

# 100 years since the Balfour Declaration

## Part one

Jean Shaoul  
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*This is the first part of a two-part article. The second part will be published tomorrow.*

One hundred years ago, on November 9, 1917, the *Times* of London published a short letter from British Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur James Balfour to Lord Walter Rothschild and the Zionist Federation.

Known since then as the Balfour Declaration, it set out a proposal to establish a homeland in rural Palestine for the Jews, who formed around 3-5 percent of the population before 1914, when the territory was part of the Ottoman Empire.

The proposal was intentionally ambiguous, relating to a country that Britain did not yet control and whose people it had not consulted and omitting any reference to the term “state.”

The 67-word letter, written on November 2, stated:

“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 Declaration is celebrated by the Zionists as laying the foundations for the state of Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu flew to London to mark the occasion at a dinner at Lancaster House with his counterpart, Theresa May.

While she said that Britain would mark its role in the founding of Israel “with pride,” official events have been low-key. Transport for London was moved to ban advertisements on the Underground and buses, highlighting objections to the Balfour Declaration by the Make It Right campaign. Commissioned by the Palestine Mission to the UK, the adverts featured pictures of Palestinian life before and after 1948, when the State of Israel was established, and 750,000 Palestinians fled or were driven from their homes.

The Declaration was a sordid deal made over the heads of the inhabitants of Palestine, launching a nakedly colonial project that was to have a profound impact on the development of conflicts and divisions within the region. Britain’s role became one of the most controversial actions of its imperial history.

The Declaration paved the way for the establishment of the Jewish Legion to fight alongside British forces in Palestine, as well as the limited emigration of European Jews into post-World War I Palestine—which would be ruled by Britain under the victors’ carve-up of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East.

This began the now century-long conflict between the Arabs and Jews, both of who sought to establish nation states on the small Ottoman

province largely governed from Damascus.

The Balfour Declaration was bound up first and foremost with the predatory aims of British imperialism in the Middle East region. The control of the newly discovered oil resources in Iraq and Iran, which powered the Royal Navy, was one of the issues that lay at the heart of the imperialist rivalries that erupted into World War I in 1914.

But the considerations involved were also determined by the February and later the October Revolutions in Russia in 1917, mass anti-war sentiment, and the US entry into the war to protect its own commercial interests against its enemies and allies alike, under the guise of making “the world safe for democracy” and a “war to end war.”

Just weeks after the Declaration was published, in January 1918, President Woodrow Wilson issued his famous “Fourteen Points” that included the removal of economic barriers between nations, the promise of self-determination for national minorities, and a world organization that would guarantee the “political independence and territorial integrity [of] great and small states alike”—a League of Nations.

Wilson’s professed support for self-determination was a weapon to be wielded on behalf of US imperialism against its rivals and their territorial preserves. Politically, it was a direct response to the Russian Revolution—particularly the Bolsheviks’ call for the negotiations with the German High Command at Brest-Litovsk to become the basis for a general peace agreement and their defence of the right to self-determination for oppressed minorities.

Many Jews had rejected nationalism as a solution to the pogroms and political reaction in Russia, which was home to five million Jews, the largest Jewish community in the world, at the end of the nineteenth century. Particularly after the failure of the 1905 revolution, many emigrated (very few of them to Palestine) or joined the socialist movement. Political Zionism was a small minority movement.

### British war aims in the Middle East

Britain sought to wrap its own predatory aims in the Middle East in pledges of independence for the Arabs and a homeland for the Jews—under Britain’s tutelage—in return for support against the Ottoman Empire, Germany’s ally in the war. The Balfour Declaration aimed at winning the support of Jews not just in Britain, but also in America and Palestine for the war effort.

Britain believed that the establishment of such a homeland, in effect a small Jewish colony in Palestine, would secure a client regime in a strategic location that would join the various parts of the British Empire from the Atlantic to the middle of the Pacific, and above all the Suez Canal and India. It would also provide an excuse for intervention in the region and counter France’s claims in the region via its support for the

Maronites (Roman Catholics) in present day Lebanon.

While the letter bore the signature of Lord Balfour, the driving force behind the Declaration was the new Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George, a former Radical and opponent of the war who had become an arch-imperialist. Having unseated Herbert Asquith as prime minister at the end of 1916, as war losses in Europe and the Middle East mounted, Lloyd George moved quickly to impose a war dictatorship, establish a five-man war cabinet and order British forces in Egypt to launch an offensive and acquire Palestine for Britain.

His aim was to destroy the Turkish Empire and gain control of territory in the Middle East—not just for the land route to India but for colonial expansion. This would be at the expense of France, which under the secret Tripartite agreement between Britain, France and Russia in 1916 (the Sykes-Picot agreement) would gain Syria and Lebanon, while Britain would take Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Russia would take Constantinople and parts of the Ottoman Empire.

This secret deal was one of many made public by the Bolshevik government after the seizure of power in October 1917.

The new foreign policy contradicted London's promise in 1915 to the Hashemite Sherif Hussein of Mecca, in what later became known as the McMahon-Hussein correspondence, of independence for the territories now known as Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, in return for organising the Arab Revolt against the Turks.

The promise of a Jewish home in Palestine was therefore one of a series of secret, fraudulent and mutually irreconcilable agreements designed to bring the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire, with their oil supplies and trade, under British control.

