

The Balfour Declaration (2 November 1917)

Hurewitz, J.C. *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics, A Documentary Record*. 2nd, Revised and Enlarged ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. 106. Print. Vol. 2 of *British-French Supremacy*.

Background to the Declaration

The Balfour Declaration was the Jewish charter that Herzl failed to obtain from the Ottoman Sultan twenty years earlier. The terms of the declaration were included in the preamble of the Palestine Mandate's Articles (1922), and given international sanction and political legitimacy by the newly formed League of Nations. Many historians of Zionism and Israel view the Declaration as part of political progression – from Herzl's Jewish State (1897), to the Articles of the Mandate (1922) to the UN partition Resolution (1947) that proposed the creation of an Arab and Jewish state in Palestine – that ultimately culminated in Israel's Declaration of Independence (1948). Those interested in delegitimizing Israel argue that the Balfour Declaration, and therefore anything based upon its validity, like the Palestine Mandate or the State of Israel, is null and void. This was the official position of most of the Arab world well into the 1990s.

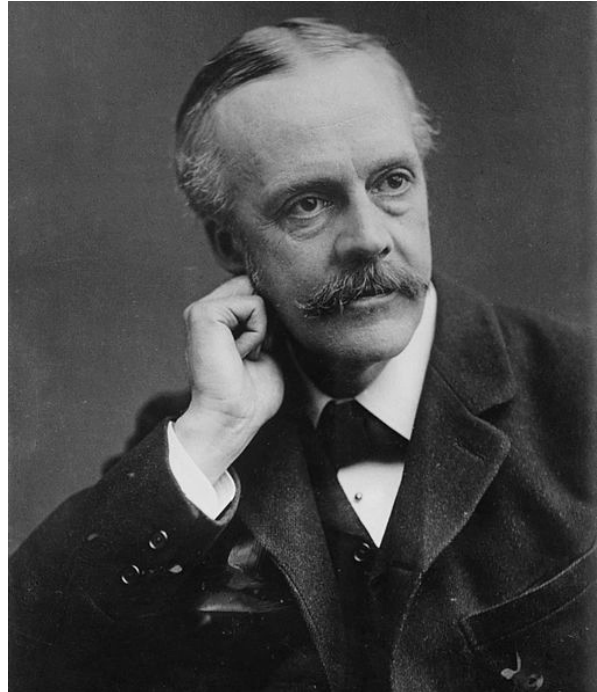


Figure 1 Arthur Balfour (Public Domain)

Issuance of the Declaration made Zionist adherents euphoric. Recognition of their will to establish a homeland meant that the Zionist movement had received permission, first from a great power, England, and then from the League of Nations, to fulfill the Zionist objective of establishing a territorial base for expressing Jewish identity and asserting the right of Jews to re-establish themselves on the land that G-d had promised the Jewish people. For some 40,000 Jews who had immigrated to Palestine and purchased land to build settlements from the 1880s to 1917, the Declaration's issuance confirmed that their ideological and physical choice to return to the land of their forefathers was just. For Jews worldwide, who had for centuries lived on the margins as a minority in sometimes extraordinary hostile environments, constantly subject to the whims of rulers, protection from a great power was a major political break with the Jewish past. The Declaration's 102 words were a permission statement to build a national home, while calling for the protection of the civil and religious rights of the non-Jewish population.

For Jews who were non-Zionists or anti-Zionists, the Declaration caused at the very least worry, if not profound consternation. Would non-Zionist Jews in Britain be labeled as disloyal citizens because their co-religionists were so enthusiastic about having a homeland elsewhere? These Jews who opposed Zionism believed in Jewish equality or emancipation in the countries where they lived, not in a national home for Jews. These Jews weren't sufficiently organized, and their reasoning failed to bring them much immediate or long term notice.

A Jewish national home in Palestine supported by Great Britain fit conveniently with

larger British strategic interests in the Middle East. Before, during, and after World War I, British strategic interests included the establishment of a "land bridge" from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean in order to insure British economic and political influence and control from India to Egypt. For the British, the Declaration was one of many building blocks that asserted British influence and territorial control over the Middle East, connecting Britain's Arab allies, clients, kings, and tribal leaders into a desired geo-political network of influence across the region. This strategy included agreements with Arab tribal leaders in Yemen, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Afghanistan, and the Arabian Peninsula. Securing Palestine as geographic buffer for British presence in Egypt and protection of the Suez Canal was necessary from Britain's viewpoint. Thus, Zionist and British interests dovetailed into a workable and functioning symbiosis.

