Balfour Declaration

The Balfour Declaration (dated 2 November 1917) was a letter from the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour to Baron Rothschild (Walter Rothschild, 2nd Baron Rothschild), a leader of the British Jewish community, for transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland.

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.

The text of the letter was published in the press one week later, on 9 November 1917. The "Balfour Declaration" was later incorporated into the Sèvres peace treaty with the Ottoman Empire and the Mandate for Palestine. The original document is kept at the British Library.

Background

World War I

In 1914, war broke out in Europe between the Triple Entente (Britain, France and the Russian Empire) and the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary and later that year, the Ottoman Empire). The war on the Western Front developed into a stalemate. Jonathan Schneer writes:

Thus the view from Whitehall early in 1916: If defeat was not imminent, neither was victory; and the outcome of the war of attrition on the Western Front could not be predicted. The colossal forces in a death-grip across Europe and in Eurasia appeared to have canceled each other out. Only the addition of significant new forces on one side or the other seemed likely to tip the scale. Britain's willingness, beginning early in 1916, to explore seriously some kind of arrangement with "world Jewry" or "Great Jewry" must be understood in this context.
Zionism

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In 1896, Theodor Herzl, a Jewish journalist living in Austria-Hungary, published *Der Judenstaat* ("The Jewish State"), in which he asserted that the only solution to the "Jewish Question" in Europe, including growing antisemitism, was through the establishment of a Jewish State. Political Zionism had just been born.\(^2\) A year later, Herzl founded the Zionist Organization (ZO), which at its first congress, "called for the establishment of a home for the Jewish people in Palestine secured under public law". Serviceable means to attain that goal included the promotion of Jewish settlement there, the organisation of Jews in the diaspora, the strengthening of Jewish feeling and consciousness, and preparatory steps to attain those necessary governmental grants.\(^3\) Herzl passed away in 1904 without the political standing that was required to carry out his agenda of a Jewish home in Palestine.\(^4\)

During the first meeting between Chaim Weizmann and Balfour in 1906, Balfour asked what Weizmann's objections were to the idea of a Jewish homeland in Uganda, (the Uganda Protectorate in East Africa in the British Uganda Programme), rather than in Palestine. According to Weizmann's memoir, the conversation went as follows:

"Mr. Balfour, supposing I was to offer you Paris instead of London, would you take it?" He sat up, looked at me, and answered: "But Dr. Weizmann, we have London." "That is true," I said, "but we had Jerusalem when London was a marsh." He ... said two things which I remember vividly. The first was: "Are there many Jews who think like you?" I answered: "I believe I speak the mind of millions of Jews whom you will never see and who cannot speak for themselves." ... To this he said: "If that is so you will one day be a force."\(^5\)

Two months after Britain's declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire in November 1914, Zionist British cabinet member Herbert Samuel circulated a memorandum entitled *The Future of Palestine* to his cabinet colleagues. The memorandum stated that "I am assured that the solution of the problem of Palestine which would be much the most welcome to the leaders and supporters of the Zionist movement throughout the world would be the annexation of the country to the British Empire".

**The McMahon–Hussein Correspondence**

Henry McMahon had exchanged letters with Hussein bin Ali, Sharif of Mecca in 1915, in which he had promised Hussein control of Arab lands with the exception of "portions of Syria" lying to the west of "the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo". Palestine lay to the southwest of the Vilayet of Damascus and wasn't explicitly mentioned. That modern-day Lebanese region of the Mediterranean coast was set aside as part of a future French Mandate. After the war the extent of the coastal exclusion was hotly disputed. Hussein had protested that the Arabs of Beirut would greatly oppose isolation from the Arab state or states, but did not bring up the matter of Jerusalem or Palestine. Dr. Chaim Weizmann wrote in his autobiography *Trial and Error* that Palestine had been excluded from the areas that should have been Arab and independent. This interpretation was supported explicitly by the British government in the 1922 White Paper.

On the basis of McMahon's assurances the Arab Revolt began on 5 June 1916. However, the British and French also secretly concluded the Sykes–Picot Agreement on 16 May 1916.\(^6\) This agreement divided many Arab territories into British- and French-administered areas and allowed for the internationalisation of Palestine. Hussein learned of
the agreement when it was leaked by the new Russian government in December 1917, but was satisfied by two disingenuous telegrams from Sir Reginald Wingate, High Commissioner of Egypt, assuring him that the British government's commitments to the Arabs were still valid and that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was not a formal treaty. According to Isaiah Friedman, Hussein was not perturbed by the Balfour Declaration. On 23 March 1918, Hussein wrote in *Al Qibla*, the daily newspaper of Mecca:[7]

> The return of these exiles [jaliya] to their homeland will prove materially and spiritually an experimental school for their [Arab] brethren who are with them in the fields, factories, trades and all things connected to the land.

