



Balfour 100

The Fathom Essays

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A HISTORIAN REFLECTS

Fathom is one of the liveliest and most interesting forums for the discussion of Israeli matters - far better, in fact, than many of the Hebrew language sources which purport to cover the same topics.

Gadi Taub, Israeli historian, author, screenwriter, and political commentator.

Indispensable reading for anyone who wishes to understand Middle Eastern politics; well researched, balanced, deeply committed to Israel but equally reading to ask tough questions about its policies; a unique combination of values and realpolitik. **Shlomo Avineri**, Professor of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

Fathom has become a highly respected, leading publication of both in-depth analysis of fundamental developments and trends in the Middle East alongside serious studies of key events and trends that characterise the fast changing domestic Israeli scene. Fathom's highest quality editorship and insistence on careful fact-checking is fast propelling the journal into becoming essential reading for every person involved in policy and politics in the region and on the international scene. It entertains orthodox views and approaches alongside highly conflicting and provocative analyses that are thought provoking and often allow extreme protagonists to state their cases.

The opportunities Fathom affords critics and adversaries of Israel to state their case lends a unique quality to this product of BICOM – they enjoy a fair chance to state their views and air their concerns and also benefit from the very best available products of Jewish and Israel Advocacy. That is why Fathom has become the platform where several hundreds of thousands of readers learn, debate and disagree, but never fail to read every word printed. **Efraim Halevy** was director of Mossad and head of the Israeli National Security Council.

For objective insights into Israeli politics, society and its relations with the wider world, few can match the scope and quality of BICOM's work. **Clive Jones**, Chair in Regional Security, School of Government and International Affairs, University of Durham.

BICOM and Fathom have played vital roles at a time when political and intellectual dishonesty seems to prevail in so much discussion about Israel and the Mideast. They have countered it with energy, integrity and balanced understanding. **Mitchell Cohen**, Professor of Political Science at Bernard Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and Editor Emeritus of Dissent.

BICOM and Fathom facilitate meetings between the two sides, scrutinise what went right and what went wrong in the process of negotiations over the past two decades. Only by understanding the other and accepting the others existence can the Arab-Israeli conflict be solved. BICOM and Fathom are leading both of us closer along that route. BICOM and Fathom have leverage that many lack and serve as one of the major catalysts that can remove obstacles on the road to peace. **Elias Zananiri** is Vice-Chairman of the PLO Committee for Interaction with the Israeli Society. He is a former journalist and spokesperson for the PA's Ministry of Interior and Internal Security.

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Foreword

COLIN SHINDLER

In a year of anniversaries which relate to the history of modern Israel, perhaps the centenary of the Balfour Declaration is the most significant. For those who resent the rise of a Hebrew republic in the Land of Israel, it represents a colossal historic mistake. It clearly upsets the ideological applecart, anchored in the belief that the Jews are not a nation in the modern sense, but merely a fossilised remnant of the past – a primitive religious group which inexplicably has not disappeared. The twentieth century, it was argued in 1917, would solve the centuries-long Jewish problem through assimilation into other societies. Hitler also thought this, but he chose other methods.

The Balfour Declaration and the October revolution occurred within days of each other. One proclaimed a new Jewish future in Palestine, the other the liberation of humankind wherever the socialist sun shone. Both Zionists and Jewish Communists of the era laid claim to Jewish tradition – in particular the teachings of the Prophets. For Jews in the twentieth century, these rival ideologies magnetically attracted them in their tens of thousands. Yet there was a difference. Herzl wanted the Jew to become a different type of Jew. Lenin wanted the Jew to become a different type of non-Jew.

The great dream of Communism perished in Stalin's gulag. For Diaspora Jews, there was a continuum of disillusioning events – the Moscow show trials, the Nazi-Soviet pact, the Doctors Plot, the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. No wonder that many Jews went to Israel to build a new society, one profoundly different from the ones they had inhabited.

The Balfour Declaration was a breakthrough for Zionist diplomacy. Despite their best efforts, doors had previously remained closed in Whitehall. It was a rare constellation of political circumstances in 1917 that presented a window of opportunity. Weizmann, Sokolov, Jabotinsky, Harry Sacher, Leon Simon and many others understood their role at this juncture in Jewish history – and acted accordingly.

Zionism was not wrong, it was different. It was a revolt against traditional Jewish leadership. It was a protest against passivity. It was a rebellion against the acceptability of being a pariah people on the margins. It was a dissent from thinking inside the box.

The wording of the Balfour Declaration was a masterclass in ambiguity which allowed post-

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Lloyd-George British governments to interpret it according to its perception of national interests. The revelations of the Sykes-Picot agreement, the McMahon-Sherif Hussein correspondence and other lesser postulations indicated that the Balfour Declaration was merely one piece on the imperial chessboard – in an attempt to end the slaughter during the Great War.

Despite its best efforts, HMG could not quite absolve itself from its commitment to the Jews. To its credit, successive British governments allowed hundreds of thousands of Jews to emigrate to Palestine during the third, fourth and fifth aliyot. Many Polish Jews during the fourth aliyah and German Jews during the fifth effectively owe their lives to British adherence to the Balfour Declaration.

The Balfour Declaration was the first practical step on the road to the state. It realised Herzl's dream of an international affirmation of the Zionist project. No longer was building Zion rooted solely in theory. While the infrastructure for a new society was already being laid by figures such as Ben-Gurion, Katznelson and Tabenkin, the Balfour Declaration literally opened up the gates.

