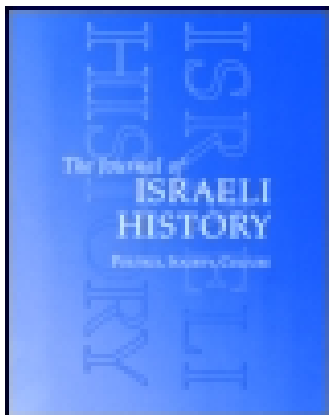


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The Historiography of the Balfour Declaration: Toward a Multi-causal Framework*

James Edward Renton

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THE BALFOUR DECLARATION is recognized by many as the beginning of the problems that face the Middle East today. This study will examine the possible motives behind the Declaration and will respond specifically to the explanation proposed by Mark Levene, whose article dismisses all previous historiography on the subject, except that of David Vital (although even Vital's work is not considered by Levene to give a totally satisfactory explanation of why the Declaration was written).¹ Levene rejects the traditional school of thought that the makers of the Balfour Declaration were "primarily motivated by British imperial interests in the Middle East." He argues that such considerations would not have "necessitated a British recognition of Zionism." This was apparently endorsed by the idea that an "attachment to Zionism, from the standpoint of Britain's own Middle Eastern interests, was fraught with dangers."²

Levene has asserted that the only important motive behind the Balfour Declaration was to give the Zionists in Russia a reason to fight on the side of the Allies. Behind this was the assumption, rooted in modern anti-Semitism, that all Jews were part of a powerful collective entity. From this presupposition, it follows that all Jews in Russia were Zionists and extreme revolutionaries who were spreading harmful pacifist propaganda. Thus the Declaration was essentially motivated by issues of war rather than concerns about imperialism. This presumes a distinct separation of war and imperial interests. Moreover, the most crucial contention of this thesis is that there was mono-causal reasoning behind the Balfour Declaration, as without such a concept Levene could not categorically reject all the other factors put forward. Has his revisionism gone too far? This question raises a number of issues that beg examination.

Firstly, Levene's mono-causal theory rests on the assumption that there was a homogeneous group behind the Balfour Declaration who had one model of reasoning and therefore had the same personal background and the

* The author would like to thank the Central Research Fund, University of London, whose support has been crucial for this research.

1 Mark Levene, "The Balfour Declaration: A Case of Mistaken Identity," *English Historical Review*, vol. 107, January 1992, p. 54.

2 Ibid, p. 69.

same uniform approach to the issue of Zionism. This argument raises three further fundamental questions: Did this group have a homogenous approach to Zionism? How was this group defined? And finally, is it accurate to talk of a coherent *dramatis personae* behind the Balfour Declaration?

Secondly, Levene's theory discounts other possibilities put forward by historians such as Mayir Vereté.³ This article aims to evaluate the evidence used to suggest that there could only have been one motive for the Declaration. Other motives suggested by scholars will be examined in the light of Levene's thesis. The motive to maintain both Anglo-French relations over the issue of Palestine, and Anglo-American relations, which is related to the British and French ambition to obtain Palestine in the postwar settlement. The importance of the Suez Canal and its link in the trade route to India made Palestine valuable as a bulwark to protect British interests in Egypt. Another motive suggested by historians was to placate American sensibilities over the issue of Palestine. This became an issue, it has been argued, because of President Wilson's abhorrence of annexation. However, previous historiography has not made it clear why Wilson's ideology should have forced the British into taking action to comply with his demands.

The argument that a pro-Zionist declaration would help the Allied cause in Russia based on an over-estimation of Jewish influence in Russian affairs, is not a new concept. Leonard Stein claimed that the Jews in Russia were an important consideration in the Foreign Office.⁴ Stein, however, did not state that this was the sole motive behind the Balfour Declaration. His work implies that he was wary of drawing conclusions as to which factors were the most important. Stein's cautious approach indicates an appreciation for the complex nature of the motives behind the Balfour Declaration and a reluctance to oversimplify the issue. Perhaps he was aware that each factor's importance varied from person to person. It was not possible to establish a consensus about which was the overriding motive. This sophisticated analysis, however, frustrated historians who wanted a clear and definite motive behind the Declaration.⁵ Thus the historiography evolved into a debate about which factor was the primary motive. For example, Vereté has argued that the Declaration was written to help the British obtain sole suzerainty over Palestine, whereas Isaiah Friedman has suggested that it was written to prevent the German government from gaining the support of the Zionists, and Levene has argued that the Declaration was expected to solve the problems in Russia.

3 Mayir Vereté, "The Balfour Declaration and Its Makers," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.6, 1970, p. 66.

4 Leonard Stein, *The Balfour Declaration*, London, 1961, p. 347.

5 Vereté, "The Balfour Declaration," p. 49.

Levene has, therefore, resurrected Stein's observation that the situation in Russia was an important element behind the Declaration. He has, however, continued the debate in its established mono-causal framework. Whereas Stein noted that the situation in Russia was an important part of a complex picture, Levene has argued that it had become the whole picture. He suggests that by 31 October 1917, the only considerations that could warrant the writing of the Balfour Declaration were the events in Russia. Arguably, it cannot be denied that for some of those involved in the making of the Balfour Declaration the situation in Russia was a major consideration. Closer examination of the *dramatis personae*, however, does not suggest that it was the only motive.

Levene has named Sir Mark Sykes, O'Beirne and Ormsby-Gore as the advocates of the Declaration and suggests that their main concern was the situation in Russia.⁶ However, it can be argued that they were not a group that shared the same objectives in relation to the Declaration. The only evidence that has been offered to support the suggestion that events outside the Middle East were the sole consideration behind the Declaration was from Hugh O'Beirne:

"The one ruling consideration," minuted a senior official [in the Foreign Office], "is ... whether any suggestion put forward ... would appeal to a large and influential section of the Jews throughout the world. If the question is answered in the affirmative and I believe it is so answered by good authorities, then it is clear that the Palestine scheme has in it the most far-reaching political possibilities."⁷

This quotation does indeed indicate that the ruling consideration behind the Declaration was to appeal to Jews around the world. It could, therefore, be suggested that the Balfour Declaration was not related to imperial interests in the Middle East, as suggested by Vereté. There are, however, many problems with this evidence being used to represent the motives of those behind the Declaration.

