially, provides diplomatic cover for Israel. UK foreign policy is thus “unlawful under standards of international law”, Karmi-Ayyoub stressed, and urged supporters of Palestine to change their view of Israel in order to move the UK government to take their words into action.

To summarise, Lord Norman Warner facilitated a stimulating discussion amongst the audience and offered the speakers a chance to share their closing remarks. Salma Karmi-Ayyoub again stressed the importance of a paradigm shift, and suggested that perhaps a new generation with a new vision will be able to find unforeseen solutions. For the moment, she encouraged supporters of Palestine to adopt BDS, respecting the wishes of the Palestinian people. John Rees finished off with a similar sentiment, quoting the adage that “wars and revolutions are unforeseeable before they happen, and inevitable after they happen”. Bernard Regan emphasized the importance of international solidarity, also inviting supporters of Palestine to join the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, the BDS campaign, and pay attention to the needs of people in Palestine.

Lord Norman Warner lastly drew attention to the fact that the British government has still not recognized the state of Palestine, and criticized the difficulty with which Parliamentarians can visit Gaza.