



# **BALFOUR DECLARATION**

## **THE BASICS**

For WWI-era British policymakers, the Balfour Declaration was a matter of national interest, balanced by a desire to foster a Jewish national home while ensuring Arab civil and religious rights.

For the Jewish people, it represented the beginning of the end of 2,000 years of statelessness.

For its enemies, the Balfour Declaration remains the West's never-expiated 'original sin'.

## Balfour Declaration: The Basics

HERE IS where the world stood on Friday morning, November 2, 1917:

A World War which had begun in the summer of 1914 was still pitting the Central Powers—including Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey)—against the Allies led by France, Britain and Russia. Only seven months earlier, on April 6, the United States had abandoned neutrality and entered the fray on the side of the Allies. The first American soldiers were now in France, at the front.

The world had been torn asunder.



That morning the newspapers reported—incorrectly it transpired—that Austro-German forces had captured 60,000 Italian Allied prisoners. Also reported was heavy artillery fire on the western front at Flanders, near German-occupied Belgium.

In Russia, where Tsar Nicholas II had been overthrown in March, the government of the liberal Alexander

Kerensky had just done well in local elections.<sup>1</sup> But the country's resolve to stay in the war was shattered; within one week, on November 7, the Bolsheviks (or communists), led by Vladimir Lenin, would overthrow Kerensky and Russia would pull out of the war.

The war had devastated Britain. Nevertheless, the British Empire would fight on for another full year until November 11, 1918, when the Central Powers capitulated. By then well over 700,000 British troops from every stratum of society had been killed in the World War.

Also on that Friday morning in November, the newspapers reported that Beersheba, a desert town in Ottoman-controlled Palestine, had been captured by British forces. The British Army, headquartered in Egypt, had already taken control of Palestine's Gaza coastal strip.

But one piece of momentous news came too late to make it into the morning newspapers that day. British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour (1848-1930)—Conservative member of a wartime coalition government led by Liberal Party Prime Minister David Lloyd George (1863-1945)—had written to Lionel Walter Rothschild

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<sup>1</sup> Because of a calendar the event is conventionally referred to as the February Revolution rather than the March Revolution.

(1868-1937), a leader of the Jewish community. The letter, now known as the Balfour Declaration, read:

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following Declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet.

'His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.'

I should be grateful if you would bring this Declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours,  
Arthur James Balfour

One week later, on November 9, 1917, a terse dispatch on the Declaration headlined "Britain Favors Zionism" appeared in *The New York Times*. The newspaper and its German Jewish owners were unsympathetic to the Zionist cause. Citing Balfour's letter, the New York newspaper referred to a *Jewish Chronicle* commentary that spoke of an end to Jewish exile.

In Britain, *The Daily Express*—then owned by Lord Beaverbrook—ran the story (also on November 9) under the more expansive headline: "A State for the Jews."

That same November 9, 1917, *The Times* of London headlined its brief report: "Palestine for the Jews. Official sympathy"

Among the other newspapers that carried the story were:

- The *Daily Chronicle* opined that "one has to go back to Cyrus for a parallel" referring to Babylon's Cyrus the Great who had allowed the Jews to return to Palestine circa 458 BCE. Nebuchadnezzar, a previous ruler of Babylon had expelled the Jews and destroyed their temple in 586 BCE. In lauding the Declaration, *The Chronicle* said it would bolster the British Empire's hold on the strategic Suez Canal.
- *Irish Times* – "It would be a great gain that the Jews become a nation and not a hyphenation"
- *The Globe* – "It is indeed a victory for the Jews, but equally a British triumph"
- *Manchester Guardian* – "This extraordinary people"

- *The Scotsman* – "Next Year in Jerusalem"

First, though, there was the matter of completing the liberation of Palestine from the crumbling Ottoman Empire.

### **Back Story: Palestine and Arabia**

Towards the end of January and beginning of February 1915, an Ottoman attempt to capture the strategic Suez Canal in British-controlled Egypt had been pushed back by the British Army in a key attack now known as the Battle of the Suez Canal.

As they contemplated the inevitable post-war colonial competition with France and other powers, British strategists—among them T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia")—had sought, with dubious results beyond the Arabian Peninsula, to mobilize Arab chieftains in the Allied war against the Ottoman Turks.

Thus in talks between the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, and Hussein bin Ali, the Hashemite ruler who had declared himself Sharif of Mecca, Britain promised on October 24, 1915, to back Arab independence in Arabia. Crucially, no reference was made to Palestine. The Arab Revolt started in June 1916 with attacks on Ottoman garrisons in Arabia.

It should be noted that at the post-WWI Paris Peace Conference in 1919 Hussein and his son Feisal did not so much as suggest that McMahon had promised Palestine for the Arabs.

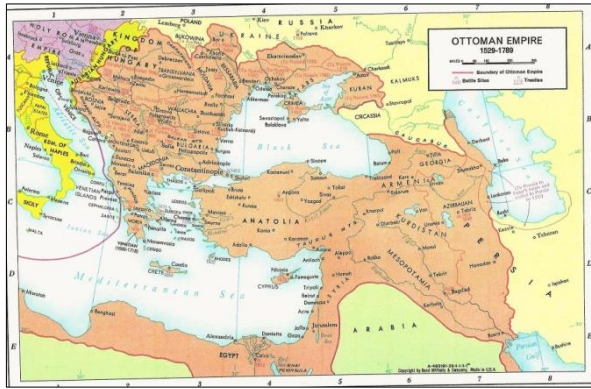
McMahon himself wrote in *The Times* in 1937: "I feel it my duty to state, and I do so definitely and emphatically, that it was not intended by me in giving this pledge to King Hussein to include Palestine in the area in which Arab independence was promised. I had also every reason to believe at the time that the fact that Palestine was not included in my pledge was well understood by King Hussein."