Firstly, this minute was written on 8 March 1916, a year and a half before the Declaration, and cannot be associated with the events of 1917. Between 1916 and 1917 a great deal changed: the Tsarist regime collapsed; America entered the war; relations between France and Great Britain deteriorated; and Lloyd George became Prime Minister. Therefore, this evidence from O'Beirne can be seen only to reflect the thinking of one man in March, 1916. In fact, the temporary and personal nature of this assessment is clear

6 Levene, "The Balfour Declaration," p. 76.

7 Ibid, p. 65.

from the part of this minute that Levene chose to omit: "The one ruling consideration, as it seems to me, by which we should be guided in the present stage of this matter."⁸ However, not only is this minute not representative of the motives for the Balfour Declaration of late 1917, but the general ideas of this man were not in cohesion with Sykes, the man whom Vereté, Roger Adelson and Elie Kedourie have all cited as the most influential advocate of a pro-Zionist declaration.⁹

Sykes' vision for the Middle East involved the Arabs playing a major role,¹⁰ whereas O'Beirne did not consider the Arabs important.¹¹ This difference in viewpoint suggests that the group that Levene identifies as being the advocates of the Declaration were far from homogenous in their approach and ideas. Indeed, the background of Sykes and Ormsby-Gore would indicate that their motives were not just related to the situation in Russia. They were in fact two of the War Cabinet's three young under-secretaries responsible for Middle Eastern Affairs (the other being Leopold Amery). Howard Sacher noted that "Sykes was the most influential of this group, the official who served as 'marriage broker' in the progressively intimate relationship between the government and the Zionist leadership."¹² Importantly, the ideas of Sykes were far from mono-causal and were not solely concerned with events in Russia. If one looks at evidence closer to the time of the Declaration the many uses that Sykes had for the Zionists becomes clear.¹³ In fact the more the background and ideas of Sykes are examined the stranger it seems that firstly, O'Beirne is used to reflect this supposed group and secondly, that he is pointed to at all. After all, Jacob Rosen and Elie Kedourie argued that Sykes' desire for a relationship with Zionism began with his aim of circumventing the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 (in which Britain, France and Russia agreed to place the rough area of Palestine under an international administration).¹⁴ "Whereas, O'Beirne had spent a great deal of his career working in British Embassies around the world, particularly the Embassy in Petrograd,

8 O'Beirne, Minute, 8 March 1916, Public Record Office (hereafter PRO) FO 371/2817/42608.

9 Vereté, "The Balfour Declaration," p. 66; Roger Adelson, *Mark Sykes: Portrait of an Amateur*, London, 1975, p. 244; Elie Kedourie, "Sir Mark Sykes and Palestine 1915-16," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 2, 1970, pp. 340-345.

10 See for example Sir Mark Sykes, "Memorandum on the Asia-Minor Agreement," 14 August 1917, PRO FO 371/3059/150558.

11 O'Beirne, Minute, 23 March 1916, PRO FO 371/2817/42608.

12 Howard M. Sacher, *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, New York, 2nd ed., 1996, p. 99.

13 Sykes to Nicolson, 18 March 1916, PRO FO 371/2767/938.

14 Kedourie, "Sir Mark Sykes," pp. 340-345; Jacob Rosen "Captain Reginald Hall and the Balfour Declaration," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 24(1), 1988, pp. 56-67.

Russia, and it is of no surprise, therefore, that he advocated a pro-Zionist policy in order to solve problems that were beyond the scope of the Middle East."¹⁵ Moreover, O'Beirne had no direct contact with the Zionists and played no role in the discussions behind the Declaration of 1917. Indeed he drowned with Lord Kitchener in 1916. As a result, no other historian has used O'Beirne to such a degree and Levene has failed to justify why this should change. Furthermore, Levene's omissions, from those deemed to be the advocates of the Balfour Declaration, are just as conspicuous as his inclusion of O'Beirne.

One important advocate in favor of the Balfour Declaration who was left out of Levene's model is Lloyd George. Leonard Stein has documented the central importance of the role of the Prime Minister.¹⁶ Lloyd George's first priority was to obtain the sole suzerainty of Palestine, which shows that the problems in Russia were not the only important considerations behind the Declaration. Conversely, Balfour, the minister who was considered by the opponents of the Declaration to be "immovable" in his support for a declaration, thought that the importance of the Declaration lay in the pro-British propaganda it could create in America and Russia.¹⁷ Another strong advocate for a pro-Zionist declaration was Sir Ronald Graham, the Assistant Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office. His motives can be seen to have been in part similar to those of Lloyd George. He too appreciated the need to help Britain establish sole suzerainty over Palestine. But, as Isaiah Friedman has argued, another of Graham's motives for the Declaration was to stop the Germans establishing their own relationship with the Zionists.¹⁸ While considering these important advocates, however, one cannot forget those in the War Cabinet, such as Lord Milner and Lord Robert Cecil, who, despite some hard opposition from people such as Montagu and Curzon, were also instrumental in creating the Balfour Declaration. These people had varying motives for supporting the Declaration. Thus, it is clear that it would be an unwieldy task to establish who constituted the *dramatis personae* behind a Declaration about which everyone in the British government seems to have had a strong opinion. Moreover, even if this was possible, the divergent reasons these people had for supporting the Declaration is striking. It therefore seems nonsense to speak of a streamlined group of diplomats or politicians who wanted the Declaration or of one overriding purpose.