He called on the Arab population in Palestine to welcome the Jews as brethren and co-operate with them for the common welfare.[8] Following the publication of the Declaration the British had dispatched Commander David George Hogarth to see Hussein in January 1918 bearing the message that the "political and economic freedom" of the Palestinian population was not in question. Hogarth reported that Hussein "would not accept an independent Jewish State in Palestine, nor was I instructed to warn him that such a state was contemplated by Great Britain".[9] Continuing Arab disquiet over Allied intentions also led during 1918 to the British Declaration to the Seven and the Anglo-French Declaration, the latter promising "the complete and final liberation of the peoples who have for so long been oppressed by the Turks, and the setting up of national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the free exercise of the initiative and choice of the indigenous populations."[10]

Lord Grey had been the Foreign Secretary during the McMahon-Hussein negotiations. Speaking in the House of Lords on 27 March 1923, he made it clear that he entertained serious doubts as to the validity of the British government's interpretation of the pledges which he, as foreign secretary, had caused to be given to Hussein in 1915. He called for all of the secret engagements regarding Palestine to be made public.[11] Many of the relevant documents in the National Archives were later declassified and published. Among them were the minutes of a Cabinet Eastern Committee meeting, chaired by Lord Curzon, which was held on 5 December 1918. Balfour was in attendance. The minutes revealed that in laying out the government's position Curzon had explained that: "Palestine was included in the areas as to which Great Britain pledged itself that they should be Arab and independent in the future".[12]

**Sykes–Picot Agreement**

In May 1916 the governments of the United Kingdom, France and Russia agreed the Sykes–Picot Agreement, which defined their proposed spheres of influence and control in Western Asia should the Triple Entente succeed in defeating the Ottoman Empire during World War I. The agreement effectively divided the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire outside the Arabian peninsula into areas of future British and French control or influence.

The agreement proposed that an "international administration" would be established in an area shaded brown on the agreement's map, which was later to become Palestine, and that the form of the administration would be "decided upon after consultation with Russia, and subsequently in consultation with the other allies, and the representatives of the Sherif of Mecca". Zionists believed their aspirations had been passed over. William Reginald Hall, British Director of Naval Intelligence criticised the agreement on the basis that "the Jews have a strong material, and a very strong political, interest in the future of the country" and that "in the Brown area the question of Zionism, and also of British control of all Palestine railways, in the interest of Egypt, have to be considered".
Motivation for the Declaration

British Government

James Gelvin, a Middle East history professor, cites at least three reasons for why the British government chose to support Zionist aspirations. Issuing the Balfour Declaration would appeal to Woodrow Wilson's two closest advisors, who were avid Zionists.

"The British did not know quite what to make of President Woodrow Wilson and his conviction (before America's entrance into the war) that the way to end hostilities was for both sides to accept "peace without victory." Two of Wilson's closest advisors, Louis Brandeis and Felix Frankfurter, were avid Zionists. How better to shore up an uncertain ally than by endorsing Zionist aims? The British adopted similar thinking when it came to the Russians, who were in the midst of their revolution. Several of the most prominent revolutionaries, including Leon Trotsky, were of Jewish descent. Why not see if they could be persuaded to keep Russia in the war by appealing to their latent Jewishness and giving them another reason to continue the fight?" ... These include not only those already mentioned but also Britain's desire to attract Jewish financial resources.

At that time the British were busy making promises. At a War Cabinet meeting, held on 31 October 1917, Balfour suggested that a declaration favourable to Zionist aspirations would allow Great Britain "to carry on extremely useful propaganda both in Russia and America". The cabinet believed that expressing support would appeal to Jews in Germany and America, and help the war effort. It was also hoped to encourage support from the large Jewish population in Russia. Britain promoted the idea of a national home for the Jewish People, in the hope that Britain would implement it and exercise political control over Palestine, effectively "freeze out France (and anyone else) from any post-war presence in Palestine." According to James Renton, Senior Lecturer at Edge Hill University, an Honorary Research Fellow at University College London, and author of The Zionist Masquerade: the Birth of the Anglo-Zionist Alliance: 1914–1918 (2007), Prime Minister David Lloyd George of the United Kingdom supported the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine because "it would help secure post-war British control of Palestine, which was strategically important as a buffer to Egypt and the Suez Canal." In addition, Palestine was to later serve as a terminus for the flow of petroleum from Iraq via Jordan, three former Ottoman Turkish provinces that became British League of Nations mandates in the aftermath of the First World War. The oil officially flowed along the Mosul-Haifa oil pipeline from 1935–1948, and unofficially up until 1954.