In May 1916, Sir Mark Sykes (1879-1919) of Britain and François Georges-Picot (1870-1951) of France had—without informing either the Zionists or the Arabs—broadly arranged how the powers would divide the Mideast once Ottoman Turkey



was defeated. Much of Palestine was to come under international control. The secret Sykes-Picot Agreement (also approved in principle by Tsarist Russia), would later be made public by Lenin's Russia. When they learned of the accord both Zionists and Arabs were dismayed.

Nation state sovereignty, it should be noted, was a construct of Western international law. Ottoman



Turkey claimed to be a Muslim caliphate; the Sultan was its supreme leader, his political power legitimized by religion. The loyalty of ordinary Arabs, Turks, Persians, Berbers and Kurds was first and foremost to their immediate family, then to clan and tribe. The Ottomans had ruled over

the Middle East since 1299—and from the Maghreb (or North Africa) to the Mashriq (the Arab world east of Egypt) there were no sovereign Arab states. The first glimmers of Arab nationalism in opposition to the Ottoman Turks might be traceable to Negib Azouri (1870–1916), a Lebanese Maronite Christian who, writing in Paris in 1905, proposed the creation of a pan-Arab state—rooted in race and language—to stretch from the "Tigris and the Euphrates to the Suez and from the Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea."

Azouri would have excluded Egypt from his pan-Arab state because, he wrote, "the Egyptians do not belong to the Arab race; they are of the African Berber family and the language which they spoke before Islam bears no similarity to Arabic."

### **Britain Captures Palestine**

On December 11, 1917 General Edmund Allenby demonstratively entered Jerusalem's Old City on foot, through the Jaffa Gate, signifying the capture of the city. In London Prime Minister David Lloyd George heralded the city's capture as "a Christmas present for the British people."

The rest of Palestine and the Mideast followed in due course. In Iraq, Baghdad fell to British forces in March 1918. By September-October 1918 the Ottomans had been utterly defeated and driven back to Anatolia (today's Turkey).

The Palestine that the British took charge of was parched and terribly neglected: Jerusalem had few pavements, no sewer system and no electricity. Wartime blockades had contributed to food shortages; locusts had ruined what little could be grown. Not much seemed to have changed since the American writer Mark Twain (1835-1910) had visited in 1867 and described the country as a "hopeless, dreary, heartbroken land."

### **Political Zionism**

The First Zionist Congress, organized by Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), was held in Basle, Switzerland, in August 1897. Herzl—in a precursor to the thinking behind the Balfour Declaration—sought to secure an international declaration approving the idea of a Jewish homeland.

"Zion" was another name for Jerusalem. It was first used in the Bible in the Second Book of Samuel (4:7)—"Nevertheless, David took the stronghold of Zion; the same is the city of David."

The aim of political Zionism, the delegates agreed, "is to create for the Jewish people a home in Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel) secured by public law."

Thus the Balfour Declaration—issued by the superpower of the day and later achieving the imprimatur of the international community—bolstered significantly the practical and legal efforts initiated by the Jews themselves to reconstitute their homeland in Palestine.

Back in 1855 Sir Moses Montefiore, a leader of British Jews, had already bought land to enable the resettlement of a small number of Jews. In 1891 Arab and Muslim leaders petitioned the ruling Ottoman Sultan to stop Jewish immigration and forbid the sale of land—even wasteland—to Jewish people. Anti-Zionist societies and newspapers were created in Cairo, Jerusalem and other places. Newly established Jewish communities—or settlements—were attacked by Arab bands starting in 1886. The Ottomans also deported many Jews.

Herzl's efforts to persuade Sultan Abdul Hamid II to back the Zionist enterprise came to nothing—though as late as 1915 Turkey reportedly flirted with the idea of selling some of Palestine to the Zionist movement for the creation of a Jewish homeland.

Not all opponents to Zionism were motivated by Islam. Like Negib Azouri, George Antonius (1891-1942), born into a Lebanese Christian family and influenced by Western ideas of nationalism, would also declare the region the exclusive provenance of the Arabs on the grounds that they shared racial, cultural and linguistic bonds. One of the first Arab nationalists and author of *The Arab Awakening*, Antonius envisioned creating an Arab state that would encompass Palestine.

The Zionists rejected the argument that they were interlopers: their connection to the Land of Israel dated from time immemorial. Sacred history dated the Israelite conquest of Canaan under Joshua to circa 1250 BCE. The biblical stories about the Ark of the Covenant, David and Goliath, and the messianic teachings of the prophet Isaiah that "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" were already part of history by the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel (Samaria) was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. To the south, Judea and its capital, Jerusalem, remained intact.



When the ancient Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar conquered the Southern kingdom of Judaea, expelled the Jews from the Land of Israel, and destroyed their Jerusalem Temple in 586 BCE, the Hebrew poets composed the Diaspora lament recorded in Psalm 137:1, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion."