15 Godfrey E. P. Hertslet of His Majesty's Consular Service and Percy C. Rice and Leslie G. Brown of the Foreign Office, eds., *The Foreign Office List and Diplomatic Consular Year Book for 1916*, London, 1916 (not "Who's Who 1916 as Levene cites).

16 Stein, *The Balfour Declaration*, p. 144.

17 War Cabinet Minutes, 31 October 1917, PRO CAB 23/4/WC 261.

18 Bertie to Graham, 12 April 1917, and Graham to Bertie, 16 April 1917, PRO FO 371/2767; Isaiah Friedman, *The Question of Palestine 1914-1918: British-Jewish-Arab Relations*, London, 1973, pp. 285-287.

This lack of homogeneity among the specific group of advocates for the Declaration is evidence against the mono-causal arguments propounded by Vereté, Friedman and Levene. Moreover, Levene's suggestion that the relationship between Zionists and the British Government "cooled so rapidly once the Mandate was in operation" contradicts the validity of the argument that postwar imperial aims in Palestine were a motive for the Declaration. His suggestion is ahistorical because what happened after 1917 can in no way be used to explain the making of the Balfour Declaration. Furthermore, the suggestion that an attachment to "Zionism, from the standpoint of Britain's own interests, was fraught with dangers" is not accurate, since key figures, such as Sykes, envisioned a Middle East where Arabs, Zionists and Armenians would work together. The only member of the War Cabinet who stressed that there might be any future conflict between Arabs and Zionists was Lord Curzon. He received no support.¹⁹ Further, not only is there no evidence to suggest that there was only one motive for the Declaration but the importance that some of those behind the Balfour Declaration attached to the question of Palestine and Franco-British relations seems to suggest that matters of Middle Eastern policy did play an important part in the decision to adopt a pro-Zionist policy.

As noted above, the recent historiography of the Balfour Declaration has seen a shift in the debate away from the importance of Anglo-French relations and considerations over the future of Palestine. Previously, the general consensus among historians was that the motives for the Declaration were related to matters of empire and the postwar settlement. It was thought that the Declaration was a mechanism that would help to give the British government sole suzerainty of Palestine. Specifically, it was thought by most historians that the Declaration was needed to circumvent the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, and was created in order to prevent the French from obtaining the part of Palestine that had been promised to them in that agreement. However, recently it has been argued that a relationship with the Zionists would not have been necessary to achieve that. Indeed, even Leonard Stein claimed that the importance of these considerations had waned by October 1917.²⁰ To what extent is this correct?

Mayir Vereté argued that a relationship with the Zionists was required for the British to obtain sole suzerainty of Palestine at the peace conference in light of the provisions of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Vereté suggested that Lloyd George's cabinet had made Palestine a major part of Britain's

19 Stein, *The Balfour Declaration*, p. 546.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 549–550. For another example of recent scholarship that does not emphasize the importance of Anglo-French relations, see Sharman Kadish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews*, London, 1992.

desiderata so it could act as a bulwark to Egypt and the Suez Canal. Vereté asserted that by declaring her support, Britain could use the Zionists to obtain sole suzerainty at the prospective peace conference. Much of the recent historiography has disputed this thesis. Isaiah Friedman began by suggesting that the aim of the Declaration was to prevent Germany from establishing a relationship with the Zionists and obtaining Palestine in the event of a sudden peace conference.²¹ A more dramatic shift has been seen with the work of David Vital, followed by that of Levene. They have argued that the Balfour Declaration was primarily written to help alleviate problems associated with running the war.²² Levene, the most vociferous critic of Vereté's thesis, has gone so far as to say that the "British, once they had entered and then occupied Palestine, hardly needed a Zionist halo to sanctify their staying there. They had *force majeure* pure and simple."²³ However, this is an exaggeration that is not substantiated by the evidence. Although it was not the only motivating factor behind the Declaration, the need to hide British intentions from the French government was indeed an important consideration. It was simply not enough to have military occupation of Palestine. In order to preserve the Entente, the War Cabinet had to consider French susceptibilities.

The British War Cabinet of 1917 was adamant that it must obtain Palestine in a postwar peace settlement.²⁴ However, one of the greatest obstacles to this goal was the French interest in the Levant. The strength of the claims to Syria and Palestine that were deeply rooted in French society must not be underestimated.²⁵ Indeed the strength of French claims to Palestine were accentuated in the run-up to the Balfour Declaration and were realized and acted upon by the British government.²⁶ There was therefore a severe problem. Britain and France would desperately compete for sovereignty over Palestine in the postwar settlement. The British government was well aware of the situation and needed a solution.²⁷ However, it

21 Friedman, *The Question of Palestine*, pp. 285–287.

22 Levene, "The Balfour Declaration," pp. 54, 76.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

24 Imperial War Cabinet, Report of Committee on Possible Terms of Peace, 28 April 1917, PRO CAB 21/77; "Notes on Possible Terms of Peace," 11 April 1917, PRO CAB 24/10.

25 F.W. Brecher, "French Ambitions in the Levant 1914–1918," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4, October, 1993, p. 645.

26 General Foch to General Sir W. Robertson and response to Foch proposal, 5 October 1917, PRO WO/106/313; "Notes of an Inter-Ally Conference held at 10 Downing Street on 7 and 8 August 1917, third session," PRO CAB 28/2/FC25(c); "Hankey, Salonika: The Decisions of the Inter-Ally Conference," 7 August 1917, PRO CAB 24/22/GT 1633; War Cabinet Minutes, 8 August 1917, PRO CAB 23/3/WC207.

