

# The Balfour Declaration And its Consequences

Avi Shlaim

in Wm. Roger Louis, ed., *Yet More Adventures with Britannia: Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2005, pp. 251-270

Occasionally there are topics that have been written about at such length that it helps to clear the air, or to establish the vantage point from which I intend to consider my subject. My aim therefore is to take a fresh look at the Balfour Declaration in the light of recent scholarship. What I propose to do is to focus on the Declaration itself, on the motives behind it, on the way it was implemented, on the conflicts to which it gave rise, and on its consequences for Britain's position as the paramount Western power in the Middle East. I begin with a note on background.

British imperialism in the Middle East in World War I was intricate, to use a British understatement. In 1915 Britain promised Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca, that they would support an independent Arab kingdom under his rule in return for his mounting an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire, Germany's ally in the war. The promise was contained in a letter dated October 24, 1915 from Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, to the Sharif of Mecca in what later became known as the McMahon-Hussein correspondence. The Sharif of Mecca assumed that the promise included Palestine. In 1916 Britain reached a secret agreement with France to divide the Middle East into spheres of influence in the event of an allied victory. Under the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement, Palestine was to be placed under international control. In 1917 Britain issued the Balfour Declaration, promising to support the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.

Thus, by a stroke of the imperial pen, the Promised Land became twice-promised. Even by the standards of Perfidious Albion, this was an extraordinary tale of double-dealing and betrayal, a tale that continued to haunt Britain throughout the thirty years of its rule in Palestine. Of the three wartime pledges, the most curious, and certainly the most controversial was the Balfour Declaration. Here, wrote Arthur Koestler, was one nation promising another nation the land of a third nation. Koestler dismissed the Declaration as an impossible notion, an unnatural graft, a "white Negro." C. P. Scott, the ardently pro-Zionist editor of the Manchester Guardian, played a significant part in persuading the British government to issue the Declaration. In an editorial article, Scott hailed the Declaration as an act of imaginative generosity. "It is at once the fulfilment of aspiration, the signpost of destiny."<sup>[1]</sup> Elizabeth Monroe in Britain's Moment in the Middle East conceded that to the Jews who went to Palestine, the Declaration signified fulfilment and salvation. But she also notes that to the British the Declaration brought much ill will, and complications that sapped their strength. "Measured by British interests alone," argued Monroe, "it is one of the greatest mistakes in our imperial history."<sup>[2]</sup>

On November 2, 1917, Arthur Balfour, Britain's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, addressed a letter to Lord Rothschild, one of the leaders of the British Jews, as follows:

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy 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.

The statement was exceedingly brief, consisting of a mere sixty-seven words, but its consequences were both profound and pervasive, and its impact on the subsequent history of the Middle East was nothing less than revolutionary. It completely transformed the position of the fledgling Zionist movement vis-à-vis the Arabs of Palestine, and it provided a protective umbrella that enabled the Zionists to proceed steadily towards their ultimate goal of establishing an independent Jewish state in Palestine. Rarely in the annals of the British Empire has such a short document produced such far-reaching consequences.

In view of its political impact, it is not surprising that the Balfour Declaration has attracted so much attention from historians of the Middle East. Nor is it surprising that, almost a century later, it remains such a contentious and controversial subject. There are several bones of contention in this debate, all of them revolving around the question of compatibility between the three war-time agreements. On the question of conflict between Britain's promise to Sharif Hussein and to the French the most definitive study is by Elie Kedourie. Kedourie was the first scholar to bring together all the available evidence from British, French, and Arabic sources to elucidate the meaning of the McMahon-Hussein correspondence and to examine its impact on British policy between the wars. His principal conclusion is that the Sykes-Picot agreement did not violate the commitments contained in the McMahon-Hussein correspondence. The Balfour Declaration, however, is only mentioned by Kedourie in passing because it falls outside the scope of his study.<sup>[3]</sup>

In 1916 the Sharif of Mecca proclaimed himself "King of the Arab Countries," but the Allies recognized him only as King of the Hijaz. On the relationship between Britain's commitments to the Zionists and to King Hussein, the most recent study is Palestine: A Twice-Promised Land? by Isaiah Friedman.<sup>[4]</sup> Friedman's answer to the question posed in the title is that Palestine was not twice-promised in as much as McMahon's offer to recognize and uphold Arab independence after the war was conditional and non-

binding and that, in any case, it did not include Palestine. Friedman argues not only that Sir Henry had definitely excluded Palestine from the prospective Arab kingdom but that this was understood by the Hashemite leader at the time. Hussein's silence following the publication of the Balfour Declaration is seen by Friedman as indicative of his attitude. Another piece of evidence cited by Friedman comes from the famous book by George Antonius, the spokesman and chronicler of the Arab national movement. From Antonius we learn that King Hussein "ordered his sons to do what they could to allay the apprehensions caused by the Balfour Declaration among their followers [and] despatched an emissary to Faisal at Aqaba with similar instructions."[\[5\]](#)