In line with Lloyd George's determination to take control of the Ottoman Empire, his war cabinet was attempting to secretly bribe Turkey's rulers to end their participation in the war and conclude a separate peace treaty with Britain. Under the terms of such a treaty, Britain would gain de facto control over Mesopotamia, Syria and Lebanon, over which the Turkish flag would continue to fly. Turkey's leaders rebuffed Britain after the new Bolshevik government in Russia, Turkey's longstanding enemy, announced an armistice and peace based on freedom of the nationalities.

## Lloyd George and Zionism

Lloyd George was one of a long-line of Christian Zionists in Britain. He had acted as the legal representative of the Austrian journalist Dr. Theodore Herzl, when he sought in 1903 to secure British support for a Jewish homeland in Sinai. That same year the British government offered to allow for Jewish emigration to Uganda, Britain's colony in East Africa—a proposal that was seriously discussed by the Zionists before being rejected in 1906.

Herzl had first set out his proposal for a national homeland for the Jews in 1896 as the solution to the persecution and oppression faced by European Jewry at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century—a period characterised by extreme bourgeois reaction, militarism, imperialism and virulent anti-Semitism. Part of a second wave of nationalist movements, after the consolidation of Italy and Germany by 1870, it came too late in the development of capitalism to have any progressive tendencies.

The Zionist project entailed the creation of a Jewish national project within a political entity where they constituted a tiny minority and faced Ottoman restrictions on immigration and land acquisition and increasing opposition to its expansion from the majority Arab population. Such an entity, which could only be established by force and violence at the

expense of the existing inhabitants, was based on profoundly undemocratic foundations: the denial of the rights of non-Jews already living there.

From the outset the Zionist project aroused opposition and was always going to be dependent upon Great Power support.

The Zionists justified the Jewish claims to Palestine and nationhood in terms of Biblical history, with the claim that they had been expelled from their homeland nearly 2,000 years earlier. But the prime hope of most Jews was not for a “return” to Palestine, but emancipation and the attainment of basic democratic rights in the West. Other Jews voted with their feet, with some 2.4 million fleeing the persecution, social misery and economic hardship of Eastern Europe between 1882 and 1914, mostly to the US. Fewer than 3 percent went to Palestine and many of these soon left.

The British government's attitude towards the Jews and the Zionist project went through several twists and turns. The early discussions between Balfour, Chamberlain and Herzl took place against a background of moves towards the 1905 Aliens Act, introducing immigration controls and giving the Home Secretary overall responsibility for immigration and nationality matters. One of its main objectives was to control Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. Supporting a movement dedicated to encouraging the Jews to settle elsewhere, while possibly even strengthening Britain's hand in Africa, was an attractive proposition.

Britain became receptive to the idea of Jewish resettlement in Palestine after Turkey entered the war on the side of Germany and Austria. The Balfour Declaration was the outcome of extensive lobbying for a Jewish state over several years by Zionists in Britain, notably Dr. Chaim Weizmann, a Russian-born chemist whose work at the University of Manchester made an important contribution to the war effort. He won the support of the upper echelons of British Jewry and through them access to key foreign policy officials such as Sir Mark Sykes, who had negotiated the Sykes-Picot Treaty. They called for the government to make a public commitment to a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and thus overturn the secret plans to assign Palestine, as part of Syria, to France after the war.

## Impact of the Balfour Declaration

The Balfour Declaration gave succour to a small minority of “political” Zionists led by the journalist and writer Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940), who went on to form the Revisionist Party that was later to orient towards the fascists in Germany, Italy and Spain in the 1930s. The Revisionist Party was the political antecedent of Likud, which has dominated Israeli politics for the last 40 years.

Jabotinsky argued that the Jews had to “take political possession of Palestine” if they were to become the majority. To this end, he demanded and won British consent to form three Jewish battalions, comprising the Jewish Legion, that fought with Britain's General Allenby in the campaign for Palestine in 1917-18. These forces were later to form the Irgun and the Stern gang and play a key role in terrorist activities aimed at driving the Palestinian Arabs from their homes.

While Weizmann was unhappy that the Declaration made no mention of a Jewish state, he made strenuous efforts to ensure that the promise was embedded in the political arrangements made after the war.

Soon after British troops took Palestine, he led a delegation on a visit to the area, known as the Zionist Commission, that included James Rothschild and Edwin Samuel, whose father would go on to become the first British High Commissioner in Mandatory Palestine. He laid a cornerstone for what would become the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem, on land owned by the World Zionist Organization,

and established the foundations of what would eventually become the institutions of a government in waiting.

It was far from clear who would rule Palestine after the war as the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 left the boundaries vague, leading to a struggle between Britain and France. The region was convulsed with uprisings against imperialist rule in Iraq, Egypt, Afghanistan and Persia. Weizmann was determined to ensure that Britain took sole charge of Palestine. However, at the same time 14 armies, including Britain's, were supporting the Whites, the Russian opponents of the Bolshevik revolution. Britain was seriously overstretched.

When the Allies convened in Paris in 1919 to draw up a treaty to present to Germany, the Soviet government was not invited. But the spectre of the October Revolution haunted the Peace Conference. Lloyd George's letter to French President Clemenceau set out his fears:

“The whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution. There is a deep sense not only of discontent but of anger and revolution amongst the workmen against pre-war conditions. The whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the masses of the population from one end of Europe to the other.”

*To be continued*



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