27 Levene, "The Balfour Declaration," p. 68.

seems unlikely that they would risk giving up a prized possession such as Palestine, given the degree to which France clearly wanted it for themselves. In support of the argument that the British government did not need a "Zionist halo" in order to obtain sole suzerainty of Palestine, Lloyd George did say to Lord Bertie in April 1917 that "the French will have to accept our Protectorate: we shall be there by conquest and shall remain."²⁸

Nevertheless, although it was thought that France would ultimately renounce their claim, the War Cabinet and some of those behind the Balfour Declaration did not want to risk anything at a peace conference and also wanted to keep animosity between Britain and France at a minimum. After all, no matter what the end result might be, British representatives would have to stake their claims at a peace conference against the French. Lloyd George himself reflected on this problem when he expressed concern over this issue at a meeting of the War Cabinet where the arrangements for an eventual peace conference were discussed:

[We must face] the difficulty which would arise if France ... asked us to surrender some of our conquests in order to release their territory. We have to consider the position of British delegates at the peace conference. ... France with nearly two million dead; could we under such conditions, claim they should get nothing and we should have practically everything?²⁹

These apprehensions, as expressed by Lloyd George, are important for understanding part of the motives behind the Balfour Declaration. His words reveal that he was indeed aware that it would be difficult to justify Britain's having sole suzerainty over Palestine. One can speculate that this evidence gives a fuller picture of Lloyd George's thinking on the issue of Palestine. Although he thought that Great Britain would ultimately secure Palestine, it had to be justified at a peace conference. By confirming the support of the government for the Zionists through the Balfour Declaration, the British government could justify a protectorate over Palestine. If such precautions were not taken the British might risk a direct confrontation with the French over Palestine which could endanger the very existence of the Entente.

28 Bertie of Thame, *The Diary of Lord Bertie of Thame 1914–1918*, 2nd vol., London, 1924, p. 123.

29 Statements by the Prime Minister, 1 May 1917, PRO CAB 23/40. Similar sentiments were also expressed in a memorandum prepared by Lord Curzon at the request of the War Cabinet, "Policy in view of Russian Developments," PRO CAB 24/G.T. 703, quoted in David R. Woodward, "The Origins and Intent of David Lloyd George's 5 January War Aims Speech," *The Historian*, November 1971, p. 24.

Significantly, Sykes, was one of the main proponents of the Balfour Declaration. On 13 October 1917, he wrote a letter that clearly expressed his ardent support for the Entente. He advocated a policy of British political influence in the Middle East alongside "good post-war terms with France in order to continue the entente."³⁰ This policy can be seen as an important part of the plans of Sykes as early as May 1917. When he returned from the Middle East he submitted a report to the Foreign Office on 17 May 1917 that aimed at preserving the Entente as well as fulfilling the promise of Arab independence given to Sherif Hussein.³¹ Although the War Cabinet rejected the latter proposal and recommended a quick advance into Palestine, the former proposal was not rejected and can be seen as a consistent part of British policy up to, and including, the Balfour Declaration and beyond. In fact, the aim to preserve the Entente would have been accentuated by the Franco-British crisis of 1917, which was caused by economic and strategic disagreements.³² This desire to placate French susceptibilities negates the argument that Britain could remain in Palestine because of its military occupation.

The policy to hide British intentions and placate the French was evident from the time that the War Cabinet confirmed Palestine as one of its most important war aims. On the same day that Lord Curzon's Committee on Possible Terms of Peace declared that the Sykes-Picot Agreement should be revised to give Britain sole suzerainty over Palestine, the plan to place Palestine under an international administration was endorsed and strengthened at the conference held at St. Jean de Maurienne.³³

It could be suggested that this discrepancy between the foreign policy and the aims of the War Cabinet was due to British elements at St. Jean de Maurienne that did not want sole suzerainty of Palestine. Lloyd George, however, was at the conference and was probably the most vociferous supporter of British suzerainty in Palestine.³⁴ Therefore, it seems clear that the War Cabinet pursued a policy of hiding its aims from the French and even went so far as to make agreements pertaining to a joint administration of Palestine. This policy could be seen as irrelevant to the situation in October

30 Sykes to Lord Robert Cecil, 13 October 1917, quoted in Shane Leslie, *Mark Sykes: His Life and Letters*, London, 1923, p. 274.

31 Sykes, "Observations on Arabian Policy as a result of a visit to the ports of Jidda, etc," 17 May 1917. Quoted in Jukka Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, London, 1969, pp. 60-61.

32 Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, "Strategic and Economic Relations during the First World War," in N. Waites, ed., *Troubled Neighbours: Franco-British Relations in the Twentieth Century*, London, 1971, pp. 40-66.

33 Nevakivi, *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East*, p. 54.

34 V.H. Rothwell, *British War Aims and Peace Diplomacy 1914-1918*, Oxford, 1971, p. 132.

1917, because in April 1917 the British did not yet occupy Palestine and would not have had the confidence it might have had later. However, on the very day the Balfour Declaration was finally agreed upon, 31 October, the Foreign Office signed an agreement with the French government pertaining to the areas that were drawn up in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916.³⁵

The behavior of the British administration once they had occupied Palestine, and their instructions for the occupation, further substantiates that the British did want suzerainty. Although these events took place just after the publication of the Balfour Declaration, they can be seen as indicative of the attitude of the British government that had just issued the Declaration. The British army occupied Jerusalem in November 1917, and the makeup of its government had direct implications for the future administration of Palestine. After all, it was the capital of Palestine and if the French were given a part of its control it would have been difficult to reverse such a process at a later date. As Sykes stated on 13 November, 1917, "Jerusalem should be kept under martial law so as to avoid Franco-Italian complications."³⁶ The desire to establish martial law, however, aroused French anxiety over their lack of involvement. A letter from Lord Bertie to the Foreign Office on 15 December 1917 made this clear: "Minister for Foreign Affairs [in the French government] begs General Allenby will, as soon as possible, establish at Jerusalem mixed Administration system provided for in Franco-British Agreement."³⁷ The solution, as it had been since April of that year, was to placate French susceptibilities without harming the British interest:

There is no doubt that it would greatly allay French and Italian susceptibilities if it were possible to employ a few of their officers at once in the administration of Palestine. Of course this could only be done if it in no way hampered military operations, nor must we do anything to jeopardise our future political aspirations.³⁸

Communications such as this between the Foreign Office and the British administration in the Levant reveal a policy of hiding British intentions and placating French sensibilities at the same time. This approach has been consistent throughout 1917, when the Balfour Declaration was made. Perhaps this need to placate French susceptibilities would not be enough motivation to establish a relationship with the Zionists. Nevertheless, this

35 Brecher, "French Ambitions," p. 663.

36 Sykes' Note, 13 November 1917; FO to Wingate, 16 November 1917, PRO FO 371/3061/214354.

37 Bertie to FO, 15 December 1917; see Balfour to Cambon, 23 November 1917; and FO to Wingate, 26 November 1917, PRO FO 371/3061/214354.

38 FO to Wingate, January 1918, PRO FO 371/3061/214354.

would only be the case if such a relationship could bring more problems than benefits to the British government and if there was only one factor behind this Declaration. It could be argued, however, that there were at least two other important motives behind this Declaration and that those that supported the Declaration did not think that the Zionists would upset the situation in the Middle East.³⁹

Historians such as Leonard Stein, in his seminal work, *The Balfour Declaration*, have suggested that Anglo-American relations played a part in the motives behind the Balfour Declaration. Stein and Vital have pointed to the need to placate America in order to further British aims in Palestine. They argued that by ensuring the support of the Zionists with the Balfour Declaration the British government would negate President Wilson's objection to annexation. By having a mandate over Palestine the British government would appear to be helping the Jewish nation achieve national self-determination, which was one of President Wilson's major aims for the postwar world. However, Stein and Vital have not explained why Great Britain should have had to comply with American demands. This lacuna suggests that this factor would not have been a major consideration in the making of the Declaration. By restricting their attention to events directly related to Jews and Zionism, most scholars have overlooked Great Britain's financial dependence on the United States. This dependence caused problems, with both short- and long-term implications for the British government that some thought could have been solved by a relationship with the Zionists.

It can be argued that from the beginning of World War I until April 1917, American Jews were a prime concern for the Foreign Office. It was thought at the time that the war might be won on finance and that therefore the support of the influential financial sector of the Jewish population would be crucial. A majority of Jews, however, were perceived to be actively against the Entente because of the way in which the Tsarist regime treated their co-religionists. Therefore, the Foreign Office had a great interest in winning Jews over to the side of the Entente. This line of thought was hinted at in a letter written by Sykes on 18 March 1916. As part of his reasons for establishing a good relationship with the Zionists he noted that, "if they [the Zionists] want us to win they will do their best ... in USA."⁴⁰ But, it has been argued that this policy was no longer necessary after the collapse of the Russian Tsarist regime and the entrance of America into the war.⁴¹ Such an

39 For example, Sykes' plan for the Middle East incorporated a compatible alliance between Arabs, Zionists and Armenians. See Sir Mark Sykes, "Memorandum on the Asia Minor Agreement," 14 August 1917, PRO FO 371/3059/1550558.

40 Sykes to Nicolson, 18 March 1916, Nicolson Papers, PRO FO 800/381.

41 Levene, "The Balfour Declaration," p. 68.

assertion, however, does not seem to hold true if one examines the minutes of the War Cabinet from 31 October 1917, when the Cabinet finally agreed to issue a pro-Zionist declaration. These minutes show that the intention to influence America did indeed play a major role in the motives of some of the important advocates behind the Balfour Declaration:

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs [A.J. Balfour] stated that he gathered that everyone was agreed that ... some declaration favourable to the aspirations of the Jewish Nationalists should now be made. ... If we could make a declaration favourable to such an ideal, we should be able to carry on extremely useful propaganda both in Russia and America.⁴²

Curiously, these minutes do not specify why this propaganda was needed. This raises questions: if America had already entered the war and the collapse of the Tsar had ended Jewish animosity against the Entente, what was the purpose of the propaganda and how important was it?

It can be argued that the need for propaganda was a direct result of Britain's financial dependence on America. The complications that ensued meant that Britain desperately needed to influence the decisions of President Wilson. During the year and a half after April 1917, America provided "\$7.5 billion worth of credits to the Allies."⁴³ Britain's dependence on the United States was discovered with great initial shock earlier, in December 1916. John Maynard Keynes was commissioned to establish how much Britain was borrowing. He concluded that the Allied Powers were dependent on public loans to the extent of four-fifths of their needs.⁴⁴

One can speculate how this would have been a tremendous blow to a British ruling establishment that was accustomed to being the dominant power. Nevertheless, this economic dependence on America was not at first considered to be a problem by the Foreign Office. It was thought that America was dependent on Britain as a market and would not take any action that might put this at risk.⁴⁵ However, the situation changed and it became apparent that no matter what the United States government

42 War Cabinet minutes, 31 October 1917, PRO CAB 23/4/WC261.

43 Kendrick A. Clements, *The Presidency of Woodrow Wilson*, Lawrence, Kansas, 1992, p. 143.

44 J. M. Keynes, "Economic Dependence of the U.K. on the U.S.A.," memorandum 10 October 1916, PRO FO 371/2796. For more information on the development of Great Britain's financial and overall dependence on America, see K.M. Burk, *Britain, America and the Sineus of War 1914-1918*, Boston, 1985; John M. Cooper, Jr., "The Command of Gold Reversed: American Loans to Britain, 1915-1917," *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 45, May 1976, pp. 209-230; and Carl P. Parrini, *Heir to Empire: United States Economic Diplomacy, 1916-1923*, Pittsburgh, 1969.