Friedman's conclusion is that the charges of fraudulence and deception levelled against the British after the war were largely groundless. Groundless or not, these charges acquired the status of dogma not only in the eyes of Arab nationalists but, more surprisingly, in the eyes of most British officials as well. In the case of King Hussein it is necessary to distinguish much more clearly than Friedman does between his initial response to the Balfour Declaration and his subsequent attitude. When news of the Declaration reached Hussein he was greatly disturbed by it and he asked Britain to clarify its meaning. Whitehall met this request by the despatch of Commander D. G. Hogarth, one of the heads of the Arab Bureau in Cairo, who arrived in Jeddah in the first week of January 1918 for a series of interviews with King Hussein. "Hogarth's Message," as it came to be known, reaffirmed the Entente's determination that "the Arab race shall be given full opportunity of once again forming a nation in the world." So far as Palestine was concerned, Britain was "determined that no people shall be subject to another." Britain noted and supported the aspiration of the Jews to return to Palestine but only in so far as this was compatible with "the freedom of the existing population, both economic and political." Hussein voiced no disagreement with this policy though we may be sceptical of Hogarth's report that he "agreed enthusiastically" with it.[\[6\]](#)

Hogarth's Message is crucial for understanding King Hussein's attitude to the Balfour Declaration. Following the meetings in Jeddah, Hussein thought that he had Britain's assurance that the settlement of the Jews in Palestine would not conflict with Arab independence in that country. This explains his initial silence in public and his private efforts to allay the anxieties of his sons. Hussein had great respect for the Jews, seeing them, following the Koran, as "the People of the Book," meaning the Bible. He was not opposed to the settlement of Jews in Palestine and even welcomed it on religious and on humanitarian grounds. He was, however, emphatically opposed to a Zionist takeover of the country. Hogarth gave him a solemn pledge that Britain would respect not only the economic but also the political freedom of the Arab population. When Britain subsequently refused to recognize Arab independence in Palestine, Hussein felt betrayed and accused Britain of breach of faith.[\[7\]](#)

If the disenchantment of Sharif Hussein and his sons with Britain was gradual, the hostility of the Arab nationalists towards Britain on account of the Balfour Declaration was immediate and unremitting. One valuable Arabic source on this period is the diary of Auni Abd al-Hadi. Abd al-Hadi was a Palestinian politician who served as one of Amir Faisal's secretaries at the Paris Peace Conference and during his short-lived administration in Damascus in 1920. He then served Amir Abdullah, Faisal's elder brother, in Transjordan. In 1924 he returned to Palestine and became one of the chief spokesmen of the Palestinian national movement. Abd Al-Hadi's impression was that Faisal resented the Zionist intrusion into Palestine but was wary of upsetting the British. Faisal was also influenced, according to Abd al-Hadi, by the reassuring letters that he received from his father in the early months of 1918 in his camp in Aqaba on the subject of the Balfour Declaration.[\[8\]](#)

For his part, Abd al-Hadi did not believe in the possibility of co-operation with the Zionists in Palestine. He was therefore very critical in his diary of Faisal for signing an agreement on Arab-Jewish co-operation with Dr. Chaim Weizmann at their meeting in Aqaba on June 4, 1919. Abd al-Hadi notes that Faisal signed the agreement without understanding its implications because it was in English, a language he did not know. But he also notes that Faisal added a hand-written codicil making the implementation of the agreement conditional on his demands concerning Arab independence being fulfilled.[\[9\]](#) As these conditions were not fulfilled, the agreement became null and void.

There are a number of other references to the Balfour Declaration in Auni Abd al-Hadi's diary, all of them highly critical of the British and of their Jewish protégés. His basic view, repeated on several occasions, was that the Declaration was made by an English foreigner who had no ownership of Palestine to a foreign Jew who had no right to it.[\[10\]](#) Palestine thus faced a double danger: from the British Mandate and from the Zionist movement. In December 1920 Abd al-Hadi participated in the Third Palestinian Congress in Haifa. The Congress denounced the actions of the British government and its plans for realizing the Zionist goals. It also rejected Balfour's promise of a national home for the Jews in Palestine as a violation of international law, of wartime Allied commitments, and of the natural rights of the inhabitants of the country.[\[11\]](#) In 1932 Abd al-Hadi founded the Palestinian branch of the Pan-Arab Independence Party whose manifesto called for the cancellation of the Mandate and of the Balfour Declaration.[\[12\]](#) Arab hostility to the Balfour Declaration, as exemplified by Auni Abd al-Hadi, could have been predicted from the beginning. So why was the Declaration issued?

There are two main schools of thought on the origins of the Balfour Declaration, one represented by Leonard Stein, the other by Mayir Vereté. What later became the conventional wisdom on the subject was first laid out by Leonard Stein in 1961 in his masterly survey [The Balfour Declaration](#).[\[13\]](#) This book provides a careful, detailed, and subtle account of the decision-making process that led Britain to issue the Declaration, but it does not reach any clear-cut conclusions. The conclusion implicit in the narrative, however, is that it was the activity and the skill of the Zionists, and in particular of Dr. Chaim Weizmann, that induced Britain to issue this famous statement of support for the Zionist cause.

Leonard Stein's book was subjected to an extended critique by Mayir Vereté of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in a notable article he published in 1970 on "The Balfour Declaration and its Makers."<sup>[14]</sup> According to Vereté the Declaration was the work of hard-headed pragmatists, primarily motivated by British imperial interests in the Middle East. Far from the Zionists seeking British support, it was British officials who took the initiative in approaching the Zionists.