To gain some perspective, consider that all this happened well before Plato appeared on the scene in ancient Greece around 427-347 BCE.

Cyrus, the ruler of Persia—which had become the regional superpower—allowed the Babylonian Jewish exiles to make their way back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, which became known as the Second Temple. Later the Persians were supplanted on the world stage by the Greeks. Then came the Romans.

In 70 AD, taking advantage of internal Jewish divisions about 30 years after the Roman crucifixion of Jesus, the Roman Empire destroyed the Second Temple. Of course, Jesus was Jewish—Matthew 1:17 traces his Jewish roots back to Abraham.

The Jews had battled the Romans between 66-70 and scattered Jewish resistance continued. The fall of Masada occurred in 73 AD. The Bar-Kokhba rebellion of 132-135 ended in defeat at Betar. At the end of the day the Jews were dispersed around the globe. Only a remnant Jewish community was to remain in the land.

Even in Exile, Jews' longing for their homeland persisted, however. Finding themselves in the Diaspora again, Jews would turn to face Jerusalem three times a day and pray to God: "May our eyes behold Thy return in mercy to Zion."

Neither Christians nor Muslims face Jerusalem when they pray.

In a sense, explained historian Arthur Hertzberg (1921-2006), modern political "Zionism is Jewish messianism in [the] process of realizing itself through this-worldly means."

In sacred history the root of Jewish identity is the Covenant, a fundamental motif of Hebrew and Christian Scripture.

There is no Covenant without the Land of Israel.

In Jewish tradition, codified in the Bible's Book of Genesis, God promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the Land of Israel. This Covenant or Contract was reiterated to the



Patriarchs Isaac and Jacob as well as to the Lawgiver Moses.

After the Romans and their Byzantine Christian successors came a string of conquerors. A mere six years after the death in Arabia of Islam's founding Prophet Muhammad, his followers conquered Jerusalem in 638. They prayed in Jerusalem facing Mecca—the holiest city in Islam. (Islam's second-holiest city is Medina.)

The Umayyad Arab dynasty (661–750 CE) ruled Palestine from Damascus and built the beautiful Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount. The Abbasid Arab Dynasty (750–1258 and 1261–1517) ruled Palestine from Baghdad. Islamic tradition holds that both Jews and Christians broke their Covenant with God and corrupted his Scripture. Therefore, they believe, only Allah's Covenant with Muhammad is true and complete.

Next, in 1099, the first Christian Crusaders came.

Then in 1187 Saladin, who was of Muslim, Sunni and Kurdish origin, led a counter-crusade and took the city.

After that, came the Khwarizmis, who were Persian Sunnis.

And so it went on...

Finally in 1516 the Muslim Turkish Ottomans claimed the city for their Empire.

The Arabs of Palestine saw themselves as descended from the Arabs of Arabia who had conquered the Fertile Crescent (a quarter-moon shape, from the Persian Gulf, through southern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and northern Egypt) hundreds of years earlier. By the 1800s the Arabs naturally thought of themselves as indigenous having lived in the country for centuries.

Still, the Arabs of Palestine never established an independent polity. There was never an Arab country called Palestine only a geographical area known, by 1911, as Filastin.

Palestinian Arab national identity was a post-WWI development—partly a response to the Zionist movement, partly an element of the overall post-WWI Arab Awakening, but centrally due to the imposition of borders by Britain and France.





Until after the creation of Israel in 1948, most mentions in the newspapers of "Palestinians" generally referred to Jews. The Jerusalem-based English-language Zionist newspaper founded in 1932 was called *The Palestine Post*.

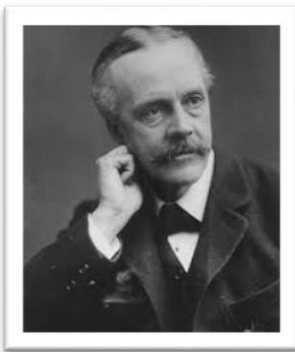
### **Arthur James Balfour**

Balfour was born in 1848 into a wealthy, well-connected family. His trajectory included Eton and Cambridge, and by 1874 he had become a member of parliament. He was appointed private secretary to his influential uncle, Lord Salisbury (1830-1903), when the latter was Foreign Secretary.

Had he not entered politics Balfour might have turned to scholarship. In 1879 he wrote *Defense of Philosophic Doubt*, which sought to find a balance between respect for science and religious belief. His health was described as "delicate" and his manner one of languor. Lloyd George once quipped that Balfour's place in history would be fleeting "just like the scent on a pocket handkerchief."

Salisbury better recognized his nephew's potential and appointed him Chief Secretary for Ireland, an office he held from 1887 until 1891. The job allowed him to demonstrate his mettle and dexterity as he grappled with Irish nationalism. His public-speaking style, while not brilliant, was effective and logical. Thus the man who was initially derided as a dilettante more interested in golf and music than in politics went on to become Prime Minister, replacing Salisbury, from 1902 through 1905.

Defeated in the January 1906 election, in 1907 he was back in politics, this time as Leader of the Opposition. By 1915, with the World War under way, he became First Lord of the Admiralty and, from 1916 to 1919, Foreign Secretary in a wartime coalition led by the Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George.



As an elder statesman Balfour went on to represent Britain at the conference which established the League of Nations in 1920 and at the Washington disarmament talks in 1921. In the interim he was made honorary chancellor of Cambridge University (1919).