One hundred years on, a vibrant dynamic state has arisen. Does Israel have its flaws? Certainly. Do some politicians lack a moral compass? Undoubtedly. Are there seemingly insoluble problems? Absolutely. But Zionism has achieved a remarkable success – and its genesis lies in the Balfour Declaration of 2 November 1917. This issuing of this document – a turning point in Middle East history – is dissected from different perspectives in this stimulating collection of Fathom essays.

Colin Shindler is emeritus professor at SOAS, University of London.



INTRODUCTION: WHO AND WHAT SHOULD BRITAIN 'VIEW WITH FAVOUR' TODAY?

PROFESSOR ALAN JOHNSON

'Me' or 'Him' –
Thus begins the war. But it
Ends with an awkward encounter:
'Me and him.'

Mahmoud Darwish, Palestinian poet, from *A State of Siege*, translated by Fady Joudah, 2002.

Who are the good guys? That's what every well-meaning European, left-wing European, intellectual European, liberal European always wants to know, first and foremost. Who are the good guys in the film and who are the bad guys? In this respect Vietnam was easy: The Vietnamese people were the victims, and the Americans were the bad guys ... [But] the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a Wild West movie. It is not a struggle between good and evil, rather it is a tragedy in the ancient and most precise sense of the word: a clash between right and right, a clash between one very powerful, deep, and convincing claim, and another very different but no less convincing, no less powerful, no less humane claim.

Amos Oz, Israeli novelist, *How to Cure a Fanatic*, 2012.

'His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.' So began the fateful letter, issued on 2 November 1917 by the United Kingdom's [Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour](#) to [Lord Walter Rothschild](#), a leader of the [British Jewish community](#), for transmission to the [Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland](#). 100 years later, the letter sits in the [British Library](#) as *Additional Manuscripts number 41178* and Israel is looking forward to celebrating its 70th birthday.

But the national question between Israel and the Palestinians remains unresolved, so the question has to be posed: who and what Britain should 'view with favour' today?

British policy is settled: two states for two peoples, to be agreed by negotiation between the parties. This vision has been shared by BICOM since its foundation in 2001 and by Fathom since its creation in 2012. Less fashionable today than once it was, besieged by maximalists on both sides, it remains in our view the only policy that warrants the name 'solution' because no other proposal can recognise and reconcile the legitimate national aspirations of both peoples, which is the only basis for a just peace.

Those who advance that vision today will of course use this centenary year to look back at how the Balfour Declaration came to be issued and what its impact has been. Several essays published in 2017 at Fathom, and collected here in this booklet, launched at the 3rd Annual BICOM-Jewish News Policy Conference, seek to do just that.

But looking back is not enough if we are to answer the question of who and what Britain should ‘view with favour’ today? It is the Fathom essays by Toby Greene and Elias Zananiri, a British-born Israeli and a Palestinian, that suggest what an ‘awkward encounter’ between the parties might look like.

Both begin by standing behind the narrative of their people. Greene notes that ‘For Jews, the Balfour Declaration is part of its narrative of salvation’ and with passion he tells us why: ‘simply put, hundreds of thousands of Jews who fled from Europe to Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s, and their descendants, owe their lives to it. The family members they left behind perished in the Shoah.’ Zananiri declares himself to be ‘a Palestinian who is shattered with grief for ‘the millions of Palestinians who lost their homeland because of that Declaration.’ Given the history, then it seems we must begin with Darwish’s ‘me or him’, with Oz’s ‘right and wrong’.

But each writer then reaches for the ‘me and him’ of the awkward encounter, for the ‘right and right’ of Oz’s tragedy. The Israeli Greene knows that ‘everyone who cares about Israel must also recognise that the process that created the State of Israel – the Jewish narrative of salvation – is for Palestinians their narrative of catastrophe.’ The Palestinian Zananiri knows that, ‘the calls to sue the UK for Balfour should stop. Instead we need a courageous decision by the UK to undo part of the injustice that befell the Palestinians because of the Declaration.’

And both look forward. ‘Britain,’ urges Greene, ‘should use the spotlight to promote a positive vision for the future, using a vocabulary that is sensitive to the conflicting emotions on both sides of the dispute.’ As well as strengthening the UK’s relationship with Israel and celebrating the ending of centuries of Jewish homelessness and persecution, Greene believes Britain should ‘view with favour – indeed reaffirm with vigour – the urgency of establishing a Palestinian state that would afford long overdue self-determination, due dignity, and economic and political opportunity to the Palestinian people.’

Fathom believes that these two goals are really one. Israel’s future as a Jewish national home – in terms of demography, security, and legitimacy – will be secured by the creation of a separate Palestinian state. And for this to be possible, there must be not only mutual security guarantees but a refugee policy that is consistent with two states – two ‘national homes’ – for two peoples.

For our part we will continue to view with favour the vision of mutual recognition, coexistence and peace in the small strip of land between the river and the sea.

[Professor Alan Johnson](#) is the editor of *Fathom*



WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

TOBY GREENE

2017 is the hundredth anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, the British government's letter of support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. [Toby Greene](#) argues that Britain should use the spotlight to promote a positive vision for the future, using a vocabulary that is sensitive to the conflicting emotions on both sides of the dispute, and 'it's best endeavours' to improve the chances of the pragmatists who recognise that two national homes is the only way to reconcile the demands of two nations, and end a century of conflict.

Prime Minister Theresa May declared at a speech to the Conservative Friends of Israel on 12 December that this year's centenary of the Balfour Declaration would be marked by Britain 'with pride'.

This sets out an important marker for how Britain will handle an anniversary which, let's face it, must look to many in Whitehall like one big headache. Not a word can be spoken about the document – which left indelible British fingerprints all over the Jewish-Arab struggle in the Middle East – without angering someone, or several million someones. Ministers could be forgiven for wanting to hide under the bed until it's all over.