Weizmann-Balfour relationship

One of the main proponents of a Jewish homeland in Palestine was Chaim Weizmann, the leading spokesperson for organised Zionism in Britain. Weizmann was a chemist who had developed a process to synthesize acetone via fermentation. Acetone is required for the production of cordite, a powerful propellant explosive needed to fire ammunition without generating tell-tale smoke. Germany had cornered supplies of calcium acetate, a major source of acetone. Other pre-war processes in Britain were inadequate to meet the increased demand in World War I, and a shortage of cordite would have severely hampered Britain's war effort. Lloyd-George, then minister for munitions, was grateful to Weizmann and so supported his Zionist aspirations. In his War Memoirs, Lloyd-George wrote of meeting Weizmann in 1916 that Weizmann:

Lord Balfour's desk, in the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, in Tel Aviv
... explained his aspirations as to the repatriation of the Jews to the sacred land they had made famous. That was the fount and origin of the famous declaration about the National Home for the Jews in Palestine .... As soon as I became Prime Minister I talked the whole matter over with Mr Balfour, who was then Foreign Secretary.

This may, however, have been only a part of a longer series of discussions about Britain and Zionism held between Weizmann and Balfour which had begun at least a decade earlier. In late 1905 Balfour had requested of Charles Dreyfus, his Jewish constituency representative, that he arrange a meeting with Weizmann, during which Weizmann asked for official British support for Zionism; they were to meet again on this issue in 1914.[17]

**Jewish National Home vs. Jewish State**

The records of discussions that led up to the final text of the Balfour Declaration clarifies some details of its wording. The phrase "national home" was intentionally used instead of "state" because of opposition to the Zionist program within the British Cabinet. Following discussion of the initial draft the Cabinet Secretary, Mark Sykes, met with the Zionist negotiators to clarify their aims. His official report back to the Cabinet categorically stated that the Zionists did not want "to set up a Jewish Republic or any other form of state in Palestine or in any part of Palestine". Both the Zionist Organization and the British government devoted efforts over the following decades, including Winston Churchill's 1922 White Paper, to denying that a state was the intention.[18] However, in private, many British officials agreed with the interpretation of the Zionists that a state would be established when a Jewish majority was achieved.

The initial draft of the declaration, contained in a letter sent by Rothschild to Balfour, referred to the principle "that Palestine should be reconstituted as the National Home of the Jewish people." In the final text, the word that was replaced with in to avoid committing the entirety of Palestine to this purpose. Similarly, an early draft did not include the commitment that nothing should be done which might prejudice the rights of the non-Jewish communities. These changes came about partly as the result of the urgings of Edwin Samuel Montagu, an influential anti-Zionist Jew and Secretary of State for India, who was concerned that the declaration without those changes could result in increased anti-Semitic persecution. The draft was circulated and during October the government received replies from various representatives of the Jewish community. Lord Rothschild took exception to the new proviso on the basis that it presupposed the possibility of a danger to non-Zionists, which he denied.[19]

**Authorship**

Sir John Evelyn Shuckburgh of the new Middle East department of the Foreign Office discovered that the correspondence prior to the declaration was not available in the Colonial Office, 'although Foreign Office papers were understood to have been lengthy and to have covered a considerable period.' The 'most comprehensive explanation' of the origin of the Balfour Declaration the Foreign Office was able to provide was contained in a small 'unofficial' note of Jan 1923 affirming that:

little is known of how the policy represented by the Declaration was first given form. Four, or perhaps five men were chiefly concerned in the labour – the Earl of Balfour, the late Sir Mark Sykes, and Messrs. Weizmann and Sokolow, with perhaps Lord Rothschild as a figure in the background. Negotiations seem to have been mainly oral and by means of private notes and memoranda of which only the scantiest records seem to be available.[20]

In his posthumously published 1981 book *The Anglo-American Establishment*, Georgetown University history professor Carroll Quigley explained that the Balfour Declaration was actually drafted by Lord Alfred Milner. Quigley wrote:

This declaration, which is always known as the Balfour Declaration, should rather be called "the Milner Declaration," since Milner was the actual draftsman and was, apparently, its chief supporter in the War
Cabinet. This fact was not made public until 21 July 1937. At that time Ormsby-Gore, speaking for the government in Commons, said, "The draft as originally put up by Lord Balfour was not the final draft approved by the War Cabinet. The particular draft assented to by the War Cabinet and afterwards by the Allied Governments and by the United States...and finally embodied in the Mandate, happens to have been drafted by Lord Milner. The actual final draft had to be issued in the name of the Foreign Secretary, but the actual draftsman was Lord Milner."