Arthur James Balfour died on Wednesday, March 19, 1930 and Palestinian Jews went into mourning. The Zionist flag was lowered to half-mast, shops were closed, teachers prepared special lessons and rabbis composed eulogies for delivery on the Jewish Sabbath.

## **The Balfour Declaration**

Balfour's November 1917 typewritten letter to Rothschild was drafted after a great deal of back-and-forth within Lloyd George's government and considerable input by Zionist leaders led by Nahum Sokolow (1859-1936) and Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952); and by British Jews adamantly opposed to Zionism.

On June 13, 1917 Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour met with Lord Walter Rothschild, leader of the British Jewish community, and Zionist statesman Chaim Weizmann and suggested they submit a draft document encapsulating their hopes for Palestine that he could submit for Cabinet discussion.

The formula which the Zionists preferred was submitted by Rothschild to Balfour on July 18, 1917.

But the to-and-fro over the letter's wording continued.

The phraseology needed to be crafted so as to promote a national home for the Jews in Palestine while protecting the political status of Jewish people who would never move there and, at the same time, ensure that Arab civil and religious rights would not be prejudiced in the Jewish homeland.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the most vocal opponents of issuing the Declaration were some British Jews, among them David Alexander, president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, and Lucian Wolf, a journalist who held what amounted to the foreign affairs portfolio at the Board of Deputies.

Claude Montefiore (1858-1938), a great-nephew of Sir Moses and a proponent of liberal Judaism, was another fierce adversary of Zionism. Leon Simon, a leading Zionist campaigner, civil servant and intellectual, rebutted the anti-Zionist claims in his pamphlet "The Case of the Anti-Zionists: A Reply."

The Declaration's opponents, concerned that Jewish nationalism would raise doubts about their own loyalty to the Crown, argued that the Jews were solely a religious community. One of the two Jewish ministers in Lloyd George's Cabinet, the Liberal Party's Edwin Montagu, Secretary of State for India, made the anti-Zionist case. His cousin and fellow Cabinet member, Herbert Samuel (1870-1963), also a Liberal, not only supported Zionism, but within months of the outbreak of the World War presented the Cabinet with a memorandum on the benefits of a British protectorate for Palestine to support Jewish immigration.

On October 6, 1917 the War Cabinet decided to send out the latest draft text to eight Jews—four anti-Zionists and four Zionists—for comment. The cover letter acknowledged that "in view of the divergence of opinion expressed on the subject by

the Jews themselves," the Government "would like to receive in writing the views of representative Jewish leaders, both Zionists and non-Zionists."

Letters of support were submitted by Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz (1872-1946), Rothschild, Sokolow and Weizmann.

The anti-Zionist case was made, also in separate letters, by Leonard Cohen of the Jewish Board of Guardians, MP Philip Magnus, president of the Anglo-Jewish Association Claude Montefiore, and the newly elected president of the Board of Deputies, Stuart Samuel.

### **Behind the Balfour Declaration: National Interest, Christian Zionism & Useful Prejudice**

The Cabinet's decision to go with the pro-Zionist camp was the result of a confluence of factors.

One of them was compassion for persecuted Jewry. Back in 1840, prompted by the Christian Zionism of the young Lord Shaftesbury, then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Lord Palmerston instructed the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire to encourage the Sultan to allow Jews to resettle in Palestine. Shaftesbury's hope was that they would in due course embrace Christianity.

In 1903, Joseph Chamberlain, then Secretary of State for the Colonies, floated the idea of finding the Jews a homeland somewhere in East Africa or in the Sinai Peninsula at El Arish.

Balfour himself, very much in keeping with his age and class, was ambivalent about Jews but believed that the Christian world owed a moral debt to Jewish civilization over centuries of persecution and contempt. Adding to the atmosphere, George Eliot's 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda* raised the idea of restoring Palestine to the Jews. Back in 1833 Benjamin Disraeli—Prime Minister of Britain from 1874 until 1880—had written *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy*, a novel set partly in Jerusalem about a young Jewish man trying to survive in a non-Jewish world. Disraeli's father had converted to Christianity when Benjamin was 12 years old. The future Prime Minister visited Palestine in 1831.

At the end of the day, Balfour envisaged, those Jews who could not or would not fully assimilate in their countries would move to their national home. This was more or less Herzl's vision too.

A second factor was the British leadership's rather inflated view of Jewish influence. It imagined Jews—irrespective of whether they were Russian, American or

German—as a unified collective that could be used to further British interests. Zionist leaders in London had done nothing to disabuse the British of this belief.

Up until the World War Zionist leaders had simply hedged their bets. The movement sought to sway any leader—from the Turkish Sultan to the German Kaiser, and from the British Prime Minister to the Catholic Pope—who would lend an ear to supporting the restoration of the Jews to Palestine.

So it was that Britain hoped the Jews could help with the war effort. London needed Russia to stay in the Great War and the US to accelerate its military involvement in the fighting. But Russia's Kerensky despite his Jewish-sounding name was actually Russian Orthodox. The revolutionary Leon Trotsky was Jewish though certainly no Zionist. President Wilson had nominated Louis Brandeis (who was indeed a Zionist) to the US Supreme Court in 1916. Another Zionist, Felix Frankfurter—later also a member of the US Supreme Court—worked in the War Department and elsewhere in the Wilson administration.