But the anniversary, and Britain's historical legacy, cannot be avoided. For Jews around the world the Balfour Declaration, and its role laying the groundwork for the establishment of Israel, is something to be celebrated with pride. Whilst for the Arab and wider Islamic world, and for Palestinians in particular, the Balfour Declaration is a mark of shame against the British. The Palestinian Authority has threatened to sue Britain for its 'crime,' and anti-Zionist campaigners will seek to tar Zionism, once again, with the brush of imperialism and colonialism.

How then should British politicians and leaders handle this thorny subject this year? What is a reasonable and balanced way to relate to, and talk about, the Balfour Declaration one hundred years on?

Millions of words have been written, and millions more will be written, about what the Balfour Declaration was about from a British perspective, seen through the lenses of Britain's ambivalent relationship with its imperial and colonial past.

What British leaders across the spectrum need to recall in the face of the conflicting emotions of Jews and Palestinians and their respective supporters, is what the Balfour Declaration means for

the nations whose destiny it has touched.

For Jews, the Balfour Declaration is part of its narrative of salvation. Simply put, hundreds of thousands of Jews who fled from Europe to Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s, and their descendants, owe their lives to it. The family members they left behind perished in the Shoah (Holocaust). For Jews it is the 1939 White Paper, in which Britain cancelled its commitment to a Jewish national home, all but halted Jewish immigration, and closed off one of the last escape routes from the Europe, that is the mark of British betrayal and shame. These events touched most Jewish families in Britain in one way or another.

Not only did the creation of the Jewish national home provide a refuge for hundreds of thousands of Jews before the war, but it enabled the establishment of the State of Israel after the war. For Jews, Israel's establishment – restoring Jewish sovereignty in what Jews consider their historic homeland – was the anti-Shoah, giving Jewish identity a positive future.

By understanding this, it can be appreciated how clankingly offensive the demands for Britain to apologise for the Balfour Declaration are for Jews. Though perhaps understandable from Palestinians, from others it reflects a conspicuous disdain for Jewish sensitivities and Jewish history. It is no surprise that a recent Parliamentary event launching a 'Balfour Apology Campaign' became a shameful forum for antisemitic bluster.¹

That said, everyone who cares about Israel must also recognise that the process that created the State of Israel – the Jewish narrative of salvation – is for Palestinians their narrative of catastrophe, or 'Nakba'. The extent to which the declaration is responsible for their loss is open to historical debate, but the loss and suffering of the Palestinian people is undeniable.

This is the minefield that Britain must navigate, and a notable gap has already emerged between Number 10 and the Foreign Office. May's commitment to mark the anniversary with pride jars with the position taken by Middle East Minister Tobias Elwood in a recent Parliamentary debate, in which he declared that Britain will mark the centenary, but 'will neither celebrate nor apologise'.

Certainly the answer for British representatives is not to attempt to retrospectively rewrite the Balfour declaration, as Elwood awkwardly appeared to do in that debate, stating that the Balfour Declaration should have asserted the political (rather than only civil and religious) rights of the non-Jewish communities in Palestine.

Redrafting a century-old letter to assuage today's political sensitivities can only distort the historical picture. Rather than rewrite the past, Britain should use the spotlight to increase understanding of it, and promote a positive vision for the future, using a vocabulary that is

¹ 'Jews blamed for Holocaust at "shameful" House of Lords event,' last modified October 27 2016, *The Times*, www.thetimes.co.uk/article/jews-blamed-for-holocaust-at-shameful-house-of-lords-event-m86q69td0.

sensitive to the conflicting emotions on both sides of the dispute.

1917 AND ALL THAT

Arthur Koestler witheringly summarised the Balfour Declaration as document in which ‘one nation solemnly promised to a second nation the country of a third’. This is pithy, but no more helpful as a history than the Zionist slogan of ‘A land without a people for a people without a land’. A balanced account of the origins of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict requires looking simultaneously at two overlapping but different perspectives: of Jewish–Zionists and Palestinian–Arabs. It is like staring at stereogram. If you can avoid going cross eyed and getting a headache, a picture with depth begins to emerge.

Zionism as a modern political movement gained momentum at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the failure of the Jewish emancipation to end antisemitism in Europe. The founder of political Zionism Theodor Herzl witnessed as a journalist the 1895 Dreyfus trial, in which a French Jewish army captain was falsely convicted for spying and publicly disgraced before a Parisian crowd chanting ‘death to the Jews’. Meanwhile in the Russian empire Jews were scapegoated for political unrest, and subject to waves of murderous antisemitic riots and punitive legislation restricting their freedoms.

In his famous pamphlet, ‘The Jewish State,’ Herzl lamented the fact that ‘we have honestly endeavoured everywhere to merge ourselves in the social life of surrounding communities and to preserve the faith of our fathers. We are not permitted to do so.’ His plan was, ‘perfectly simple ... Let sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe large enough to satisfy the rightful requirements of a nation; the rest we shall manage for ourselves’.

Herzl was not the first to reach this conclusion. It was hardly surprising in a Europe filled with ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups seeking national self-determination, that Jews would seek the same solution to their own situation.

Indeed, a movement to establish modern Jewish settlements in Palestine had begun in the Russian empire in response to a wave of pogroms of 1881. Whilst hundreds of thousands left the empire to find new homes – mostly in North America but also in Britain and other places – a smaller number went to the ancient homeland known to Jews as the Land of Israel, inspired by the vision of a new Jewish centre of life where Jews could emancipate themselves.