45 Draft Memorandum by the Foreign Office, 20 October 1916, PRO FO 371/2796.

decided, Britain was in no position to actively oppose her. Thus it can be suggested that Britain's economic position was threatened, which in turn, would have had grave implications for fighting the war and would also influence their position in the postwar world. Any propaganda, such as the Balfour Declaration, which could help alleviate the problems that were caused by Britain's financial dependence upon America would have been of the utmost importance.

Britain's helpless situation first became clear when President Wilson's government insisted that all purchases and loans must be applied for through the American Treasury.⁴⁶ As a result, Northcliffe, the new coordinator of British war purchases in America, lamented to Lloyd George about his humiliation at watching "this poor man [Sir Richard Crawford] practically begging for financial assistance from McAdoo [head of the American Treasury]." A month later (on 17 July 1917), he repeated this theme: "our attitude is that of beggars."⁴⁷ The inability of Britain to oppose the demands of America continued to manifest itself through the proposal of an Inter-Ally council by President Wilson's government. The proposed council would co-ordinate all Allied efforts and would be dominated by America. It was thought that such a development would have negative implications for the war aims of Great Britain. The desperation of Great Britain's position was noted by Sir Maurice Hankey, the War Cabinet Secretary: "The scheme of an Inter-Ally Council in its present form was not of our seeking. It was practically imposed on us by the American government, and is required by them in the main for political purposes."⁴⁸ In the period just before the Balfour Declaration relations between America and Britain deteriorated even further with the question of British ships in America. The British government, with money that had been loaned to them by the American treasury, had commissioned some merchant ships to be built in America. However, the War Cabinet had been informed in late August 1917 that the American treasury was requisitioning these ships for its own purposes.⁴⁹ It was at this point that the need for propaganda became urgent. The argument of the Foreign Office that America would not risk losing the market in Great Britain seemed to have become nonsense.

46 "Purchases by European Allies in the USA," Phillips, 7 June 1917, PRO CAB 24/15/GT966; Northcliffe to Lloyd George, 16 August 1917, PRO CAB 24/23/GT 1780; War Cabinet Minutes, 10 August 1917, PRO CAB 23/3/WC210.

47 Northcliffe to Lloyd George, 20 June and 17 July 1917, F/41/7/8 and 10; Lloyd George Papers, House of Lords Record Office. Quoted in Edward P. Parsons, *Wilsonian Diplomacy: Allied-American Rivalries in War and Peace*, St. Louis, 1978, p. 45.

48 Hankey, Inter-Ally Council, 16 October 1917, PRO CAB 24/29/GT 2309.

49 Cecil to War Cabinet, 20 August 1917; Northcliffe cable, 21 August 1917, PRO CAB 24/23/GT 1790.

The requisition of ships not only offended the sensibilities of the British government, but also reflected America's disregard for the plight of the Allies. As many ships as possible were needed to transport wheat to Europe to help alleviate the desperate situation in France and Italy.⁵⁰ Moreover, it was suggested by members of the British government that not only were ships being requisitioned but they were being used for the development of American trade with Latin America, where Great Britain had withdrawn ships.⁵¹ This point was emphasized again when the War Cabinet met on 10 October: "Sir J. Macklay said that information had just come to hand showing that the United States were out for post bellum development, of which they always suspected us."⁵² This was seen as extremely harmful to British interests as the markets in Latin America were thought to be essential for postwar reconstruction.⁵³ The contrast between the struggle and plight of the Allies, and the way the Americans were using this as an opportunity for opening up markets and trade development, made it clear that something had to be done.

Britain's economic dependence on the US meant that the usual diplomatic channels were of no use.⁵⁴ Therefore, it was felt that propaganda was desperately needed to help gain support and thereby prevent any future action by the American government that would be inimical to the British war effort, such as requisitioning desperately needed ships.⁵⁵ It can therefore be argued that the desire for propaganda in America, which was cited as the British War Cabinet's major motive for the Balfour Declaration was related to the country's financial dependence on the US.

Furthermore, on the question of continuing the war, America had become a more important consideration than Russia, the other country noted in the War Cabinet's decision for a pro-Zionist policy in the minutes of 31 October 1917. America not only supplied the Allies with essential raw materials and the necessary armed forces. It was suggested in October 1917 that to win the war the Allies must "await the development of the forces of the United States, and in the meantime to rely upon a drastic economic war to weaken the enemy."⁵⁶ At this point the Russian army was demoralized and

50 War Cabinet minutes, 10 October 1917, PRO CAB 23/4/WC253.

51 War Cabinet minutes, 2 October 1917, PRO CAB 23/4/WC243.

52 War Cabinet minutes, 10 October 1917, PRO CAB 23/4/WC253.

53 Lord Percy, "Commercial Relations with the USA after the War," memorandum, 21 October 1916, PRO FO 371/2796.

54 Sir William Wiseman, "Memorandum on Anglo-American Relations," 21 August 1917, PRO CAB 1/25/12.

55 Northcliffe, Cable, 21 August 1917, PRO CAB 24/23/GT 1790.

56 General Sir W.R. Robertson to Secretary of the War Cabinet, 12 October 1917, PRO WO 106/313.

ineffective: "by the end of July [1917] he [Lloyd George] had lost all faith that the Russians would ever again be able to afford their allies active military assistance."⁵⁷

Sir William Wiseman, who was essential to these considerations, had become the de facto British representative in America by the autumn of 1917. The ambassador, Sir Cecil Spring-Rice, was out of touch with the American political establishment after his open support of President Wilson's opponent in the previous election. However, Wiseman's assessment of the situation in America was respected by both Lloyd George and the War Cabinet and his ideas of what should be done in America to improve relations with the American government were consistent with the anticipated effect of the Balfour Declaration.⁵⁸ It was thought at the time that President Wilson was an autocrat who could only be influenced by public opinion.⁵⁹ Propaganda seemed to be the key to win over the support of the American public. Wiseman believed that it would be more effective if Americans carried out pro-British propaganda themselves.⁶⁰ It can be suggested that this was exactly what made the Balfour Declaration useful: if American Zionists became pro-British they would then carry out the required pro-British propaganda. Thus, because of the far reaching problems that Britain had with the American government, it was deemed necessary to carry out propaganda in America, as noted by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

Some were behind the Balfour Declaration because they thought that the Zionists were the most powerful force in the US and that they could be influenced by Great Britain. The Balfour Declaration was seen as an appropriate method of propaganda by those in the Foreign Office who believed that the American Jewish community was a collective and powerful entity and that the majority of American Jews were Zionists.⁶¹ This conception about Jewish influence and the need to attract American public opinion were important factors in short-term relations between the British and American governments.