Ultimately Woodrow Wilson signaled that he would welcome a Jewish homeland Declaration by Britain.

Asked later about the Balfour Declaration, Lloyd George would make the case that the Zionist movement was "exceptionally strong in Russia and America."

There was of course a dark side to this overrating of Jewish influence; anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists went so far as to convince themselves that a Jewish "hidden hand" wanted the World War to continue and was profiteering off it.

In fact about 1.5 million Jews fought in World War I for their respective countries and, wretchedly, battled their co-religionists across the trenches. Some 100,000 German Jews fought in the war and 12,000 gave their lives for the fatherland. About 500,000 Russian Jews were conscripted—not that they wanted to fight for the anti-Jewish Tsar. Roughly 250,000 American Jewish soldiers also went to war. Some 60,000 Jews from throughout the British Empire enlisted and 3,500 killed; and about 35,000 Jews served in the French army. There were Jewish field-marshals and Jewish generals commanding the Austro-Hungarian forces.

Finally, the Cabinet's decision to go with the pro-Zionist camp was in no small measure due to the indefatigable Zionist campaigners led by Chaim Weizmann who would become the first President of the



State of Israel.

The Russian-born Weizmann had immigrated to Britain in 1904 and been appointed a lecturer in chemistry at Manchester University. Balfour and Weizmann first met in 1906 and the two men hit it off. The relationship was renewed in 1914. It helped that Weizmann had made a significant contribution to the war effort with his discovery of a method to produce the synthetic acetone used to create cordite, a military propellant. Still, Balfour's letter could hardly be addressed to Weizmann, who had become a British citizen in 1910, in part because in the Zionist hierarchy Nahum Sokolow was his senior.

"While the Cabinet was in session, approving the final text, I was outside," Weizmann relates in his autobiography *Trial and Error*. "Sykes brought the document out to me, with the exclamation: 'Dr. Weizmann, it's a boy!' Well—I did not like the boy at first. He was not the one I had expected."

But, like Rothschild, Weizmann knew that delaying the Declaration in order to obtain more perfect wording would have played into the hands of the anti-Zionist Jews—and in the end there would have been no Declaration at all.

"A new chapter had opened for us," Weizmann wrote—"full of new difficulties, but not without its great moments."

Leonard Stein (1887-1973), an English lawyer and Weizmann's political secretary whose book *The Balfour Declaration* remains one of the authoritative works on the subject, posits: "What, then, were the Zionists promised? The language of the Declaration was studiously vague, and neither on the British nor on the Zionist side was there any disposition, at the time, to probe deeply into its meaning—still less was there any agreed interpretation."

### **International Approval**

By 1918, with the end of the World War, statesmen and legal scholars went to work on rebuilding the shattered international political system. Besides the terrible toll in human life (17 million dead and 20 million wounded) and unprecedented cost, the war resulted in the fall of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and the Ottoman empires.

There was a need for a new international political order.

In 1919 victors and vanquished—among them David Lloyd George and Arthur Balfour for Britain and US President Woodrow Wilson and his Secretary of State Robert Lansing—gathered in Paris for the Versailles Peace Conference. The conference led to the 1920 founding of the League of Nations, the body that codified a Mandate system under which Britain, France, Belgium, Japan, New Zealand,

Australia and South Africa would oversee former German and Turkish territory in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.



Britain's Mandate for Palestine was granted in 1920 at the San Remo Conference in Italy and ratified by the 52 League of Nations governments on July 24, 1922. The US was not a member of the League but the Congress passed a resolution supporting the Balfour Declaration in 1922. Notably, the Mandate for Palestine explicitly required Britain



to implement the Balfour Declaration.

In addition to Palestine, Britain was given responsibility for Iraq. France was granted the Mandate for Syria and Lebanon. The idea, naive in retrospect, was that civilized nations could sensibly resolve their differences while simultaneously guiding people living under their Mandate to stand by themselves in the modern world. This naiveté arguably reached a crescendo in 1928 with the Kellogg–Briand Pact under which most countries decided to prohibit war under international law.

### **Palestine under the Mandate**

Arab reaction to the Balfour Declaration was mixed. Zionist leaders had hoped to win Arab support for the restoration of the Jews to Palestine; they saw a win-win situation that would benefit Jews and Arabs alike. Two Arab representatives attended a Zionist celebratory meeting in London's Covent Garden on December 2, 1917.

In May 1918, under British tutelage, Weizmann met Feisal in the Red Sea port of Aqaba where they exchanged letters of mutual support. With T.E. Lawrence as a middleman the two continued with a series of meetings that led to a January 3, 1919 memorandum in which Feisal endorsed the Balfour Declaration.



On March 3, 1919, Feisal wrote to Felix Frankfurter expressing sympathy for the Zionist movement. "We are working together for a reformed and revived Middle East, and our two movements complete one another. The Jewish movement is national not imperialist, and there is room in Syria [conceiving of Palestine as part of a Greater Syria where for a short time he would rule as monarch] for us both." Added Feisal: "I think that neither can be a real success without the other."

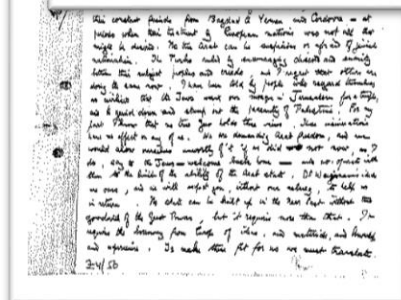
But over time all such Arab advocates for accommodation were silenced, shunted aside and branded as traitors. Sometimes they were assassinated.