The territory they reached was an underdeveloped and relatively underpopulated part of the Ottoman Empire. Though the area was known as Palestine, there was no such place on the Ottoman administrative and political map, being divided into various smaller administrative units, and its half million Arab inhabitants had no notion of Palestine as political unit or ‘Palestinian’ as a national identity. There was a small, educated, urban Arab elite, but most of the population were rural tenant farmers or Bedouin, with illiteracy estimated at 95 per cent.

Life in Ottoman Palestine was harsh. Many Jews gave up; some died. But this unpromising

territory is central to the Jewish collective identity, being at the core of its biblical and historical narrative, its theology and daily liturgy. And it was over this territory that the Zionist movement lobbied the great powers for a charter to establish a Jewish state.

By the outbreak of World War I, the Jewish population of Palestine had swelled from around 20,000 to around 90,000: buying land; establishing agricultural communities, including kibbutzim; and building new towns, like Tel Aviv. This was the original start up nation. Leon Pinsker, one of the early Russian-Zionist ideologues, called it 'Auto-emancipation'. However, by 1914 Jews were still a small minority, with Arabs numbering around 590,000.

Why Russian-born chemist Chaim Weizmann and his small group of British Jewish supporters was successful in convincing the British cabinet to back the idea of a Jewish national home in Palestine in 1917 is the subject of endless historical curiosity, especially given how much of a burden this promise later seemed. Did ministers hope, as they claimed, in their desperation to break the tie in the Great War, that the support of American and Russian Jewry would strengthen their position? Were they swayed by altruistic motives, recognising the plight of world Jewry? Were they inspired by biblical prophecy of the Jewish people's restoration to their land? Did they hope for a reliable British dependency to hold key strategic ground protecting Suez, Haifa and the overland routes to the Gulf, and to keep at bay the French and Russians?

Whatever their motives, they carefully considered the wording, with the outcome a masterpiece in brevity, but also ambiguity. The goal was vague with respect to geography and political status: 'the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.' The British commitment was imprecise: 'to use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object.' And there were caveats: 'nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine', intended to satisfy pro-Arab voices; nor to prejudice 'the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country,' to satisfy non-Zionist Jews in Britain who feared harm to their status as equal British citizens.

Nonetheless, for Zionism the declaration was a game changer, not because it was unique as a statement of support: French and American leaders also expressed support for Zionism, but because the outcome of the war made it possible for support became policy. Within weeks of the declaration, General Allenby has captured Jerusalem. The British commitment to the Jews was upheld in the post-war peace settlement, and transformed into an internationally endorsed legal Mandate by the League of Nations.

PROMISES AND BETRAYALS

Whether or not this was wise policy for the British, it was the opportunity for the Zionist movement, and they took it. Under the protection of the British sovereign and backed by international law, the Zionist movement spent the next twenty years establishing the foundations

of a Jewish state: buying and cultivating land; bringing in Jewish immigrants; building communities; developing industries; establishing social services and cultural institutions. They absorbed waves of new immigrants leaving behind discrimination in Europe. A great surge of refugees fleeing Nazi Germany in the 1930s buoyed the Jewish population to around 350,000 by 1939, around one third of the population.

Yet in the Arab world, the Declaration came universally to be seen as a case of British betrayal and double dealing: evidence of Western disregard for Arab rights and even a cynical agenda to keep the Arabs weak and divided. The British had made a separate commitment in 1915 to Hussein the Sharif of Mecca, to support his aspiration for an independent Arab kingdom in return for his rebelling against the Turks. This commitment was also laced with ambiguity and qualification, explicitly excluding regions that ‘cannot be said to be purely Arab’, but imprecisely describing their geographical extent. These commitments were complicated by a third agreement between Britain and France, to divide the Ottoman territories of the Middle East into areas of their control and influence.

Whether or not the promises were consistent with one another is debated by historians. It is worth recalling of the three agreements, only the Balfour Declaration was not a secret, being issued in a letter that was intended to be made public.

After issuing the Balfour Declaration, the British tried to reassure Hussein, and even brokered a signed agreement between Chaim Weizmann and Faisal, Hussein’s son and representative at the Paris peace conference, in which each committed to support the aspirations of the other.

How the two movements were to be reconciled remained unclear. As Colonial Secretary in 1922, Churchill tried to draw a line under the matter by drawing a line in the sand. He partitioned Palestine along the Jordan River, and barred Jewish settlement east of the river, where he created Transjordan as he would later boast, with ‘one stroke of a pen, one Sunday afternoon’. Allowing Faisal’s brother Abdullah to rule it, he considered the British commitment to the Sharif and his sons with respect to Palestine fulfilled.

Of course Abdullah was not fulfilled, cut off from Jerusalem, and frustrated in his aspiration to lead an Arab kingdom of greater size and significance. But the more immediate concern was the majority Arab population of the area now defined in international law as a Jewish National Home. Arabs in Palestine had a mixed response to the arrival of Jews at the turn of the century. But unease at the threat to their political and economic position grew in parallel with the size of the Jewish community, and with the increasing influence of nationalism in the Arab world. As the Ottoman Empire collapsed, Arab nationalists in Palestine hoped that they would become part of newly formed wider Arab state, most likely part of a greater Syria. But the publication of the Balfour Declaration, and then the loss of Syrian independence to French control in 1920, catalysed the emergence of a distinct Palestinian national identity, of which resistance to the establishment of a Jewish national home was a core component. From then on, Jewish and Arab

claims to sovereignty in the territory west of the Jordan River were irreconcilable.