For the Arabs living in Palestine, particularly among the politically engaged notable landed elites, the Declaration posed several problems. By establishing mandates for the Arab regions of the now defunct Ottoman Empire, the French and British brought some measure of administrative efficiency to regions dominated by a few powerful families. Second, sanctioned Zionist development meant the British were not focused on establishing local Arab elite control over politics. So dismayed were local Arab elites in the major towns of Palestine that they decided ultimately not to officially recognize the British Mandate. Instead, the political leadership boycotted official participation with the British. The Balfour Declaration's contents and intents were considered abhorrent to Arab sensibilities. Despite public anger at the Declaration and its inclusion in the Mandate's configuration, local Arabs did participate in some boards, commissions, advisory councils, and investigations that assessed public policy issues in Palestine. In other words, in public the Arab political leadership protested sincerely and frequently against British presence and protection of the Jewish national home idea, but in everyday practice, many Arabs cooperated with the British and even the Zionists in the daily operations of the Mandate.

Origins of the Declaration

By the time Declaration was issued in 1917, it had evolved from pre-war discussions in England and in diplomatic exchanges during the war. In England, Dr. Chaim Weizmann – who had been a resident of Manchester, England since 1906 and who would become President of the English Zionist Federation – took the lead in motivating British governmental officials to secure Palestine for Zionist interests. The French, German and Russian Governments were also unsuccessfully approached for support during the war. In October 1915, the first official memorandum about a Jewish state in Palestine after the war was prepared by the Zionist Organization for the British government. It suggested placing the state under a form of trusteeship by granting a colonization charter to the Zionist Organization, which would enable it to bring Jews into the country freely, develop agriculture and industry, and pave the way for the assumption of governmental authority by the Jewish community there.¹

Talks between Zionists and British officials continued throughout 1916 and 1917, refining British needs and matching them with Jewish aspirations. Some in Britain at the time believed that Jews possessed significant political clout in European capitals and in the US. A concerted effort was undertaken by British diplomats, through their ambassadors in France and Russia, to encourage world Jewry's support for the Entente powers in the war; in return they offered the possibility of Britain's support for Zionism. In addition, some in Britain held the

¹ The Israel Yearbook, 1950/51, Tel Aviv, Israel Publications Ltd., p. 25.

exaggerated belief that the Declaration would be helpful in mobilizing American Jews to support the British war effort. Perhaps more importantly, it was widely believed in the top circles of the British government that the Balfour Declaration would prove crucial in swinging the sympathies of Russian Jews, who many in Britain believed to be a critical bloc in the country, away from Bolshevism and towards the British Empire and the Allied/Entente war effort. These assumptions were largely flawed; Russian Jews were heavily divided on the Zionist question, and while socialism was a powerful force among Russian Jews, it was almost all concentrated in the Menshevik camp. Essentially, British statesmen had been led to mistake the power of a few influential Jewish Bolsheviks for the power of the community as a whole, which was not nearly as influential in Russian affairs as they believed.

By 1917, Sir Mark Sykes, who had negotiated the Sykes-Picot agreement in May 1916 (the secret British French agreement that eventually became the outline of how Britain and France would control the Middle East at the end of the war), moved to the view that Palestine should not be an international zone, but instead should come under British control. In addition, in mid-1917 newspaper articles began appearing in the German press, “which dealt with the great importance of the Zionist movement, the importance of a Jewish Palestine for Turkey, and the great danger which a Jewish Palestine under England would represent to the Central Powers (Turkey and Germany)...Germany is uneasy about the work of the Zionists in the Entente countries, especially in England and America.”² Whether or not the assumption that Jews could influence the outcome of the war was inflated, it had an influence in the shaping the contents and the issuance of the Declaration.³ Zionists like Chaim Weizmann, who worked diligently to obtain the Declaration from the British, did little to correct the British impression that Jews and Zionists possessed political clout far in excess of their real power to influence the outcome to the war.

The Declaration’s contents

The Declaration’s final wording was a compromise between what the Zionists wanted and what the British needed. It did not resemble, except in spirit, what was in the 1915 memorandum. In the phrase, “His Majesty’s Government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people,” for example, the Zionists would have preferred the term ‘re-establishment’ to reinforce the continuity of Jewish presence in Palestine, and the term “state” instead of a “national home.” The Declaration was sent in the form of a letter from the British Foreign Secretary, Lord James Balfour, to the president of the British Zionist Federation, Lord Rothschild. It was the first international document to define a political entity as a “national home,” though the term was used previously by the Zionists at their first Congress in 1897. At the time, no one understood the scope of a national home, or how it was different from a state. Zionists interpreted the term “home” to mean a home for all the Jewish people, not just those residing in Palestine at the time. The Declaration did not provide Jews with a country or a state with clearly defined borders; it gave them the opportunity to make a homeland for themselves through whatever efforts they might choose to apply. In the twenty years that had elapsed since 1897, Jewish immigrants to Palestine had begun to organize themselves and to amass practical experience in defending their new settlements, in understanding Ottoman law and practice, in learning Arabic, and in recreating the Hebrew language as a linguistic bond for Jews coming from geographically diverse parts of the

² *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, Series A Letters Volume VII, August 1914-November 1917, p. 440.