The definition of British interests in the Middle East began in 1915. This process led to the Sykes-Picot agreement which reconciled Britain's interests with those of France, with a compromise over Palestine. On further reflection, however, the British felt that control over Palestine was necessary in order to keep France and Russia from the approaches to Egypt and the Suez Canal. In Vereté's account, it was the desire to exclude France from Palestine, rather than sympathy for the Zionist cause, that prompted Britain to sponsor a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. It was also thought that a Declaration favorable to the ideals of Zionism was likely to enlist the support of the Jews of America and Russia for the war effort against Germany. Finally, rumor that Germany was courting the Zionists accelerated the pace at which Britain moved towards its dramatic overture. In contrast to Stein, Vereté concludes that Zionist lobbying played a negligible part in drawing Britain towards Palestine.

A similar though not identical argument was advanced by Jon Kimche in [The Unromantics: The Great Powers and the Balfour Declaration](#). As the title suggests, the author believes that the driving force behind the Declaration was not sentimentality but hard-headed realism. Kimche, however, attributes this realism not only to the British but to the Zionists as well. Indeed, he maintains that the interests of the two sides were identical, and that by working for a Jewish Palestine they were working at the same time for a British Palestine. The Declaration provided the stepping stones: each of the partners used the same stones but later each went his own way. "This," argues Kimche, "was the basic realism with which Balfour and Weizmann approached their compact; they understood that they would have to go together part of the way, but that a time would come when they would have to part."<sup>[15]</sup> What is beyond question, as Kimche himself points out, is that there was little room for such sophistication in the heated politics of wartime Britain and post-war Zionism.<sup>[16]</sup>

The historiography of the Balfour Declaration took a step forward in 2000 with the publication of Tom Segev's book on the British Mandate in Palestine.<sup>[17]</sup> Segev's contribution lies in the revisionist interpretation he develops of the origins of British rule in Palestine. His "revisionist account" is based on new source material as well as a new synthesis of earlier studies on the subject. In Segev's account, the prime movers behind the Balfour Declaration were neither the Zionist leaders nor the British imperial planners, but Prime Minister David Lloyd George. In his memoirs, written some twenty years after the event, Lloyd George explained his support for the Zionist movement during the First World War as an alliance with a hugely influential political organization whose goodwill was worth paying for. The common wisdom in Britain at the time Lloyd George published his account was that the country had erred in supporting the Zionists and he was probably trying to justify his wartime policy.

Segev will have none of it. Lloyd George's support for Zionism, he argues, was based not on British interests but on ignorance and prejudice. In his own way Lloyd George despised the Jews, but he also feared them, and he proceeded on the basis of an absurdly inflated notion of the power and influence of the Zionists. In aligning Britain with the Zionists, he acted in the mistaken—and anti-Semitic—view that the Jews turned the wheels of history. In fact, as Segev shows, the Jews were helpless, with nothing to offer—no influence other than the myth of clandestine power. As for the Zionists, they could not even speak in the name of world Jewry for they were a minority within a minority.

Lloyd George's misconceptions about the Jews were widely shared in the ruling class in Britain, as was his antipathy towards the French. In Segev's summary, the British entered Palestine to defeat the Turks; they stayed there to keep it from the French; then they gave it to the Zionists because they loved "the Jews" even as they loathed them, at once admiring and despising them. The British were not guided by strategic considerations and there was no orderly decision-making process. The Balfour Declaration "was the product of neither military nor diplomatic interests but of prejudice, faith, and sleight of hand. The men who sired it were Christian and Zionist and, in many cases, anti-Semitic. They believed the Jews controlled the world."<sup>[18]</sup> Britain's belief in the mystical power of "the Jews" overrode reality, and it was on the basis of such spurious considerations that Britain took the momentous decision to sponsor the Zionist cause.<sup>[19]</sup>

On one point there is a broad consensus among admirers as well as critics of the Balfour Declaration: it was a considered statement of policy, issued after prolonged deliberations, painstaking drafting and redrafting, and careful wording. Before the British government gave the Declaration to the world, it closely examined every word, and incorporated in the text countless changes and corrections. All these efforts, however, did not result in a clear or coherent text. On the contrary, they compounded the opaqueness, ambiguity, and, worst of all, the internal contradictions.

The greatest contradiction lay in supporting, however vaguely, a right to national self-determination of a minority of the inhabitants of Palestine, while implicitly denying it to the majority. At the time that the proposed statement was under discussion in the War Cabinet, the population of Palestine was in the neighborhood of 670,000. Of these, the Jews numbered some 60,000. The Arabs thus constituted roughly 91 per cent of the population, while the Jews accounted for 9 per cent. The proviso that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine" implied that, in British eyes, the Arab majority had no political rights.

Part of the explanation for this peculiar phraseology is that the majority of the ministers did not recognize the Palestinians as a

people with legitimate national aspirations, but viewed them as a backward, Oriental, inert mass. Arthur Balfour was typical of the Gentile Zionists in this respect. "Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad," he wrote in 1922, is "of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land."<sup>[20]</sup> The most charitable explanation that may be offered for this curious claim is that in an age of colonialism everyone was in some sense implicated in its ideology. Balfour may appear today like an extreme example of the colonial mentality, but he was not untypical of his era.