Arab resistance to British rule and Jewish settlement burst into increasingly bloody rounds of violence over the 1920s and 1930s, culminating in a broad based Arab revolt in 1936. In 1937 the British proposed reconciling the two competing populations by partitioning Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states – the first emergence of what today we call the two state solution. Jews were open to partition, albeit rejecting the proposed borders, whilst the whole enterprise was rejected by the Arab side.

By 1939, with war in Europe looming, the British decided, in Chamberlain's words, that it was better strategy 'to offend the Jews rather than the Arab'. To calm the Arab revolt and placate surrounding Arab states, it issued its White Paper capping Jewish immigration.

Six years later, two in every three Jews in Europe had been murdered, six million in total. For their survivors, living in displaced persons camps across Europe, their hope for salvation was invested in the promise for a new life in the new Jewish society in Palestine. But the British barred Jewish entry, turning back refugee ships like the famous 'Exodus'. With 100,000 British troops struggling to keep control in Palestine, the British gave up, turning the issue over to the newly formed UN, whose commission proposed a two state solution. The proposed borders satisfied no-one, but the Jews reluctantly accepted the compromise, whilst the Arabs unequivocally rejected it.

The War between the two communities that followed led to the flight and displacement of around 600,000 Arabs. Their descendants today number in the millions. Many remain stateless. Who was to blame for their flight, and for the perpetuation of Palestinian refugee status is a dispute where history intertwines almost inseparably with the political dispute. What is beyond debate however, is that for Palestinians the 'Nakba', is a defining moment in their national identity. The key is the symbol of the homes they lost. From their perspective, their land was taken from them by the Jews, and British imperial power made it possible.

WHAT TO SAY?

At the time of the Balfour Declaration, the idea of a Jewish nation state divided Jews, after the Holocaust, it united them. According to a 2015 survey of British Jews conducted by City University, 'The vast majority of our respondents support its right to exist as a Jewish state (90 per cent), express pride in its cultural and scientific achievements (84 per cent), see it as a vibrant and open democracy (78 per cent) and say that it forms some part of their identity as Jews (93 per cent).'² No wonder that the Balfour Declaration, and the British role in laying the

2 'The Attitudes of British Jews Towards Israel,' Department of Sociology, School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University London, November 2015, accessed: <http://yachad.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/British-Jewish-Attitudes-Towards-Israel-Yachad-Ipsos-Mori-Nov-2015.pdf>.

groundwork for the State of Israel is something that British Jews want to celebrate with pride. But equally, it is little wonder that this is something that Palestinians and their supporters want to denigrate. At this moment the Palestinian voice and narrative should also be heard.

Reconciling these voices however, cannot be done in the past. That is why Britain should take the opportunity of the spotlight to speak about the future. The Balfour Declaration was a statement of aspiration. It declared what Britain viewed with favour, and what it would use its best endeavours to bring about. What should Britain view with favour today?

Firstly, that with Israel's establishment, centuries of Jewish homelessness and persecution have ended; that Israel is democratic, affirms the rights of non-Jewish citizens, and is an extraordinary engine for creativity; and that it has a fruitful relationship with Britain based on shared interests and values.

But Britain should also view with favour – indeed reaffirm with vigour – the urgency of establishing a Palestinian state that would afford long overdue self-determination, due dignity, and economic and political opportunity to the Palestinian people.

Perhaps most importantly, it should affirm that these goals are mutually reinforcing. The surest way to secure Israel's future as a Jewish national home – in terms of demography, security, and legitimacy – is through the creation of a separate Palestinian state. Many Israeli politicians, including at times Prime Minister Netanyahu, have acknowledged this. At the same time, a conflict ending agreement will require the Palestinians to agree to a refugee solution that is consistent with two states – two 'national homes' – for two peoples, and does not undermine Israel's Jewish character.

Yet Britain must also recognise that today, it does not have the power to carve borders in the desert and create states with the stroke of a pen on a Sunday afternoon. Those with the power to determine the fate of the Jewish national home and the Palestinian national home for the generations to come are the two populations themselves. In that respect, all peoples can draw inspiration from what the Zionist movement achieved. The Balfour Declaration created the opportunity, but it was the endeavour of the Jews themselves who built the groundwork for what many had previously thought impossible, a fully sovereign Jewish state. Seeing a piece of paper turn into a living state is an invitation to all peoples, Israelis and Palestinians alike, to become authors of their own destinies.

The future will be shaped by Israelis and Palestinians. Britain should use 'its best endeavours' to improve the chances of the pragmatists among them, who recognise that two national homes is the only way to reconcile the demands of two nations, and end a century of conflict.

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REPAIRING THE WORLD: WHY BRITAIN SHOULD NOW RECOGNISE THE STATE OF PALESTINE

ELIAS ZANANIRI

Elias Zananiri, Vice-Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) Committee for Interaction with the Israeli Society, argues that the British government bears a moral responsibility for the impact of the Balfour Declaration on the Palestinian people and should now make recompense by recognising the State of Palestine and demanding Israel stop closing the window on the two-state solution.

PAST HISTORY

I don't know if the Balfour Declaration served Britain's interests or whether it achieved tangible accomplishments for the British Empire. I am neither a historian nor a British tax payer who wants to know where his money goes. I am a Palestinian who is shattered with grief when I hear that the UK wants to celebrate 'with pride,' in Prime Minister Theresa May's words, the centennial anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, without even considering the implications of such a celebration for millions of Palestinians who lost their homeland because of that Declaration.