³ Leonard Stein, *The Balfour Declaration*, 345-48

Diaspora. The Declaration's issuance did not spark anything more than statements of support from this or that Jewish body or organization; massive Jewish immigration to Palestine in subsequent decades did not occur. Zionism as an idea and as a practical solution to Jewish insecurity still remained very much a minor movement among Jews worldwide.

In the Declaration, Britain said that it would use its "best endeavors to facilitate" the national home, "it clearly being 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." The British did not mention the Arab population in the Declaration and did not refer to protecting their political rights, only their civil and religious rights. Yet the Declaration spoke affirmatively about not prejudicing the political status enjoyed by Jews anywhere, a definite concession to those British Jews that adamantly opposed Zionism as an ideology that threatened to confuse their identity in the British Empire.

Knowing what the British government at the time saw as the outcome of the Balfour Declaration is critical to understanding the Declaration as a compromise document. There was almost virtual unanimity among British leaders at the time that the Jews would create a state. Lord Balfour in 1918 remarked that he hoped that the "Jews will make good in Palestine and eventually found a state."⁴ Prime Minister Lloyd George believed that if the Jews became a majority in Palestine, then "Palestine would become a Jewish Commonwealth."⁵

By spring 1917, US President Wilson already reportedly indicated to Justice Louis Brandeis that he was "entirely sympathetic to the aims of the Zionist movement and in agreement with the policy, under England's protectorate for a Jewish Homeland."⁶ It was apparently not until 1919, however, that Wilson publicly endorsed the Balfour Declaration. As occurred forty years later, when the issue of recognizing Israel presented itself, the White House was more willing to recognize Jewish/Zionist aspirations in Palestine than was the US State Department. In 1922, the US House of Representatives and the US Senate endorsed the Balfour Declaration. When the House of Representatives endorsed the Declaration, it quoted from the Declaration but added, "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of Christian and all other non-Jewish communities in Palestine, and that the Holy places and religious buildings and sites in Palestine shall be adequately protected."

Conclusions

After Israel's creation, Zionism's foes disputed the validity of the Balfour Declaration, because they viewed it as inconsistent with the objective of self-determination for Arabs living in Palestine at the time. The PLO Charter, for example, states that anything based upon the Palestine Mandate (which includes the Balfour Declaration) is null and void. This was the official position of most of the Arab world (with the exception of Egypt and Jordan) well into the 1990s. Such reasoning, of course, dismissed the Jews' entitlement to the same rights that were deemed appropriate for Arab and non-Arab communities previously living under Ottoman rule. Moreover, it has been forgotten by most that self-determination based on either universal or male suffrage by local Arab populations was unknown in virtually all parts of the Middle East at the time. Arab notables of that era in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and in the Arabian Peninsula were not proponents of self-determination; rather, they were interested in

⁴ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to our Time*, Second Edition, Knopf, 2000, p. 110

⁵ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to our Time*, Second Edition, Knopf, 2000, p. 110

⁶ *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weitzmann*, Series A Letters Volume VII, August 1914-November 1917, pp.406-07.

perpetuating their own family, tribal, or local rule over regions, villages, cities, and towns. Rather than seeing the Balfour Declaration as part of the overall engagement by Britain and France to utilize their power and influence to secure their geographic and territorial interests in the Middle East, opponents of Israel and Zionism have characterized the Balfour Declaration as an unjustified aberration. In fact, the Declaration was, as mentioned previously, one of a dozen or more agreements and understandings that Britain undertook with Arab leaders in the Levant, Arabian Peninsula, and Persian Gulf, before, during, and after the War. The Declaration's issuance is often portrayed as a direct contradiction to the understanding British officials made with Sherif Hussein and his family in Mecca in 1914-1915, and to promises made to Arab leaders at the end of the war. The questions of what was promised, who promised it and what was left out geographically have fueled a seemingly unending historical and historiographic debate. Emotions attached to the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 1960s and afterwards buried the realities that Britain confirmed the legitimacy of the Saudis, Hashemites, Sabahs, and other Arab leaders throughout the Middle East, including leading Arab families in Palestine that ended up dominating Arab politics there for decades after the Declaration was issued. The Balfour Declaration was not an anomaly for a great power that was seeking as many cooperative clients as possible to secure its presence in the Middle East. For the Zionists, though, it was confirmation that the right to establish an international home was a legitimate undertaking, ratified by the League of Nations and later by the United Nations.

–Ken Stein, 2007

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 endeavours 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 Sincerely,
Arthur James Balfour

Foreign Office.

November 2nd, 1917.

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Y. in
Arthur Balfour

Figure 2 the actual text of the Balfour Declaration (Public Domain)