Yet Balfour's specific proposal to come out in favor of the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine did not enjoy unanimous support round the Cabinet table. Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India and the only Jewish member of the government, considered Zionism a threat to the Jews of Britain and other countries. He denounced Zionism as a "mischievous political creed, untenable by any patriotic citizen of the United Kingdom."<sup>[21]</sup> Montagu rejected the idea of the Jews as a nation and argued that the demand for recognition as a separate nation put at risk their struggle to become citizens with equal rights in the countries in which they lived.<sup>[22]</sup>

Lord Curzon, a member of the War Cabinet, was more troubled by the implications of the proposed move for the rights of the Arabs of Palestine. "How was it proposed," he asked his Cabinet colleagues, "to get rid of the existing majority of Mussulman inhabitants and to introduce the Jews in their place?" In a paper to the Cabinet he returned to the theme:

What is to become of the people of the country? . . . [The Arabs] and their forefathers have occupied the country for the best part of 1,500 years, and they own the soil. . . . They profess the Mohammedan faith. They will not be content either to be expropriated for Jewish immigrants or to act merely as hewers of wood and drawers of water for the latter.<sup>[23]</sup>

Montagu and Curzon were overruled. The three most powerful men in the Cabinet, Lloyd George, Balfour, and Lord Milner, threw their weight behind the proposal. At the crucial meeting, on October 31, 1917, the Cabinet approved the final wording of the declaration of sympathy for a national home for the Jews in Palestine. Curzon restated his misgivings and his pessimism about the future of Palestine. Largely in deference to his anxieties, the final version of the Declaration contained the caveat about protecting the civil and religious rights of the non-Jewish communities in Palestine.<sup>[24]</sup> Chaim Weizmann was waiting outside the room where the War Cabinet met. In the early afternoon, Sir Mark Sykes emerged, calling "Dr. Weizmann, it's a boy!"

While Chaim Weizmann's part in procuring the Balfour Declaration may have been exaggerated, his role in keeping Britain to her rash wartime promise was of critical importance. To the peace conference that convened at Versailles in January 1919, Weizmann went as the head of the Zionist delegation. His aim was to ensure that the British would remain in Palestine. At the conference he pleaded for the international ratification of the Balfour Declaration. But at the San Remo conference, in April 1920, the French representative objected to the inclusion of the language of the Balfour Declaration in the text of the mandate over Palestine. It took strong British pressure to persuade the League of Nations to incorporate the commitment to establish a Jewish national home in the terms of Britain's mandate to govern Palestine.<sup>[25]</sup>

Even before the international ratification of the Balfour Declaration, violent protests broke out in Palestine against Britain's pro-Zionist policy and against Zionist activities. The Arabs emphatically refused to recognize the Declaration and anything done in its name, seeing it as the thin end of the wedge of an Anglo-Jewish plot to take over their country. Arab resentment towards the British and their protégées culminated in the Nebi Musa riots of April 1920. A court of inquiry appointed to investigate the riots noted that the Balfour Declaration "is undoubtedly the starting point of the whole trouble." The court also reached the conclusion that Arab fears were not unfounded.<sup>[26]</sup> The Nebi Musa riots were the first intrusion of mass violence into the Arab-Jewish conflict. The riots did nothing to advance the political aims of the Arab nationalists but they also bode ill for the Zionists' expectation of achieving their ends peacefully. The riots and their aftermath, in the words of Bernard Wasserstein, "created a gangrene of suspicion and mistrust in the British-Zionist relationship in Palestine which was to subsist throughout the three decades of British rule."<sup>[27]</sup>

Throughout these three decades Britain was subjected to repeated criticism from Zionist quarters for renegeing, or at least backsliding, on its wartime pledge to the Jews. In self-defense the British pointed out that the Balfour Declaration committed them to support a national home for the Jews in Palestine, not a Jewish state. Not all British officials, however, adhered to this interpretation. Balfour and Lloyd George, for example, admitted in 1922 at a meeting with Winston Churchill and Chaim Weizmann, that the Balfour Declaration "had always meant a Jewish State."<sup>[28]</sup>

The troubled and tangled history of the British Mandate in Palestine has been told many times before, recently among others by Joshua Sherman and Naomi Shepherd.<sup>[29]</sup> Most historians of this period attribute to British policy a pro-Arab bias. Some Zionist writers go further: they accuse Britain not only of persistent partiality towards the Arabs, but of going back on its original promise to the Jews.

Tom Segev makes a major contribution to the existing literature on this issue by putting Britain's record as a mandatory power under an uncompromising lens. His verdict is that British actions considerably favored the Zionist position and thus helped to ensure the establishment of a Jewish state. The evidence he presents of British support for the Zionist position is both rich and compelling. So is the evidence he adduces for the proposition that once the Zionist movement came to Palestine with the intention of creating a Jewish state with a Jewish majority, war was inevitable. From the start there were only two possibilities: that the Zionists would defeat the Arabs or that the Arabs would defeat the Zionists. British actions tended to weaken the Arabs and to strengthen the



Zionists as the two national movements moved inexorably towards the final showdown. The Arab nationalists in Palestine, under the leadership of Haj Amin al-Husseini, despaired of Britain and eventually threw in their lot with Nazi Germany. The Zionists, under the leadership of Chaim Weizmann, hitched a lift with the British Empire, advancing under its sponsorship to the verge of independence. The Zionists were not slow to grasp the importance for a weak national liberation movement of securing the sponsorship and support of a great power. Indeed, ensuring the support of the paramount Western power of the day remains to this day a basic tenet of Zionist foreign policy.