What pride can there be in a declaration that sought to create a homeland for the Jewish people while leaving another nation with nothing? Tough words? Maybe. But the Declaration was the opening shot of a protracted effort to create a new reality in the Middle East which left the Palestinians, my people, suffering ever since. The disaster that befell the Palestinians as a result of the Declaration requires remorse on the part of the British government. Countries that were ruled by the British Empire in the last century are already independent states. They don't need Britain's apology anymore. They licked their wounds of living under British rule and moved on. We, the Palestinians, continue until this very day to pay the price of that Declaration.

Britain, by the way, does know how to apologise, doing so for the 1845-1952 Famine in Ireland. But not for the Declaration? In our case, the British Mandate turned a deaf ear to the atrocities carried out against the Palestinians by Jewish armed groups, which had two future prime ministers, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, in their ranks, and who in many cases didn't spare the British forces either. The bombing of the King David Hotel in 1946 was carried out by the Irgun, which was headed by Begin and both men were placed on the 'Wanted List' by the British authorities. The British also suppressed Palestinian revolts against the Mandate and the increase of Jewish migration into Palestine.

PRESENT RESPONSIBILITIES

It seems the UK does not want to think about an apology and an admission of responsibility for the Declaration. The UK's refusal to admit responsibility is not acceptable to Palestinians but, 100 years later, it is comprehensible. What is not is the decision to announce, a century later, that the British people should *celebrate* the anniversary with pride. Why should enlightened guardians of human rights and supporters of every people's right to self-determination feel 'pride'?

I grew up as a stateless Palestinian kid admiring Britain. But not for long. As I grew older and wiser it became obvious to me how detrimental the Declaration had been for the Palestinians. It imposed, by Great Power fiat, the ground for the creation of the State of Israel but it failed to honour the commitment 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'.

While viewing with favour 'the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people,' the Declaration defined the indigenous population of Palestine as 'non-Jewish communities'. For shame! Jews from all over the world were defined as the 'Jewish people' while the Palestinians living in the land of their ancestors for thousands of years were simply considered 'non-Jewish communities'.

To add salt to the Palestinian wound, the Declaration offered an extra layer of protection of 'the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country'. By securing a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine on one hand, and on the other ensuring rights and political status the Jews enjoyed in other countries, the Declaration was a double prize for the Jews and a knockout for the Palestinians. I know that many will not see it that way but that is exactly what it meant for an unborn nation that, in due time, lost its homeland and saw the majority of its people either kicked out of, or voluntarily leave, Palestine in the aftermath of the 1948 proclamation of the State of Israel.

The British ruled over India for a little less than a hundred years and they never promised the subcontinent to a third nation. Instead they split India into two separate states: India and Pakistan. So why didn't the UK follow suit in Palestine and endorse the 1947 UN Partition Plan?

Some will argue that Palestinians never accepted the 1947 partition of Palestine. But we had *good reason* to reject it: it lacked all fairness. It allocated for a future Jewish state 56.74 per cent of the total area of Palestine, gave a future Arab state 42.88 per cent and left Jerusalem and Bethlehem under a special international status. So, three years before the British Mandate ended, with Palestinian Muslims and Christians forming 68 per cent of the population and the Jews 31 per cent, the Jews were allocated more than half of the total area of Palestine.

FUTURE RECOMPENSE

No one can undo this history. Nevertheless, a lot can be done to make the Declaration centennial a day for a dramatic move that is not meant to undo what took place a century ago

but to begin to repair the damage it caused.

The UN General Assembly on 29 November 2012 adopted Resolution 67/19 which recognised the State of Palestine based on the 4 June 1967 lines as a non-member state, adding one more internationally-recognised term of reference for the two-state solution, i.e. Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security. The least the UK should consider is endorsing this resolution to safeguard the two-state solution at a time when the far-right government in Israel is doing everything it can to kill it.

Every expression of concern over the fate of the two-state solution remains meaningless when nothing is done *in practice*. It is hypocrisy in its worst form. Criticism, press releases, expressions of concern, even the condemnation issued in June by Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson about the Israeli announcement of 3000 more settlement units in the West Bank, do not stop the settlement expansion that endangers the two-state solution. Should the international community fail to exert pressure on Israel, then Israelis and Palestinians will be subjected to a permanent conflict, driving both sides along the path of mutual destruction.

The UK bears a moral responsibility for the consequences of the Declaration. A recognition of the State of Palestine would be a solid step in the right direction. But the clock is ticking. We are moving rapidly closer to the centennial anniversary. So why not make the anniversary a different day? Make it a day of atonement, a day of repairing the damage, a day for giving back to the Palestinians some of the rights the Declaration took away?

The Palestinians never disappeared as a result of the Declaration and what followed. On the contrary, we remained and we are today an inseparable part of the Middle East. Yes, our state is under occupation, but this is not unique. Populations have lived under occupation for as long as the occupiers could suppress them. Eventually those populations earn their freedom and build their states. Palestinians will be no exception.

The alternative will be bad for all parties. The denial of the Palestinian national rights to self-determination and statehood will continue to nourish conflict in the region and beyond. Various terror groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and others will continue to use the question of Palestine as an excuse to incite, recruit new members and mobilise public support for the despicable crimes they commit. Solving the Arab-Israeli conflict would deny them this excuse.

The calls to sue the UK for Balfour should stop. Instead we need a courageous decision by the UK to undo part of the injustice that befell the Palestinians because of the Declaration. The British people should recognise the State of Palestine instead of dancing on the ruins of the Palestinian people.