There was also the matter of how the British authorities would implement the Mandate. Lord Curzon, who had replaced Balfour at the Foreign Office, had never been overly sympathetic to the Zionist enterprise.

With the appointment of Ronald Storrs as Jerusalem's military governor in 1917, the die was cast. Thoroughly unsympathetic to the Zionist cause, Storrs made sure that, for example, Jerusalem's Jewish majority was not reflected in the distribution of municipal power. In fact Jerusalem's Jewish majority notwithstanding, and even though Jews comprised most of the taxpayers, the British always appointed a

Muslim mayor and two deputy mayors, one Jewish and one Christian.

As Jerusalem's Jewish population became bigger, British efforts to mollify Arab rage invariably fell short. During Passover 1920 Jerusalem's Arabs rioted, killing five Jews, wounding hundreds and looting property.



Anything could set off such violence. Typically it was the unfounded rumor that the Jews planned to destroy the Dome of the Rock or the Aksa Mosque, the Muslim holy places atop the Temple Mount.

The atmosphere went from bad to worse. In 1921 the British appointed Haj Amin al Husseini as Mufti, or

spiritual leader, of the Palestinian Arab Muslims. He would remain at the epicenter of anti-Zionist incitement until he fled to Adolf Hitler's Berlin during World War II.

### **The First Partition of Palestine: Jordan Is Born**

On September 16, 1922, the British divided Mandatory Palestine into two administrative areas with 77 percent earmarked for the Arabs.

The background for this was that the Hashemite Feisal, who had been made king of Syria in March 1920, had been dethroned in 1921 by France. Britain, which had the Mandate for Iraq, offered Feisal the throne of Iraq. But the Iraqi throne had been pledged to Feisal's brother Abdullah who anyway turned down the offer because his brother Feisal has been thrown out of Damascus. The men were the sons of the Emir Hussein of Mecca.

Abdullah then organized a ragtag force to march on Damascus. He set up camp in Transjordan, the eastern side of the River Jordan.

Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill headed for Cairo to handle the crisis and brokered an arrangement whereby eastern Palestine would be transformed into Jordan with Abdullah made sovereign. Feisal would become king in Iraq.

This was technically possible because the League of Nations had not yet ratified the Palestine Mandate. The draft was now altered so that Britain had the right to "withhold" the Jewish homeland provisions of the Mandate "in the territories lying between the Jordan and the eastern boundary of Palestine..."

British strategist and diplomat T.E. Lawrence wrote that creating Transjordan "honorably fulfils the whole of the promises we made to the Arabs in so far as the so-called British spheres are concerned."

Thus, out of the blue, the Jewish national home provisions of the Mandate were rendered inoperative as they applied to eastern Palestine; the space for a Jewish national home became dramatically smaller. Not until 1946 would this eastern chunk of territory become officially known as the Hashemite Kingdom of Trans-Jordan.

Zionist leaders led by Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky (1880-1940) never became reconciled to the loss of Eastern Palestine. Most others, however, came to accept it as a fait accompli.

By 1925, the British-backed Hashemite family had been elbowed out of Arabia by the Saud clan (hence the name "Saudi Arabia"). As noted, the Hashemites had already lost the Syrian throne in 1920 after a brief reign. Looking ahead, they would be forced out of Iraq in a military coup after ruling that country from 1921 to 1958.

The remaining 21<sup>st</sup>-century Hashemite royal is Jordan's King Abdullah II. The legitimacy of the family's rule hinges, partly, on assertions that it is descended from Islam's founding prophet.

A footnote to the land adjustments: Britain also ceded the Golan Heights, situated above Galilee, to be included in the French Mandate of Syria.

### **Arab Opposition to Jewish Homeland**



By 1922, the Arab population in the Middle East was some 10 million. In Palestine, out of an estimated population of 757,182, there were 590,890 Arabs and 88,794 Jews. Christians numbered 73,024 and Druze 7,028. There were smaller numbers of other minorities.

Hardship during World War I had driven out many of Jerusalem's 45,000

Jews. By 1922 the trend began to reverse. Of the 62,578 souls living in Jerusalem, the Jewish population had inched back up to 33,971. There were 14,699 Christians and 13,413 Muslims, along with 495 others.

Implicit in the Jewish homeland idea was that Jews would be allowed to return to Palestine and form a majority.

Violent Arab opposition to a Jewish homeland was first manifested on a large scale in April 1920 with the Nebi Musa riots in Jerusalem.

A month earlier, in March 1920, Arab irregulars comprised of Shi'ites from Syria and local Sunni Bedouin had attacked the Galilean settlement of Tel Hai killing its Jewish commander, Joseph Trumpeldor. The settlement was overrun and destroyed.

In May 1921 riots broke out in Jaffa. Among the dead was Yosef Haim Brenner, one of the pioneers of modern Hebrew literature.

In 1922 British policymakers led by Churchill—though he was personally supportive of the Zionist enterprise—announced (in the Churchill White Paper) that Jewish immigration to Palestine would be restricted to "economic absorptive capacity."