More recently, William D. Rubinstein, Professor of Modern History at Aberystwyth University, Wales, wrote that Conservative politician and pro-Zionist Leo Amery, as Assistant Secretary to the British war cabinet in 1917, was the main author of the Balfour Declaration.

**Reaction to the Declaration**

**Arab opposition**

The Arabs expressed disapproval in November 1918 at the parade marking the first anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. The Muslim-Christian Association protested the carrying of new "white and blue banners with two inverted triangles in the middle". They drew the attention of the authorities to the serious consequences of any political implications in raising the banners.[21]

Later that month, on the first anniversary of the occupation of Jaffa by the British, the Muslim-Christian Association sent a lengthy memorandum and petition to the military governor protesting once more any formation of a Jewish state.[22]

On November 1918 the large group of Palestinian Arab dignitaries and representatives of political associations addressed a petition to the British authorities in which they denounced the declaration. The document stated:

...we always sympathized profoundly with the persecuted Jews and their misfortunes in other countries... but there is wide difference between such sympathy and the acceptance of such a nation...ruling over us and disposing of our affairs.[23]

**Zionist reaction**

Chaim Weizmann and Nahum Sokolow, the principal Zionist leaders based in London, had asked for the reconstitution of Palestine as "the" Jewish national home. As such, the declaration fell short of Zionist expectations.[24]

**British opinion**

British public and government opinion became increasingly less favourable to the commitment that had been made to Zionist policy. In February 1922, Winston Churchill telegraphed Herbert Samuel asking for cuts in expenditure and noting:[25]

In both Houses of Parliament there is growing movement of hostility, against Zionist policy in Palestine, which will be stimulated by recent Northcliffe articles[26]. I do not attach undue importance to this movement, but it is increasingly difficult to meet the argument that it is unfair to ask the British...
taxpayer, already overwhelmed with taxation, to bear the cost of imposing on Palestine an unpopular policy.

**German and Ottoman reaction**

Immediately following the publication of the declaration Germany entered negotiations with Turkey to put forward counter proposals. A German-Jewish Society was formed: Vereinigung jüdischer Organisationen Deutschlands zur Wahrung der Rechte der Juden des Ostens (V.J.O.D.) and in January 1918 the Turkish Grand Vizier, Talaat, issued a statement which promised legislation by which "all justifiable wishes of the Jews in Palestine would be able to find their fulfilment". [27]

**References**

[8] Palestine, a Twice-promised Land?: The British, the Arabs & Zionism, 1915–1920 By Isaiah Friedman, page 171
[14] Wall Street Journal review of Jonathan Shneer, Balfour Declaration (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1000142405274870354604575407364169729910.html) "As Mr. Schneer documents, the declaration was, among much else, part of a campaign to foster world-wide Jewish support for the Allied war effort, not least in the U.S."


[18] See the report of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, UN Document A/364, 3 September 1947
[20] Full text of note included CO 733/58, Secret Cabinet Paper CP 60 (23), 'Palestine and the Balfour Declaration, January 1923. FO unofficial note added 'little referring to the Balfour Declaration among such papers as have been preserved'. Shuckburgh's memo asserts that 'as the official records are silent, it can only be assumed that such discussions as had taken place were of an informal and private character'. (http://books.google.com/books?id=Y27UmuiT6-4C&pg=PA256&dq=co%27s+733%2f58+secret+cabinet+paper+cp+60&source=web&ots= cukKJSZW-n&sig=5Hvi0qoW4qE41CINySHk3ime4w)
[22] 'Petition from the Moslem-Christian Association in Jaffa, to the Military Governor, on the occasion of the First Anniversary of British Entry into Jaffa', 16 November 1918, Zu'a'itir papers pp. 7–8. Cited by Huneidi p.32
Further reading


External links

- Original article reprinting the declaration from *The Times*, 9 November 1917 (http://archive.timesonline.co.uk/tol/viewArticle.arc?articleId=ARCHIVE-The_Times-1917-11-09-07-010&pagId=ARCHIVE-The_Times-1917-11-09-07)
- Balfour Declaration lexicon entry (http://www.knesset.gov.il/lexicon/eng/BalfourDeclaration_eng.htm) Knesset website (English)
- Text of the 1922 White Paper (http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/brwh1922.htm) from the Avalon Project
- Donald Macintyre, *The Independent*, 26 May 2005, "The birth of modern Israel: A scrap of paper that changed history" (http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/article223199.ece)
- Balfour: 117 words that changed the face of the Middle East (http://www.maannews.net/en/index.php?opr=ShowDetails&ID=26110)
- From the Balfour Declaration to Partition … to Two States? (http://palestine-mandate.com/from-the-balfour-declaration-to-partition-to-two-states)
- http://www.jewish-american-society-for-historic-preservation.org/images/Brandeis_Blackstone_article.doc
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