From the start, the central problem facing British officials in Palestine was that of reconciling an angry and hostile Arab majority to the implementation of the pro-Zionist policy that was publicly proclaimed on November 2, 1917. In general, British officials in Palestine had much more sympathy for the Arabs than the policy-makers in London. Many of these officials had an uneasy conscience, even a feeling of guilt, as a result of the decision of their political masters to honor Britain's wartime promise to the Jews while breaking its promise to the Arabs. Some suggested a revision of the policy because, in their opinion, it involved an injustice to the Arabs. But they constantly ran up against the argument that the Declaration constituted a binding commitment. Even Lord Curzon, who had originally opposed the Balfour Declaration, concluded in 1923 that the commitment to the Zionists could not be ignored "without substantial sacrifice of consistency and self-respect, if not of honour."[\[30\]](#)

Arab resentment and riots in Palestine persuaded the Lloyd George government to replace the military government with a civil administration, but not to reverse its pro-Zionist policy. And once the government resolved to continue to support a Jewish homeland in Palestine, it could not have chosen a more suitable man for the post of High Commissioner than Sir Herbert Samuel. Samuel's association with Zionism was intimate and his attachment to the Zionist cause was perhaps the one passionate commitment of his entire political career.[\[31\]](#) Samuel was sent to Palestine not because of—or even despite—his Jewishness, but because he was a Zionist. The appointment pleased the Zionists but it destroyed the last vestiges of Arab faith in Britain's integrity and impartiality. Before Samuel took over from the military government, the chief administrative officer asked him to sign what became one of the most quoted documents in Zionist history: "Received from Major General Sir Louis Bols, KCB—One Palestine, complete." Samuel signed.[\[32\]](#)

Traditional British historians have tended to regard Herbert Samuel as an impartial administrator in the emerging conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Zionists. Sahar Huneidi, an Arab scholar living in London, challenges this claim in a major revisionist study of the early period of the Mandate. She argues that most of the measures Samuel took during his tenure in Palestine—in the political, economic, and administrative spheres—were designed to prepare the ground not just for a Jewish national home but for a fully-fledged Jewish state. Using a wide range of primary sources, both English and Arabic, Huneidi charts Samuel's career in Palestine against the complex background of British policy in the region.[\[33\]](#)

Huneidi argues convincingly that during Samuel's five years as High Commissioner in Palestine, from 1920 to 1925, he remained an ardent supporter of Zionism. But under the impact of fierce anti-Jewish riots, he began to doubt the practicality of a policy which seemed, as he put it, to be a recipe for "a second Ireland." He therefore devised endless schemes to draw the Arab notables into the political community of Palestine. All these schemes, however, proved inadequate to the task of reconciling the Arabs of Palestine to Zionism.[\[34\]](#)

The failure of his attempts to bring together Arabs and Jews within a unified political framework led Samuel to try to satisfy each community separately. His preferred method was the devolution of power to the increasingly separate communal institutions of the Arabs and the Jews. This policy encouraged the trend towards the internal partition of Palestine. Under Samuel's successors this trend gathered further momentum. While alleviating the inter-communal conflict in the short run, this process exacerbated the problem in the long run by driving Arabs and Jews further and further apart. As the two communities built up the institutional strength required for the struggle ahead, the Government of Palestine became little more than an umpire.[\[35\]](#)

Isaiah Berlin, an Anglo-Jewish supporter of Zionism and a prescient observer, was moved to compare the Palestine Mandate to a minor English public school:

There was the headmaster, the high commissioner, trying to be firm and impartial: but the assistant masters favoured the sporting stupid boarders (Arabs) against the clever swot dayboys (Jews) who had the deplorable habit of writing home to their parents on the slightest provocation to complain about the quality of the teaching, the food, and so on.[\[36\]](#)

The role of umpire became increasingly difficult to sustain with the passage of time. High Commissioners came and went but their hands were tied by the pledge of November 2, 1917. Shortly after his arrival in Palestine, in December 1928, Sir John Chancellor reached the conclusion that the Balfour Declaration had been a "colossal blunder," unfair to the Arabs and detrimental to the interests of the British Empire. In January 1930 he sent a long memorandum to London. He wanted to extricate Britain from the Balfour Declaration and to deal a blow to Zionism. His ideas were given a respectful hearing in London and the King asked for a copy.[\[37\]](#)

On learning that the King would like to hear from him directly about the state of affairs in Palestine, Chancellor obliged with a 16-page letter explaining why, in Chancellor's view, Britain's national home policy in Palestine was misguided, unjust, and impossible to carry out. It also repeated his earlier proposals for restricting Jewish immigration and land purchases in Palestine. The Jews took

the view that the Arabs of Palestine were free to go to any part of Arabia and that they should be induced to move to Transjordan. Chancellor was strongly opposed to any such action on the grounds that it would be inconsistent with the part of the Balfour Declaration which laid down that in the establishment of a Jewish national home, nothing should be done to prejudice the rights of the non-Jewish communities in Palestine. Chancellor portrayed the Jews as an emotional people:

What makes them difficult to deal with is that they are, regardless of the rights and feelings of others, very exacting in pressing their own claims. Even as a minority of the population of Palestine the Jews adopt towards the Arabs an attitude of arrogant superiority, which is hotly resented by the Arabs with their traditions of courtesy and good manners. [\[38\]](#)

Nor did the Jews cherish genuine sentiments of loyalty towards Britain. In spite of what they said on public occasions when it was in their interest to proclaim their devotion, “the bulk of the Jewish population of Palestine have little feeling of gratitude or loyalty towards Great Britain for what she has done for the establishment of the Jewish National Home.” [\[39\]](#)

Having delivered his tirade against the Jews, Chancellor returned to the basic problem facing Britain and made a concrete proposal for dealing with it:

The facts of the situation are that in the dire straits of the war, the British Government made promises to the Arabs and promises to the Jews which are inconsistent with one another and are incapable of fulfilment. The honest course is to admit our difficulty and to say to the Jews that, in accordance with the Balfour Declaration, we have favoured the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine and that a Jewish National Home in Palestine has in fact been established and will be maintained and that, without violating the other part of the Balfour Declaration, without prejudicing the interests of the Arabs, we cannot do more than we have done. [\[40\]](#)

Chancellor’s memoranda, and a number of other reports that also underlined the gravity of the situation in Palestine, contributed to a reformulation of the official line in London. In October 1930, after several discussions in Cabinet, Colonial Secretary Lord Passfield issued a White Paper. The premise and the principal innovation of the White Paper was that the Balfour Declaration imposed on Britain a binary and equal obligation towards both Jews and Arabs. Accordingly, Jewish immigration to Palestine was linked to the Arab as well as the Jewish economy. In the past, Jewish immigration quotas were determined by the absorptive capacity of the Palestine economy. From this point on, Jews were to be allowed into the country only at a rate that would not put Arabs out of jobs. In the spirit of Chancellor’s proposals, the White Paper assumed that the Jews would remain a minority. Chancellor and his officials were pleased by this redefinition of official policy, but their success was short-lived. Dr. Weizmann succeeded in getting the new policy reversed within a few months. Once again the Zionists had won and the Arabs failed in London. [\[41\]](#)

As Chancellor had predicted, unrestricted Jewish immigration and land purchases in Palestine produced further unrest and periodic outbreaks of violence. The fundamental contradiction between Arab nationalist aspirations and Britain’s 1917 undertakings to the Jews continued to render the Mandate inoperable. The influx of German Jews to Palestine following the Nazi rise to power in 1933 provoked deep anxieties among the Arabs. In 1936 the Arab Higher Committee declared a general strike with the aim of halting Jewish immigration, banning the sale of land to Jews, and establishing an independent national government. The general strike snowballed into a full-scale revolt that was to last three years. The British government’s belated response to the outbreak of the Arab Rebellion consisted of appointing a Royal Commission, with Earl Peel as chairman, to investigate the underlying causes of the disturbances. The Peel Commission’s report went to the heart of the problem:

Under the stress of the World War the British Government made promises to Arabs and Jews in order to obtain their support. On the strength of those promises both parties formed certain expectations. . . . An irrepressible conflict has arisen between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country. . . . There is no common ground between them. . . . This conflict was inherent in the situation from the outset. . . . We cannot—in Palestine as it is now—both concede the Arab claim of self-government and secure the establishment of the Jewish National Home. . . . This conflict between the two obligations is all the more unfortunate because each of them, taken separately, accords with British sentiment and British interests. [\[42\]](#)

The Peel Commission proposed the partition of Palestine. The logic behind partition was unassailable. It was the only solution then and it remains the only solution today to the tragic conflict between the two national movements. In 1937 the Jews accepted partition but the Arabs rejected it; so the conflict continued and the violence escalated.

The Arab Rebellion of 1936–39 demonstrated once again that there could be no compromise between the two rival communities in Palestine: only war could decide the issue. The Jewish community was militarily weak and vulnerable. It would have been easily defeated had Britain not intervened to restore law and order. The Jewish national home, in the last resort, had to be defended by British bayonets.

In November 1938 Major General Bernard Montgomery arrived in Palestine. His task was to crush the revolt. “Monty” was a short-tempered professional soldier with no inclination to study the details of the conflict in Palestine. He gave his men simple orders on

how to handle the rebels: kill them. This is what his men did, and in the process they broke the backbone of the Arab national movement. When the struggle for Palestine entered its most crucial phase, in the aftermath of World War II, the Jews were ready to do battle whereas the Arabs were still licking their wounds.