### **Balfour in Jerusalem**

On April 1, 1925 Balfour, aged 77, visited Palestine for the first time. The occasion was the official opening of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Palestinian Jews

were delighted he had made the journey. Present to greet him on Mount Scopus were scores of dignitaries, among them Weizmann and Palestine's Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook.

But Arab shops closed in protest. Later, driving on to Damascus, Balfour was met by 6,000 Arabs demonstrating outside his hotel.

With the Mufti in the vanguard, violence became a reality of life in Jerusalem and throughout Palestine. In 1925 the spark was a general strike. In 1926 it was a protest against the French presence in Syria. In 1928 the catalyst was the installation of a flimsy gender partition at Jerusalem's Old City Western Wall to separate Orthodox Jewish men and women during the Yom Kippur prayer service.

### **Improving Life for Ordinary People**

Materially, the British Mandate was improving life day by day.

By 1928 electricity had become readily available. Jerusalem had a reservoir but lacked an infrastructure for efficient water distribution; the British made headway in solving that perennial problem as well and, by 1935, had drawn a pipeline that brought drinking water up to Jerusalem from the coastal plain. Many people, though, continued to use rooftop cisterns to capture rainwater.

The face of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa changed in large measure thanks to a British-inspired construction boom which brought Bauhaus and other international architectural styles to the country. Tel Aviv was unique as the first solely Jewish city – a testimony to Zionist innovation.

The Mandate authorities took city planning seriously and laid down ascetic policies—the rule that all building façades in Jerusalem needed to be of pale Jerusalem limestone, for example. The expansive construction in Jerusalem alone included Government House, a mansion atop the Hill of Evil Counsel on the south side of the city; a YMCA designed by the architect of New York's Empire State Building; and, across the street, the regal King David Hotel. Then there was the Rockefeller archeological Museum near the Damascus Gate of the Old City, and King George Avenue which became the heart of New Jerusalem.

Meanwhile Jerusalem's population continued to increase so that by 1931 there were 51,222 Jews, 19,894 Muslims and 19,335 Christians.

### **Backpedalling Balfour**

Such aesthetic and across-the-board quality of life improvements notwithstanding, the Arabs would not be reconciled to the Jewish homeland idea.

In August 1929 a new level of rioting enveloped Hebron, Jaffa, Safad, and Jerusalem. The spark? Jews had brought chairs to the Western Wall for use by elderly and infirm worshippers during the lengthy Yom Kippur services.

There had actually been a campaign of incitement since Yom Kippur 1928 when the first clashes began. On Tisha B'Av 1929 there was procession to and a meeting at Jerusalem's Yeshurun synagogue.

About 300 young people from the synagogue marched to the Western Wall.

The following day an unruly Muslim demonstration took place. It began a week of countrywide rioting which left 116 dead. The Hebrew newspaper "Davar" reported that the toll would have been higher had not some Hebron Arabs shielded their Jewish neighbours.

Jewish shop owners began abandoning Jerusalem's Old City.

In 1933, in a variation on the theme, the rioting targeted the British as much as the Jews. In April 1936 the Mufti instigated yet more rioting, this time under the auspices of the Arab Higher Committee comprised of clan and political party leaders under his chairmanship. The violence was ultimately put down thanks to a surge in British forces.

In an attempt to mollify the Arabs, the British authorities took one measure after another that backtracked on the 1917 Balfour Declaration. The Shaw Inquiry, the Hope-Simpson report, and the Passfield White Paper (all issued during 1930) represented this trend of rowing back from the Balfour Declaration.

The British government's Peel Commission of 1936 recommended, in its report the following year, the division of the remaining territory of western Palestine into two states. But the Arabs rejected any territorial compromise with the Jews—even though they would have received the bulk of the land. In fairness, the idea was not popular among Jabotinsky's Revisionists, religious Zionists and part of the labour Zionist movement – Golda Meir for example.

At some point, most likely in 1937, the violence devolved into indiscriminate attacks on civilians – terrorism. Organized gangs bombed public transport and shot at Jewish vehicles along the winding, single-lane Tel Aviv-Jerusalem road.

Finally in May 1939, just months before World War II was to engulf Europe's Jews, Britain officially reneged on the Balfour Declaration. As it prepared to confront Nazi Germany it needed to placate the Middle East Arabs. To that end London issued a so-called White Paper essentially closing the gates of Palestine to Jews and basically barring land purchases by Jews. The plan suggested 15,000 Jews a year be admitted for five years then the Arabs would decide what would happen next.

Particularly with the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, the British authorities kept Palestine's doors locked solid leaving Europe's Jews no haven. Still, the main Zionist camps—the followers of Chaim Weizmann and those of Vladimir Jabotinsky—largely supported Britain's war effort. Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion declared: "We shall fight the White Paper as if there is no war, and fight the war as if there is no White Paper."

Only the small radical Freedom Fighters for Israel, or Stern Gang (also known as Lehi), continued to attack the British throughout World War II.

In February 1944, Menachem Begin's Irgun declared an end to the ceasefire against the British and launched attacks against immigration offices in Palestine. In announcing the change, the Irgun declared: "Over the last four years of the war we have lost millions of the best of our people; millions more are in danger of eradication. And The Land of Israel is closed off and quarantined because the British rule it."

