

THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

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Kenneth W. Stein

www.ismi.emory.edu

Background to the Declaration

The Balfour Declaration was the Jewish charter that Herzl did not receive from the Ottoman Sultan twenty years earlier. The terms of the declaration were included in the preamble of the Palestine Mandate's Articles (1922), given international sanction and political legitimacy by the newly formed League of Nations. For many historians of Zionism and Israel, the Declaration is viewed 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, which ultimately culminated in Israel's Declaration of Independence (1948). Those interested in deligitimizing Israel argue that the Balfour Declaration and therefore anything based upon its validity, like the Palestine Mandate or State of Israel is null and void. This was the official position of most of the Arab world well into the 1990s.

Issuance of the Declaration made Zionist adherents euphoric. Recognition to establish a homeland meant the Zionist movement 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 for the early Jewish pioneer immigrants 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 was 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 least worry, if not profound consternation. Would non-Zionist Jews in Britain be labeled as disloyal citizens because their co-religionist 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 who opposed the national home idea were neither organized enough, nor did their reasoning 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 which asserted British influence and territorial control over the Middle East, connecting Britain's Arab allies, clients, kings, and tribal leaders into the desired geo-political link. This 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. Zionist and British interests dovetailed into a workable and working 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 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 recognize officially 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 sensitivities. Despite public anger at the Declaration and its inclusion in the Mandate's function, local Arabs did participate in some local boards, commissions, advisory counsels, 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

On the international level, by the time Declaration was issued in 1917, it possessed a background that 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 interesting British governmental officials about securing Palestine for Zionist interests. In October 1915, the first official memorandum was prepared by the Zionist Organization for the British government about having a Jewish state in Palestine after the war. It also suggested placing the state under some form of trusteeship with a grant of a colonization charter to the Zionist Organization enabling 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 continued throughout 1916 and 1917 between Zionists and British officials, refining British needs and matching them with Jewish aspirations. Some in Britain at the time believed that Jews possessed influential 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 discuss encouraging world Jewry's support for the Entente powers in the war, and in return, receive Britain's support of Zionism. In addition, it was an exaggerated belief, but it was held by some in Britain 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 away from Bolshevism, who many in Britain believed to be a

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

critical bloc in the country, and towards the British Empire and the Allied/Entente war effort. These assumptions were largely flawed. Russian Jews were contentiously 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.

Sir Mark Sykes who had negotiated the Sykes-Picot agreement in May 1916, the secret British French agreement which eventually became the outline on how Britain and France would control the Middle East at the end of the war, moved to the view by 1917 that Palestine should not be an international zone, but come under British control.

In addition, in mid-1917 for example, 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 the assumptions that Jews could influence the outcome of the war were inflated or not, that perception did not reduce their importance 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, or that held by others, that Jews and Zionists possessed political clout far in excess of their power to influence a desired outcome to the war.

The Declaration’s contents

The Declaration’s final wording was a compromise document between what the Zionists wanted and what the British needed. It did not resemble except in spirit what was in the 1915 memorandum. It was sent in the form of a letter from the British Foreign Secretary, Lord James Balfour to the the president of the British Zionist Federation, Lord Rothschild. In the phrase, “His Majesty’s Government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people,” the Zionists would have preferred the term ‘re-establishment’ to reinforce the continuity of Jewish presence in Palestine, and they would have preferred the term “state” instead of a “national home.” The Declaration was the first international document to define a political entity as a “national home,” though it was used by the Zionists at their first Congress in 1897. No one understood the scope of a national home and 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 give Jews a country or state with clearly defined borders, it gave them opportunity to make a homeland for the themselves through whatever effort they might apply in that direction. In the twenty years since 1897, immigrating Jews to Palestine had begun to organize themselves, and amassed practical experience in defense of 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 diaspora. The Declaration’s issuance did not spawn anything more than

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

support from this or that Jewish quarter; massive Jewish immigration to Palestine in the subsequent decades did not take place. Zionism as an idea and as a practical solution to Jewish insecurity still remained very much a minority movement among Jews worldwide.

In the Declaration, Britain said that it would use “their 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 it did not refer to protecting their political rights, only their civil and religious rights. Yet, it spoke affirmatively about not prejudicing the political status enjoyed by Jews anywhere, a definite concession to those British Jews who adamantly opposed Zionism as ideology that would confuse their identity among non-Jews in the British Empire.

Critical to understanding the Declaration as a compromise document is knowing what the British government at the time saw as the outcome of the Balfour Declaration. 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 e “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

Already by spring 1917, US President Wilson 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 However it was apparently not until 1919, that Wilson gave public endorsement to the Balfour Declaration. Like forty years later when the issue of recognizing Israel presented itself, the White House on both occasions 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, the validity of the Balfour Declaration was disputed by Zionism’s foes because it was viewed as inconsistent with the objective of self-determination for Arabs living in Palestine at the time. Such reasoning dismissed of course, the entitlement of Jews 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

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.

of the Middle East. Arab notables in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and in the Arabian peninsula at the time were not proponents of self-determination; rather they themselves were interested in 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 its power and influence to secure their geographic and territorial interests in the Middle East for its interests, the Declaration has been repeatedly viewed and taught by opponents of Israel and Zionism as an unjust and unjustified aberration. In fact, the Declaration was as mentioned one of a dozen or more agreements and understandings that Britain undertook with Arab leaders in the Levant, Arabian peninsula, and Persian Gulf made before, during, and after the War. The Declaration's issuance is argued as a direct contradiction to the understanding British officials made with Sherif Hussein and his family in Mecca in 1914-1915 and promised made to Arab leaders at the end of the war. What was promised, who promised it, 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 who 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. And for the Zionists, 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.

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