

Deconstructing Balfour: The Declaration at 100

By Paul Scham



If you follow news concerning Israel, it's been pretty hard to miss the spate of anniversaries that are being celebrated this year and next. The next one, coming up on November 2, is 'Balfour Day,' the date in 1917 on which British foreign Minister Arthur James Balfour sent his famous letter to Lord Rothschild, known forever after as the Balfour Declaration. In the undergraduate course I teach every year on the conflict, I parse every sentence and demonstrate how a lot is packed into those 67 words.

The operative part reads (emphasis mine):

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.

Traditionally Zionists have celebrated it as the entrance of Zionism onto the world stage and as one of the most important steps leading

to Israel's establishment 31 years later. Conversely, Arabs and Palestinians have opposed it from the moment of its announcement as a "promise of who doesn't own to those who don't deserve." More recently, Palestinians have started a movement to get Britain to apologize for its issuance, a suggestion HMG has sharply rejected. A more idiosyncratic view was recently expressed by Anshel Pfeffer in Ha'aretz, decrying the purported importance of the Declaration and asserting that it really made little difference in the course of history because Israel would nevertheless certainly have come into being.

No one can ever know whether the Balfour Declaration was essential or superfluous; most likely something in between. But even without coming to a straightforward conclusion on that – which is inherently in the slightly disreputable realm of counterfactual history – anyone who wants to understand the origin and nature of the conflict needs to understand what the Declaration was, what it wasn't, and what it led to. It is also essential to see what assumptions were explicitly or implicitly included in its phrasing. This is, of course, a synthesis and summary; innumerable articles and books have been written about it.

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The Declaration itself is a masterpiece of ambiguity but there is no denying that it was understood at the time, and subsequently, as conferring (or recognizing, according to Zionists) a “national” connection between the Jewish people as a collective entity and Palestine (the word generally used then both by Jews and non-Jews in a geographical sense). This was still the age of imperialism and colonialism, and major European nations were used to determining the disposition of territories around the world. So Britain understood and was understood, as a matter of political and military fact, to have committed itself to the principal Zionist aim of securing Palestine as a ‘national home’ for Jews, an obligation recognized by HMG until the White Paper of 1939, which rejected that commitment.

However, the words “national home” have no history or meaning in international law; so it was deliberately unclear what, if anything HMG was promising. Moreover, by employing the phrase “in Palestine” (and not, for example “Palestine as a national home”), the Declaration clearly meant to express that not all of Palestine was reserved for Jews. On the other hand, the use of the word “national” was definitely a signal victory for Zionists. Zionism’s primary goal was to reframe Judaism in national terms – and this framing was clearly accepted by the Declaration. A religion does not get or need a “national home.”

Equally important was the mode of reference to the vast majority of the inhabitants of the land at the time, the Christian and Muslim Arabs who constituted approximately 92% of the population. They (understandably) were incensed by being unnamed and referred to simply by what they were not, i.e., Jewish. At the time they were generally called “Arabs,” as the term ‘Palestinian’ wasn’t used until the 1920s. Moreover, they were promised simply “civil and religious rights,” in clear and stark contrast to the national rights granted to Jews. It is true that Palestinian Arab nationalism was barely a dream at that time; most Palestinian Arabs would have thought of themselves as located in “Greater Syria” (bilad al-sham). This perception changed in the subsequent few years as Britain and France carved up bilad al-sham in various ways, which now comprises Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Palestine (however understood).

Why did the British issue the Declaration – and why then? This is the subject of even more books, and space precludes an adequate, let alone full discussion. Among the reasons were:

- British imperial objectives, especially vis-à-vis their French allies. Britain and France had already divided up the Middle East in the secret 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement (though Britain had the previous year promised to support an Arab empire under the Hashemite family in the Hussein-McMahon correspondence). But now Britain was staking its

claim to the area just north and east of the Suez Canal, its vital lifeline to India. The Middle East was the last major part of the world not yet colonized by European Christian powers and rectifying that was an explicit post-war aim.

- The assumption that a Jewish presence in Palestine would be supportive of British interests, and that Jews would regard Britain as a necessary counterweight to the Arab population. In other words, the British hoped to use the Zionists for their own imperial interests. In retrospect it is obvious that the Zionists were far more successful in using the British than vice-versa. Both Zionists and Arabs see the British as the villains of the period.
- An overestimation of “Jewish power”, hoping especially to influence both revolutionary Russian Bolsheviks and rich American capitalists to support the Allies in the world war. This is a fascinating miscalculation for many reasons.
- Genuine sympathy for Jews, sometimes called (anachronistically) ‘Christian Zionism’. This was certainly a factor for the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George.
- The persuasive diplomacy of Chaim Weizmann, the primary Zionist leader in Britain. Some denominate it as a ‘thank you gift’ to him, as in his day job as a chemist he was the principal inventor of synthetic acetone (guncotton), a major contribution to the Allied war effort.

The British strategy initially worked (helped along by the presence of a British army already busy conquering Palestine). The Allies won the war and Britain received the ‘Mandate for Palestine’ from the League of Nations, making it a British colony in all but name. The Mandatory document incorporated the Declaration in its entirety, though some British officials were already dubious that the Declaration had been a wise idea.

Thus, from 100 years out, it is clear that the Balfour Declaration both reflected and furthered British ambitions at the time of its issuance. It was not a conspiracy, but rather a manifestation of imperial assumptions and objectives during a horrendous war. Obviously, it benefited the Zionists and disadvantaged the Arabs, but to draw a straight line between the Declaration and 1948, let alone today’s reality, would be a distortion and over-simplification of both the Declaration and the history of the last 100 years. ■

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