The costs of the British presence in Palestine were considerable and the benefits remained persistently elusive. Palestine was not a strategic asset: it was not a source of power but of weakness. Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, the highest ranking British soldier in the Middle East in the early 1920s, kept repeating that the British had no business being in Palestine, and the sooner they left, the better. “The problem of Palestine is exactly the same . . . as the problem of Ireland,” he wrote, “namely, two peoples living in a small country hating each other like hell.” Wilson castigated the civilians—he called them the “frocks”—for failing to understand that the Empire could not afford the luxury of spreading itself too thin. Again and again, he demanded that Palestine, or “Jewland” as he called it, be abandoned.[\[43\]](#)

The logic of this position became irresistible after India’s independence was declared in 1947. For if India was the jewel in the Empire’s crown, Palestine was hardly more than an anemone in the King’s buttonhole. Economic considerations reinforced the strategic arguments for withdrawal from Palestine. Hugh Dalton, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, deployed both arguments in a letter to Prime Minister Clement Attlee. “The present state of affairs is not only costly to us in manpower and money,” wrote Dalton, “but is . . . of no real value from the strategic point of view—you cannot in any case have a secure base on top of a wasps’ nest—and it is exposing our young men, for no good purpose, to abominable experiences and is breeding anti-Semites at a most shocking speed.”[\[44\]](#)

In February 1947 the Labour government decided to hand the Mandate over Palestine to the United Nations, the League of Nations’ successor. The Mandate was relinquished because it was unworkable. All of Britain’s attempts to find a formula for reconciling peacefully the rival claims of Arabs and Jews to the country had finally failed. On November 29, 1947 the UN General Assembly voted for the partition of mandatory Palestine into two independent states, one Arab and one Jewish. The Arabs of Palestine, the Arab states, and the Arab League, rejected partition as illegal, immoral, and impractical. The passage of the resolution was thus the signal for the outbreak of a vicious civil war between the two communities in Palestine, a war which was to end in a Jewish triumph and an Arab tragedy.

Britain refused to assume responsibility for implementing the UN partition resolution. It set a firm date for the end of the Mandate—May 14, 1948. As the Mandate approached its inglorious end, both sides felt let down by the British, accusing them of duplicity and betrayal. The manner in which the Mandate ended was the worst blot on Britain’s entire record as the mandatory power. Britain left Palestine without an orderly transfer of power to a legitimate government. In this respect, the end of the Palestine Mandate has the dubious distinction of being unique in the annals of the British Empire.

The consequences of the Balfour Declaration were not confined to Palestine. The Declaration engendered anger towards Britain throughout the Arab world and at all levels of Arab society from the intellectual elites to the masses. Together with the Sykes-Picot agreement, Balfour’s Declaration became a central point of reference for Arab intellectuals after the First World War. Edward Said, for example, in *The Question of Palestine* dwells at great length on the unspoken assumptions behind the Declaration. For him it is a prime example of the moral epistemology of imperialism. The Declaration, he writes, was made:

(a) by a European power, (b) about a non-European territory, (c) in flat disregard of both the presence and the wishes of the native majority resident in the territory, and (d) it took the form of a promise about this same territory to another foreign group, so that this foreign group might, quite literally, make this territory a national home for the Jewish people.  
[\[45\]](#)

At the other end of the spectrum there were popular demonstrations against the Balfour Declaration in the inter-war period by people whose grasp of its meaning was tenuous at best. One amusing example was a demonstration organized in al-Karak by Sulayman An-Nabulsi, a schoolteacher who was later to become prime minister of Jordan:

On the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, he led his class into the streets, with the cry: “Falyasqut wa’d Balfour!”, which, figuratively translated, means: “Down with the Balfour Declaration!”. The crowd in the streets was ignorant of its meaning, so started yelling: “Falyasqut Karkur!” (“Down with Karkur!”). Karkur was a local Armenian shoemaker and he ran out into the crowd, crying, “Balfour, oh people, Balfour”. Others yelled “Falyasqut wahid balkun!” (“Down with a balcony!”) and “Falyasqut wahid min fawq!” (Down with one from the top!”).[\[46\]](#)

In Britain itself opinions about the Balfour Declaration remained sharply divided long after the end of the Palestine Mandate. Richard Crossman argued passionately that Balfour, Lloyd George, and Milner all felt under an obligation, in the moment of Allied victory, to do something for oppressed world Jewry. Strategic calculations, Crossman believed, were at most secondary factors.[\[47\]](#) The opposite interpretation was advanced with equal passion and partisanship by Arnold Toynbee. Toynbee believed that Balfour and his colleagues understood the consequences for the Arabs of fostering the equivalent of a white settler community but went ahead all the same for the sake of sustaining British influence in the eastern Mediterranean.[\[48\]](#) “I will say straight out,” Toynbee told an interviewer in 1973, “Balfour was a wicked man.” He was wicked because he used the League of Nations mandate to rob the Arabs of their right to self-determination. “The Arabs had no political experience,” Toynbee stated, “and they were thrown into the

most subtle and intricate political situation you can imagine. They were clearly unprepared for it. This is part of the monstrosity of the whole affair.”<sup>[49]</sup>

Britain’s failure in Palestine can be at least partly attributed to the Balfour Declaration for that was the original sin. In Arabic there is a saying that something that starts crooked, remains crooked. The Balfour Declaration was not just crooked; it was a contradiction in terms. The national home it promised to the Jews was never clearly defined and there was no precedent for it in international law. On the other hand, it was arrogant, dismissive, and even racist, to refer to 90 per cent of the population as “the non-Jewish communities in Palestine.” And it was the worst kind of imperial double standard, implying that there was one law for the Jews, and one law for everybody else.

