TfL bans ads displaying Palestinian objections to Balfour declaration

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<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/oct/17/tfl-bans-ads-displaying-palestinian-objections-to-balfour-declaration>

Adverts highlighting Palestinian objections to the [Balfour declaration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balfour_Declaration) of 1917, when Britain promised to establish a Jewish national home in [Palestine](https://www.theguardian.com/world/palestinian-territories), have been blocked by [Transport for London](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/tfl) on the grounds that the issue is politically controversial.

Manuel Hassassian, the Palestinian ambassador to the UK, has accused [TfL](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/tfl) of censorship. Organisers had hoped to see the adverts displayed at key underground stations and on buses in the run-up to the centenary of the first world war pledge on 2 November.

Theresa May and her Israeli counterpart, [Benjamin Netanyahu](https://www.theguardian.com/world/benjamin-netanyahu), are expected to be the guests of honour at a London dinner celebrating the occasion, the most high-profile of several events. There are planned protests demanding that the UK, which has refused to apologise for the declaration, work to advance Palestinian rights and recognise the injustice and continuing consequences of its promise.

The advertising campaign, called Make It Right, was commissioned by the Palestine Mission to the UK. It included contrasting images of Palestinian life before and after 1948, when Israel won its war of independence and some 700,000 Palestinians fled or were driven from their homes. It also quoted the declaration’s famous qualification that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”. It did not mention [Israel](https://www.theguardian.com/world/israel).

Arthur Balfour was foreign secretary in David Lloyd George’s government, which planned to carve up the territories of the Ottoman empire after the war and believed British interests could be served by supporting Zionist ambitions in Palestine even as other incompatible commitments had been made to Arab nationalists as well as to its allies, France and Russia.

TfL rejected the adverts because they “did not comply fully with our guidelines,” a spokesman said. Clause 2.3(h) refers to “images or messages which relate to matters of public controversy or sensitivity”. TfL also bans causes that are “party political”.

The advertising agency involved was not asked to make changes, as often happens, and was informed after an unusually long delay that the campaign would not be approved. It was unclear why an identical teaser ad, which was displayed in Westminster underground station last year, had been cleared.

Hassassian said in a statement: “Palestinian history is a censored history. There has been a 100-year-long cover-up of the British government’s broken promise, in the Balfour declaration, to safeguard the rights of the Palestinians when it gave away their country to another people. TfL’s decision is not surprising as it is, at best, susceptible to or, at worst, complicit with, all the institutional forces and active lobby groups which continuously work to silence the Palestinian narrative. There may be free speech in Britain on every issue under the sun but not on Palestine.”

Tfl and the Foreign Office denied they had discussed the advertising campaign. The mayor of London, [Sadiq Khan](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/sadiqkhan), was not involved in the decision.

The Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, [demanded last year that Britain apologise for the Balfour declaration](https://www.theguardian.com/world/on-the-middle-east/2016/jul/27/will-palestinians-sue-britain-over-the-balfour-declaration-of-1917). The government said in April that it would not do so, adding that “establishing a homeland for the Jewish people in the land to which they had such strong historical and religious ties was the right and moral thing to do, particularly against the background of centuries of persecution”.

However, it recognised that the declaration should have also called for the protection of Arab political rights and reiterated the importance of achieving “security and justice for both Israelis and Palestinians through a lasting peace”. In recent weeks Arabic-language Foreign Office statements have emphasised that the UK is not interested in symbols and gestures but practical measures to help Palestinians suffering under Israeli occupation.

Hassassian said: “There has been a 100-year-long cover-up of Israel’s crimes: its ethnic cleansing of the majority of the Palestinian population in 1948; its unrelenting years of aggression and present brutal occupation.”

The Make It Right ads will be displayed on taxis, which are subject to less stringent advertising rules. The taxis are expected to drive around events organised by those celebrating the centenary, including Christian Zionists, who are organising a rally at the Albert Hall.

Israeli officials say it is right to celebrate the centenary and have accused those demanding an apology of being antisemitic and ignoring Palestinian hostility and intransigence.