The long-term implication was that Britain's financial dependence on America would continue after the war.⁶² This would in turn affect Britain's

57 David French, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition, 1916–1918*, Oxford, 1995, p. 136.

58 War Cabinet minutes, 10 August 1917, PRO CAB 23/3/WC210; W.B. Fowler, *British-American Relations, 1917–18: The Role of Sir William Wiseman*, Princeton, NJ, 1969, ch. 3.

59 Sir William Wiseman, "Memorandum on Anglo-American Relations," 21 August 1917, PRO CAB 1/25/12; G.R. Conyne, *Woodrow Wilson: British Perspectives, 1912–21*, London, 1992, Chs. 2, 3.

60 Fowler, *British-American Relations*, p. 64.

61 Levene, "The Balfour Declaration," p. 58.

62 "Commercial Relations with the USA after the War," Lord Percy memorandum, 21 October 1916, PRO FO 371/2796.

capability of achieving her war aim of controlling Palestine as it would be virtually impossible to force America to agree to British demands. President Wilson would dominate the prospective peace conference and, significantly, his concept of national self-determination was diametrically opposed to the annexation of Palestine or any other country.⁶³ In fact, "Wilson told House in July 1917, that he aimed to get the Allies 'among other things, financially in our hands' in order to force his peace terms on them."⁶⁴ Indeed the British War Cabinet was aware of such an eventuality. Wiseman, the War Cabinet's only reliable link to the Wilson administration, considered this to be such a problem that he equated its importance with the immediate problems facing Anglo-American relations.⁶⁵ As a solution, the Balfour Declaration would act as Britain's official recognition of Zionist aspirations. The Zionists were adamantly opposed to suzerainty other than that of Britain.⁶⁶ This meant that when the peace conference finally occurred the British would be able to cloak their occupation under the guise of self-determination. They would be seen to be helping the Jewish nation to exist, a concept that had been recognized by the French and American governments by 31 October 1917. This argument has been noted before by historians such as Stein but they have not explained why such consideration of Wilson's views was necessary. It can be argued that the financial dominance of the US made America a dangerous threat to Britain's crucial war aim.

Lloyd George was acutely aware that Wilson's most important objective was to gain a deciding influence at the prospective peace conference.⁶⁷ After America joined the war, and in the period leading up to the Balfour Declaration, President Wilson's desire to influence the peace became an important consideration for the British government because of the threat it posed to her war aims. As a result of this threat, the War Cabinet deemed it necessary to disguise their aims.⁶⁸

Sykes clearly linked gaining control over Palestine with placating feelings against annexation.⁶⁹ In the month before the Declaration was authorized by the War Cabinet, he suggested that there was a need for a "fresh diplomatic initiative," as it was suggested in the month before the Declaration was

63 For discussions of Wilson's ideas on self-determination and the rest of his peace aims, see e.g., Arthur S. Link, ed., *Woodrow Wilson and a Revolutionary World, 1913–21*, Chapel Hill, 1982.

64 Parsons, *Wilsonian Diplomacy*, p. 45.

65 Fowler, *British-American Relations*, p. 62.

66 Adelson, *Mark Sykes*, p. 219.

67 Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, New York, 1992, p. 119.

68 War Cabinet minutes, 20 August 1917: PRO CAB 23/3/WC220.

69 Adelson, *Mark Sykes*, p. 238.

authorized by the War Cabinet. In his Memorandum on the Asia-Minor Agreement, Sykes suggested that the solution to the problems posed by opponents to the goal of sole British suzerainty of Palestine was "to get Great Britain appointed trustee of the Powers for the administration of Palestine."⁷⁰ Britain would have to obtain justification and support at the prospective peace conference to ensure that she secured the much sought after prize of Palestine. It can be argued that the Balfour Declaration did just that by obtaining the support of the Zionists. In fact, Sykes used the Zionists to this end:

the important point to remember is that through Zionism we have a fundamental world force behind us that has enormous influence now, and will wield a far greater influence at the peace conference. If we are to have a good position in the Middle East after the war, it will be through Zionist influence at the peace conference that we shall get it.⁷¹

Sykes' views substantiate the argument that the Balfour Declaration was in part created to help Great Britain annex Palestine by appeasing those who were against annexation.⁷² Supporting this argument is a remarkable document, a War Cabinet memorandum, written on 12 October 1917:

The proposal to leave the Porte with a nominal suzerainty over Palestine would not be made had it been thought practicable to adopt in its entirety the opinion of the War Cabinet, previously cited, that Palestine should not be restored to Turkish rule, and should pass under British control. It is not thought that international consent to the assumption of effective British control could be obtained, and it is conceived that the next best course will be to leave the Turkish suzerainty over a Lebanite form of government, and to take advantage of the notable preference expressed by the Zionists within recent times for British assistance with a view to obtaining the appointment of a British governor on the nomination of the Sultan, or in default, of British advisers to the new Administration.⁷³

These arguments, however, do not show why the War Cabinet should have felt it necessary to take such action on 31 October 1917 and the extent of its import.