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CHRISTIAN ZIONISM AND THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

GERSHON SHAFIR

[Gershon Shafir](#) argues that British Christian Zionism pre-dated practical Jewish Zionism and helped to ensure that, by the First World War, British imperial interests were woven into a narrative of Jewish return, creating ‘the political category into which Jews fitted themselves’ and ensuring that Jews were the only political community in Palestine to be recognised in the Balfour Declaration.

INTRODUCTION

In telling the history of Zionism, it is customary to start with the movement’s two or three spiritual precursors, Moses Hess, and Rabbis Alkalai and Kalisher; then leap to the practical Zionism of Hovevei Zion, then to Theodor Herzl’s political Zionism; and only then to the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which conveniently appeared and offered itself as a vehicle for implementing what the Zionist movement was already putting into practice.¹ My goal in this essay is to reverse that chronology by pointing out that long before Zionism was brought into being, let alone became a mass movement, the British had already conceived of just such a plan.

Of course, both sides made adjustments to each other during their tumultuous collaboration during the Mandatory years, but the question should be: on whose terms was Zionism put into effect in the first place? My claim is that we attribute to Zionism ideas and expressions that actually originated with the British.

BRITISH CHRISTIAN EVANGELICAL RESTORATIONISM AND BRITISH IMPERIALISM

Long before vague Jewish messianic aspirations became a concrete Zionist project, and long before Jewish voices proclaimed Jews to be a nation rather than a religious group, Zionism was a *Christian* venture. Zionism *avant la letter*, i.e. British proto-Zionism, emerged in the form of Christian Evangelical Restorationism, a movement calling for, and willing

¹ Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea* (New York: Atheneum, 1959); Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

to sponsor, the emigration of Jews to Palestine as a precondition for the Second Coming of Christ (while simultaneously seeking to convert them to Christianity). When William Thomson, the Archbishop of York, addressed the Palestinian Exploration Fund (PEF) in 1875 he said – probably with a straight face – that ‘our reason for turning to Palestine is that Palestine is our country.’ It was the Bible, the ‘national epic’ of England, he explained, that had given him the ‘laws by which I try to live’ and the ‘best knowledge I possess’.²

But proto-Zionism was also a British *imperial* project facilitating Britain’s role as a Great Power in Palestine. The two justifications – religious and imperial – were not at loggerheads with each other but rather complimentary. In fact, even the most devoted Restorationists, such as the Earl of Shaftesbury, switched easily between the two discourses. Laurence Oliphant, a British traveller and diplomat, for example, suggested that while the idea of the restoration of the Jews is without question a ‘favourite religious theory,’ this ‘does not necessarily impair its political value’.³ Locked in a struggle with the other Great Powers over the future of Palestine, British proto-Zionism doubled as a justification for the expansion of British power in Palestine at a time when all European Great Powers became involved in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire, the ‘sick man of Europe,’ ostensibly as protectors of its minorities, but actually with the real aim of breaking up the Empire and seizing a chunk of it.

In that struggle, Britain had a serious handicap; it didn’t have a dog in the fight. Under the one-sided ‘capitulations system’ of rights and privileges conferred on Christian nations, Russia could claim to protect the Christian Orthodox subjects of the Empire and the French could claim to be the protectors of the Roman Catholics, but the Ottoman Empire had very few Protestants. Enter the Jew – the *ersatz* Protestant. Jews were more valuable in Palestine than in England and, as the Restorationists admitted, albeit somewhat bashfully, by moving to Palestine they would no longer suffer from anti-Semitism.

VISCOUNT OF PALMERSTON AND BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY

The high tide of Restorationism was the decade of the 1830s, when the Ottomans were driven out of Palestine by troops under Ibrahim Pasha, son of Muhammad Ali (or Mehmet Ali), the revolting ruler of Egypt, putting the country in play for a decade. In January 1839, the Earl of Shaftesbury published an article, claiming that there was a burgeoning desire among European Jewry to return to Palestine. By July and August two of Britain’s leading newspapers, *The Times* and *The Globe*, leaving aside the theological speculation, suggested that ‘Jewish settlement in

2 Barbara W. Tuchman, *Bible and Sword: England and Palestine from the Bronze Age to Balfour* (New York: Ballantine, 1984).

3 Tuchman, *Bible and Sword*, 271.

Palestine would free them from persecution in Europe and enable them to fulfil their historical role as agents of civilisation in the Middle East'.⁴

Conveniently, Shaftesbury's father-in-law was the Viscount of Palmerston, Britain's Foreign Secretary (1835–1841) and later Prime Minister. Between 1830 and 1860 he dominated British foreign policy. On 11 August 1840, Palmerston wrote to Viscount Ponsonby, the British Ambassador in Constantinople, to ask the Turkish Sultan 'to hold out every just encouragement to the Jews of Europe to return to Palestine'. Palmerston, himself not a Restorationist, suggested that the arrival of Jewish settlers under the Sultan's 'Sanction and Protection and at [his] Invitation' would help the Ottomans not only because 'it is well known that the Jews of Europe possess great wealth,' but also because it would place the Sultan in an advantageous position vis-a-vis his Egyptian rival, Mehmet Ali.⁵ The Sultan curtly rejected the suggestion, but the British did not let go of it for the next century.

In 1841, a mission of inquiry sent by the Church of Scotland to Palestine issued a *Memorandum to Protestant Monarchs of Europe for the Restoration of the Jews to Palestine*, and called on them to take on the mantle of Cyrus and restore the people of Israel to their native land.⁶ A member of the mission, a Scottish clergyman named Alexander Keith, was the first to speak of 'a people without a country; even as their own land [. . .] is in a great measure a country without a people,' a phrase which eventually came to be transformed into the specious slogan 'a land without people for a people without a land'. So this slogan, notwithstanding its attribution to the Zionist movement, and sometimes to Israel Zangwill, himself a British Zionist and associate of Herzl, wasn't Jewish in origin. It appears in dozens of variations in Restorationist and imperialist tracts and letters, though it later was adopted into the Zionist lexicon of justifications.

