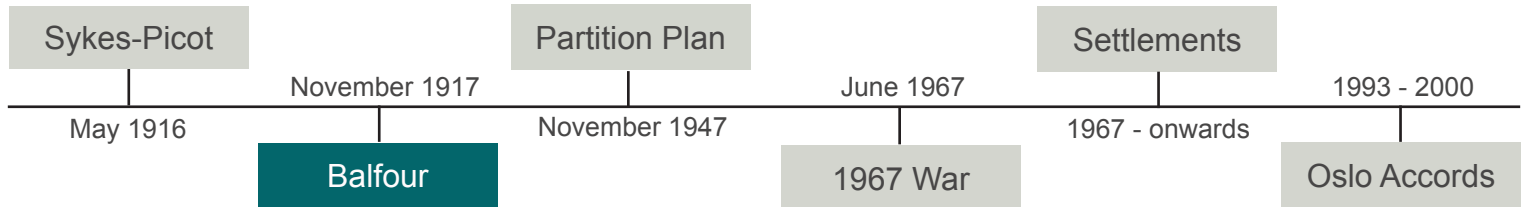


Arab-Israeli Relations



The Balfour Declaration

Prepared by Anna Siodlak, Research Associate

The Balfour Declaration (2 November 1917) was a statement of support by the British Government, approved by the War Cabinet, for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. At the time, the region was part of Ottoman Syria administered from Damascus. While the Declaration stated that the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine must not be deprived, it triggered a series of events that would result in the establishment of the State of Israel forcing thousands of Palestinians to flee their homes.

Who initiated the declaration?

The Balfour Declaration was a letter from British Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur James Balfour on behalf of the British government to Lord Walter Rothschild, a prominent member of the Jewish Community in England. It was the result of talks that began in 1916 between Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Chaim Weizmann, the chief proponent of pro-Zionist policy in Britain. These discussions were inspired by a popular European debate on the status and treatment of Jews in society, and the 1905 plan for a Jewish state in Uganda that was rejected by the Zionist Congress.¹

What were Britain's motivations behind the Declaration?

Security: Britain viewed Palestine as a zone from

which to supervise the Suez Canal; at the turn of the 20th century, 80% of the Canal's shipping belonged to the Empire. Britain also believed that they would gain a strategic foothold by establishing a strong Jewish community in Palestine. As occupier, British forces could monitor security in Egypt and protect its colonial and economic interests.

Economics: Britain anticipated that by encouraging communities of European Jews (who were familiar with capitalism and civil organisation) to immigrate to Palestine, entrepreneurialism and development would flourish, creating economic rewards for Britain.²

Politics: Britain believed that the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people would foster sentiments of prestige, respect and gratitude, increase its soft power, and reconfirm its place in the post war international order.³ It was also hoped that Russian-Jewish communities would become agents of British propaganda and persuade the tsarist government to support the Allies against Germany.

Ideology and agency: The Zionist Organisation and evangelical Christians, who hoped to fulfil a biblical prophecy that foretells the Second Coming of the Messiah, lobbied particularly hard for the British government to issue the declaration. Weizmann and Lloyd George were advocates of these strands of thought and were central to the creation of the declaration. As President of the World Zionist Organisation

² Herbert Samuel presented a memorandum to the British Cabinet in January 1915, entitled 'The Future of Palestine' that presented reasons for a Jewish state in Palestine and referred to England as a "civiliser of backward countries". H. Samuel. *The Future of Palestine*. (1915).

³ Scholars such as Mayir Vereté argue that the promise of national freedom would win over minority groups and raise political and also economic support, especially from Jewish-Americans. A. Shlaim. 'The Balfour Declaration And its Consequence' in Wm. Roger Louis, ed. *Yet More Adventures with Britannia: Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain*. (I. B. Tauris, 2005). pp. 251-270.

¹ These talks sympathised with Jewish Zionist aspirations and echoed the sentiment of Theodore Herzl's 1896 paper, 'Der Judenstaat' (The State of the Jews) which called for the end of Jewish suffering through the restoration of a Jewish state.

tion, Weizmann expanded their offices and courted state leaders, influencing their national interest in favour of the establishment of a Jewish state. Although Lloyd George's religious convictions may have inclined him towards Zionism; he was primarily a reformist and wartime Prime Minister who was focused on upholding British interests in the context of a fading empire.

The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence

A series of letters between Sharif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca and Sir Henry McMahon, Britain's High Commissioner in Cairo, was exchanged between 14 July, 1915 and 30 March, 1916. The focus of the correspondence was the status of land bound to the north by Mersina and Adana (now Turkey), to the east by the border of Persia (Iran), to the south by the Indian Ocean and to the west by the Red Sea and Mediterranean. In the letters, Sharif Hussein requests British recognition of Arab independence in return for mutual assistance and preferential economic treatment. McMahon accepts the independence of "Arabia and its inhabitants" and approves an "Arab Khalifate". However, he rejects the proposed boundaries, which remain a point of contention throughout the correspondence and are consequently left unresolved. The letters also stipulate payments to be made by the Sharif to the British government for additional troops, ammunition and food supplies.

What happened next?

At the time of the Declaration, Britain occupied Palestine under a military administration following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in an armed

campaign in the Sinai and Palestine during the First World War. A civil administration replaced this system in 1920 as negotiations began on the Mandate for Palestine and Transjordan. The Balfour Declaration was directly incorporated into the Mandate, which was ratified in 1923. This cemented the Declaration within a legal framework and provided the necessary impetus for Zionists groups to begin forming a Jewish state in Palestine.

The Declaration and following agreements were met with hostility, confusion and distrust in both Britain and the Arab world. Contradiction between the Declaration and the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, which promised Sharif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca Arab independence after the Empire's collapse, angered both Jews and Arabs. Protests and riots erupted across Palestine and in neighbouring areas. In the following decades resentment towards the British grew and violence intensified.⁴ After years of resistance, mismanagement and lack of economic, political and social progress, Britain announced its intention to terminate the Mandate in 1947.

Relevance today

The Balfour Declaration remains omnipresent in the mind of Palestinians, Jordanians and neighbouring Arab states who recognise it as the beginning of Arab-Israeli hostility. Many Palestinians blame Britain and its allies for the Israeli occupation and the resultant arduous living conditions they continue to face today.

⁴ The 1936-1939 Arab revolts, the rise of extremist groups like the Stern Gang and Irgun presented too many challenges for the British forces.



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Anna is a Research Associate with the West Asia – North Africa Institute, where she focuses on mechanisms for achieving Arab integration and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Before joining the WANA Institute, Anna was based at a development organisation in the region where she launched a number of initiatives including discussion groups on current affairs and career mentoring sessions for students. She holds a Bachelor of International Relations and is completing a Master's degree in Global Politics at the London School of Economics, specialising in international relations of the Middle East and human security.