70 Sir Mark Sykes, "Memorandum on the Asia Minor Agreement," 14 August 1917, PRO FO 371/3059/150558.

71 Sykes to Wingate, 3 March 1918: PRO FO 800/221.

72 See Stein, *The Balfour Declaration*, ch.23; and David Vital, *Zionism: The Crucial Phase*, Oxford, 1987, p. 300.

73 "Turkey in Europe and Asia," War Cabinet memorandum, 22 October 1917, Box 10, Folder No.273, William Wiseman Papers, Manuscript Group Number 666, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University; emphasis added.

Clearly, the War Cabinet believed that the longer the war continued, the stronger President Wilson's position at the peace conference would be because of Great Britain's financial dependence on the US. This consideration became particularly significant at the time of the Balfour Declaration because the Flanders and Caporetto offensives were perceived to be failing, and owing to the weakness of Russia, France and Italy, it appeared that the war could only be won with the full impact of American military might. It was thought by a significant part of the military establishment in October 1917 that this could not happen until at least halfway through 1918 and more likely 1919. The estimated length of the war and the implication of Wilson's strengthened position, along with his staunch opposition to annexation, meant that it would have been very important for the Lloyd George government to ensure that Britain obtained sole suzerainty of Palestine by cloaking their ambitions under the guise of Zionist self-determination. The Balfour Declaration, with its expressed support of creating a national home for the Jews in Palestine, seems to have been a crucial part of this important strategy.⁷⁴

"Nobody knows why the Balfour Declaration was made," Levene quotes Christopher Sykes as saying. As apt a quotation as any to begin an article on the motives behind the Balfour Declaration, these words reflect the uncertain and perplexing nature of this puzzle. Paradoxically, however, Levene goes on to argue that the key to the problem lay in the perceptions of world Jewry, and with it, he claims to establish the illusive answer – the Balfour Declaration had but one motive, to ensure that Russia remained in the war. Although the evidence does suggest that a number of those behind the Declaration did hold this perception of a powerful and collective world Jewry in October 1917, and that the problems in Russia were very important to some of these individuals, there is no evidence to suggest that this was the only motive for the Declaration.

To be fair, Levene was not the first historian to claim that there was a definitive answer and that there was only one important motive behind the writing of the Declaration. But the basis of his theory, that the Jews were considered to have influence throughout the world, suggests that there could have been more than one motive. Moreover, the evidence suggests that the diverse nature of those in the British government who were behind a pro-Zionist policy makes any discussion of a clear cohesive *dramatis personae* with a uniform rationale for the Declaration to be inaccurate. It seems that all one can do is point to motives that were important to a majority of those involved. One such motive was the need to ensure that the British government had sole

74 French, *The Strategy*, pp. 275, 148–49, 161, 136, 120; General Sir W. Robertson to Secretary of the War Cabinet, 12 October 1917, PRO WO 106/313.

suzerainty of Palestine in the postwar settlement. The Lloyd George coalition, which had obtained power in late 1916, had made Palestine one of their major war aims. However, the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 included plans agreed to by Great Britain, France and Russia to place this area under an international administration after the war. Although the provisional government in Russia rejected annexation, the French government continued to see gaining sovereignty over Palestine as an important war aim. Levene has suggested that Britain's military occupation of Palestine would be a sufficient solution to this problem and did not warrant a "Zionist halo." The eminent Leonard Stein also did not consider the need to justify the occupation of Palestine as a prominent factor in the War Cabinet's decision to write the Balfour Declaration in late October 1917. However, the evidence suggests that Sykes, in particular, was an ardent supporter of the Entente and did not want to strain Franco-British relations. This need to placate French susceptibilities is indeed apparent from British policy towards the French in relation to Palestine in 1917 — namely the St Jean de Maurienne Conference, the agreement signed on 31 October that pertained to an internationalized Palestine, and the communications between the Foreign Office and the British in the Levant over the occupation of Jerusalem. The Balfour Declaration can be seen as an important part of this policy. The Zionists were adamant in their desire for the British to have sole suzerainty over Palestine and therefore it was believed by important advocates of the Declaration that the support of the Zionists could be used as justification for this end. Moreover, because it was thought that the support of the Zionists at the peace conference would ensure success, this motive further endorses the importance of the perception that world Jewry was a collective and powerful entity in the decision to issue the Declaration.

This conception of the collective nature and collective power of world Jewry is also implied in the motive to placate the American government in the short and long term. The financial dependence of Great Britain on the US meant that the former felt powerless to influence the latter through the usual diplomatic channels. Although some might suggest that Wilson and the "East Coast establishment" were previously seen as a pro-British lobby, the British government could no longer rely on them. Wilson was at the very least facilitating the policies that the British government wished to stop. By gaining the support of the Zionists through the Balfour Declaration it was thought that they would create pro-British propaganda that would influence President Wilson. The long-term motive for the Balfour Declaration, in terms of Anglo-American relations, also indicates this belief in the collective power of world Jewry. The anticipated length of the war meant that President Wilson would have the power to dictate the peace. Moreover, Wilson's aim of national self-determination was diametrically opposed to Britain's

annexation of Palestine, and yet members of the British government believed that the cloak of Zionist aspirations would actually resolve this conflict of interest.

Thus, the aim of obtaining sole suzerainty of Palestine in a postwar settlement meant that the British government had to placate both French and American sensibilities. Both motives were intrinsically linked, as otherwise the aim of obtaining Palestine could not be achieved. Clearly, the Balfour Declaration in itself was not a British claim for Palestine, but the Zionists' support for British suzerainty meant that the Declaration could be used to justify such a claim at a future peace conference. These important motives are just two examples that show that the Balfour Declaration was the result of a complex set of circumstances, all of which must be accounted for in any explanation of the policy that led to the Declaration.