### **UN Votes for Partition**

The Second World War ended in May 1945; but Palestine still found no peace. In Britain the Labour Party's Clement Attlee was now Prime Minister, having replaced Winston Churchill. Attlee and his Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin rejected a request by US President Harry Truman to allow 100,000 Holocaust survivors into Palestine. Militant Palestinian Jewish opposition to British rule intensified, as did British reprisals.

Continuing Arab opposition to the Jewish homeland idea raised a new possibility: the partition of western Palestine—the area west of the River Jordan—into two states: one Jewish and one Arab. Eastern Palestine was already Transjordan.

In May 1947, a special committee of the UN General Assembly recommended that western Palestine be partitioned into Arab and Jewish states. And on November 29, 1947, by a vote of 33 to 13, with 10 abstentions, the General Assembly voted in favor of partition.

As the 1947 UN Partition Plan map was drawn, the Jewish state with its roughly 500,000 Jews would also be home to 400,000 Arabs – demographically a bi-national state. The borders themselves were pretty much indefensible. Jerusalem was to be under international auspices.



Britain made clear that it would not cooperate with the plan and announced that its forces would pull out on May 15, 1948. The Arab side also rejected the two-state solution. The Zionist leadership reluctantly agreed. The UN vote set off a new wave of violence that was countered by a more assertive Zionist defense spearheaded by the Haganah, Irgun and Lehi.

On May 14, 1948 the Zionist leadership under David Ben-Gurion gathered in Tel Aviv to proclaim the birth of the State of Israel. Notably, Israel's Declaration of Independence invoked Arthur James Balfour:

"The right of the Jewish people to national rebirth in its own country" had been "recognized in the Balfour Declaration of the 2nd November, 1917, and re-affirmed in the Mandate of the League of Nations which, in particular, gave international sanction to the historic connection between the Jewish people and Eretz-Israel and to the right of the Jewish people to rebuild its National Home."

The Balfour Declaration had come to fruition—though, sadly, not in the way that its author had envisioned.

The new state was recognized that night by the United States and three days later by the USSR.

Bloody urban riots and attacks on Jewish civilians had long been under way. Arab irregular forces had infiltrated into Palestine months earlier.

The Jewish population stood at about 650,000, ranged against some 1.1 million Palestinian Arabs.

The day after Independence was declared Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon—alongside the Palestinian Arabs—sent their armies to destroy Israel.



The Egyptian Secretary-General of the Arab League, Abdul Rahman Hassan Azzam, stated the goal of the invasion: "This will be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusades."

The fledgling Israel Defense Forces fielded 65,000 soldiers (some 13 percent of the population) by mid-July 1948. This rose to 108,000 by January 1949. The invasion force from the surrounding Arab countries consisted of 20,000 combat troops. These were augmented by 40,000-50,000 troops from

Yemen, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the Sudan. And this figure rose to 68,000 by October 1948.

The highly motivated Jewish forces successfully pushed back the Arab onslaught. The effort to destroy the State of Israel at its birth was overcome.

Still, strategic Jewish settlements had to be abandoned; Jerusalem's Old City was lost. Some 6,000 Israelis (one percent of the population) were killed; 15,000 were wounded.

The Israeli forces went on the offensive and gained strategically vital territory formerly granted to the Palestinian Arabs under the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947.

No Arab country was willing to sign an actual peace treaty, but in 1949, the UN brokered an Armistice. The parties promised not to launch or permit the launching of attacks from their territory against each other. They furthermore agreed that the Armistice lines were not a political border.

Israel's post-Armistice Line territory encompassed about 78 percent of the territory allocated the Jewish homeland under the Mandate.

The pre-1947 Partition Plan boundaries with Egypt, Syria and Lebanon were restored. Egypt also took control of the Gaza Strip, which was to have been part of Arab Palestine. Jordan annexed Judea and Samaria, or the West Bank (contrary to the desires of Palestinian Arab nationalists and the Mufti). Thus the West Bank and Gaza were under Arab control between 1949 and the 1967 Six Day War. Jordan also ruled over the Old City of Jerusalem and its environs.



## **Two Massive Refugee Problems Ensued**

The Arab states and the Palestinian Arabs refused to create a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza because doing so might be seen as implying acceptance of Israel's right to exist. Arab policy was that Palestinian Arabs made homeless by the war would be kept permanently in refugee camps rather than be absorbed.

According to UN figures, about 750,000 Palestinian Arabs fled (or in some instances were forced out of) Jewish-held areas. In time, at least as many Jewish refugees fled Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen. (Later in Iran, the 1979 Islamic Revolution led to the departure of most—some 60,000—of that country's Jews.)

## **Balfour Declaration Comes to Fruition**

The Balfour Declaration deserves to be commemorated because 100 years ago Britain set out to do the right thing.

Apart from pursuing its own national interests, London tried to act justly. It backed the idea of a Jewish homeland in a small part of the vast Mideast while protecting Arab religious and civil rights in Palestine.

James Arthur Balfour, David Lloyd George and the other members of the British War Cabinet could not have envisaged that the Declaration would be followed by unalterable Arab opposition to the Zionism.

Yet in the final analysis the Declaration did indeed—in a matter of three decades—help pave the way for a Jewish national homeland in Palestine.

It did not happen in the way its author envisioned, and the Jewish national homeland became a reality only after much of European Jewry had been annihilated in the Shoah; yet the Balfour Declaration did come to fruition.

And on April 28, 1950 Britain established diplomatic relations with Israel.

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