With such a singularly inauspicious and murky beginning, British rule in Palestine was predestined to fail, as in a Greek tragedy. It was not just a policy failure, but an egregious moral failure. Britain had no moral right to promise national rights for a tiny Jewish minority in a predominantly Arab country. It did so not for altruistic reasons but for selfish, if misguided reasons. At no stage in this long saga did the Jews feel that they were getting from their great power sponsor the support to which they felt entitled by virtue of the Balfour Declaration, and the end of the mandate was accompanied by the most bitter recriminations. The Arabs were violently opposed to the Balfour Declaration from the start. They held Britain responsible for the loss of their patrimony to the Jewish intruders. By the end of the mandate, there was no gratitude and no goodwill left towards Britain on either side of the Arab-Jewish divide. I can only agree with Sir John Chancellor that the Balfour Declaration was a colossal blunder-it has proved to be a catastrophe for the Palestinians and it gave rise to one of the most intense, bitter, and protracted conflicts of modern times.

<sup>[1]</sup> Quoted in Daphna Baram, Disenchantment: The Guardian and Israel (London, 2004), p. 43.

<sup>[2]</sup> Elizabeth Monroe, Britain’s Moment in the Middle East, 1914–71 (London, 1981), p. 43.

<sup>[3]</sup> Elie Kedourie, In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon-Husayn Correspondence and its Interpretations, 1914–1939 (Cambridge, 1976).

<sup>[4]</sup> Isaiah Friedman, Palestine: A Twice-Promised Land: The British, the Arabs, and Zionism, 1915–1920 (New Brunswick, N.J., 2000), Vol. 1.

<sup>[5]</sup> Ibid., p. xlvii; George Antonius, The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement (Beirut, 1938), p. 269.

<sup>[6]</sup> Timothy J. Paris, Britain, the Hashemites, and Arab Rule, 1920–1925: The Sherifian Solution (London, 2003), p. 44.

<sup>[7]</sup> Antonius, The Arab Awakening, pp. 267–69 and 331–32.

<sup>[8]</sup> Auni Abd al-Hadi, Mudhakkirat Auni Abd al-Hadi (The Memoirs of Auni Abd al-Hadi), Introduction and research by Khairieh Kasmieh (Beirut, 2002), pp. 56-57 and 292.

<sup>[9]</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>[10]</sup> Ibid., pp. 141 and 164.

<sup>[11]</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>[12]</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>[13]</sup> Leonard Stein, The Balfour Declaration (London, 1961).

<sup>[14]</sup> Mayir Vereté, “The Balfour Declaration and its Makers,” Middle Eastern Studies, 6, 1 (January 1970).

<sup>[15]</sup> Jon Kimche, The Unromantics: The Great Powers and the Balfour Declaration (London, 1968), p. 69.

<sup>[16]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[17]</sup> Tom Segev, One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate (London, 2000).

<sup>[18]</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>[19]</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>[20]</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>[21]</sup> Quoted in Margaret Macmillan, Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War (London, 2001),



p. 427.

[22] Segev, One Palestine, Complete, p. 47.

[23] Quoted in David Gilmour, "The Unregarded Prophet: Lord Curzon and the Palestine Question," Journal of Palestine Studies, 25, 3 (Spring 1996), p. 64.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Segev, One Palestine, Complete, pp. 116 and 142.

[26] Ibid., p. 141.

[27] Bernard Wasserstein, The British in Palestine: The Mandatory Government and the Arab-Jewish Conflict, 1917–1929 (Oxford, 1991, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), p. 71.

[28] Gilmour, "Unregarded Prophet."

[29] A. J. Sherman, Mandate Days: British Lives in Palestine, 1918–1948 (London, 1997); and Naomi Shepherd, Ploughing Sand: British Rule in Palestine (London, 1999).

[30] Wasserstein, The British in Palestine, p. 16.

[31] Bernard Wasserstein, Herbert Samuel: A Political Life (Oxford, 1992), p. 204.

[32] Segev, One Palestine, Complete, p. 155.

[33] Sahar Huneidi, A Broken Trust: Herbert Samuel, Zionism and the Palestinians, 1920–1925 (London, 2001).

[34] Wasserstein, The British in Palestine, pp. 16–17.

[35] Ibid., p. 17.

[36] Quoted in Avi Shlaim, The Politics of Partition: King Abdullah, the Zionists, and Palestine, 1921–1951 (Oxford, 1990), p. 54.

[37] Segev, One Palestine, Complete, pp. 334–35.

[38] Sir John R. Chancellor to Lord Stamfordham, May 27, 1930, Middle East Archive, St. Antony's College, Oxford.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Segev, One Palestine, Complete, pp. 335–38.

[42] Palestine Royal Commission, Report, Cmd. 5479, p. 370.

[43] Segev, One Palestine, Complete, p. 147.

[44] Ibid., p. 495.

[45] Edward W. Said, The Palestine Question (New York, 1979), pp. 15–16.

[46] Peter Gubser, Politics and Change in Al-Karak, Jordan: A Study of a Small Arab Town in its District (London, 1973), p. 22.

[47] Richard Crossman, A Nation Reborn: The Israel of Weizmann, Bevin and Ben-Gurion (London, 1960), pp. 31–32.

[48] Wm. Roger Louis, The British Empire in the Middle East: Arab Nationalism, The United States, and Postwar Imperialism, 1945–1951 (Oxford, 1984), p. 39.

[49] Arnold Toynbee, "Arnold Toynbee on the Arab-Israeli Conflict," Journal of Palestine Studies, 2, 3, (Spring 1973).

[Back](#)