Nor were the earliest forms of Jewish proto-Zionism free of British influences. Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai from Sarajevo visited London a decade later, in June 1852, with the intention of encouraging 'the influential men of Israel' to speak to Sultan Abdul Magid about Jewish restoration. His visit, however, brought him into contact with British Restorationists and led to the formation of the Association for Promoting Jewish Settlement in Palestine. As soon as Britain joined in the Crimean War, it founded the Palestine Land Company seeking to settle some 100,000 Jews in Palestine. Alkalai, who until then assumed the traditional role of the *shtadlan* – a 'lobbyist' on behalf of the Jewish community, and expected others to act likewise – published a book in 1857 with a very different slant. *A Plot for the Lord (Goral La'adonai)* started with traditional theological discussions of the messiah but then made some novel practical

4 Abigail Green, *Moses Montefiore: Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero*, Cambridge (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2010), 147.

5 Isaiah Friedman ed., *The Rise of Israel: From Precursors of Zionism to Herzl* (New York: Garland, 1987), 48–49.

6 Green, *Moses Montefiore*, 146.

suggestions, including the formation of a railroad or steamship joint stock company to induce the Sultan to cede Palestine to the Jews as a tributary country.⁷ Very likely, he had picked up some of these practical ideas in London.

BRITISH ARCHAEOLOGY IN PALESTINE

A particularly intriguing British undertaking for gaining influence in Palestine was archaeological excavation. Since the known Christian sites of Palestine were already under the control of either Orthodox or Catholic Christians, by associating themselves with Jewish ruins, British Protestants were able to tap into a remaining religion, and one with the oldest pedigree in the land. Thus, in 1865, the PEF was established in London with the aim of excavating Palestine's Jewish heritage.⁸ In this field, the British could also best the Ottomans, who could not justify their presence in the land with reference to ancient archaeology; as an empire, they had ties everywhere and nowhere. Archaeology made the Ottomans into the occupiers of Palestine while the British, the Protestant inheritors of the Bible, became its 'rightful' possessors.

In early 1867, Captain Charles Warren, then a 26-year-old assistant instructor in surveying at the School of Military Engineering in Chatham, was asked to lead an expedition to Palestine. He received a double commission. The PEF charged him with the exploration of ancient Jerusalem, the surveying of the sites of the Temple and the Holy Sepulchre as well as the city's ancient walls and current gates. Field Marshall Prince George, Commander in Chief of the British Army, ordered him to map Jerusalem's south and south-west environs, the Judean Plains. Warren did all that and even ventured across the Jordan. Archaeology and intelligence gathering in the Middle East went hand in hand until the First World War, and the PEF funds for these projects were comingled. In fact, most came from the coffers of Her Majesty's government. Warren must have had fun titling his book of excavations *Underground Jerusalem*.

In 1875, Warren published *The Land of Promise*, suggesting the formation of a company in the model of the British East India Company tasked with settling in Palestine North African Jews who, in the racialised view typical of colonial officials, were of sufficient moral stature to undertake such a task. Others, among them Claude Conder, Gawler, and in 1870 Laurent Oliphant, continued working for the implementation of Palmerston's plan to return Jews to Palestine.

However, these schemes had two opponents. The first was organised British Jewry. When Colonel Charles Churchill, a resident British officer in Damascus, reached out in June 1841

7 See Avineri, *Modern Zionism*; Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea*; and 'Alkalai Judah Ben Solomon Hai,' <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1247-alkalai-judah-ben-solomon-hai>.

8 John J. Moscrop, *Measuring Jerusalem: The Palestine Exploration Fund and British Interests in the Holy Land* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000).

to Moses Montefiore, President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, he was rebuffed.⁹ Montefiore, though personally connected with major Restorationist figures, was committed to supporting the impoverished Jews of Palestine – for example by helping them become peasants – but he didn't encourage colonisation by Jews coming from elsewhere. Above all, he first wanted *England's* Jews to be emancipated. Only later would the British link up with Zionism, when the Zionist movement – in particular its political wing, Political Zionism – would adopt the British approach.

The second group of opponents were the Ottomans, including the Tanzimat reformers. Palmerston wanted the Ottoman Empire be kept in one piece and under British influence, which he believed required its reform, and he hoped the settlement of Western Jews in Palestine would strengthen the reformers. But the Ottoman reformers' aim was to strengthen the Empire in order to *minimise* the intervention of foreign powers in its internal affairs, a goal that Palmerston's suggestion – to settle Jews who were not Ottoman subjects – would have undercut.¹⁰ Britain linked up with the modern Zionist movement only when it no longer wished to maintain the integrity of the Ottoman Empire but rather joined the plotting to dismember it.

It took a long time for the British imperial claim to speak for Jews and the secular Zionist movement's desire to settle Palestine to connect up. It was hardly a predetermined outcome. It could have been derailed in 1903 if the Uganda Plan – to give a portion of British East Africa to the Jewish people as a homeland – had been pursued. Moreover, the Zionist movement was not originally oriented toward Britain. By 1917, when the Balfour Declaration was issued, Zionist colonisation had already been going on for over three decades. Throughout those years the World Zionist Organization (WZO) was headquartered in Vienna, Cologne and then in Berlin. The Zionist movement's centre of gravity shifted to Britain as a result of its conquest of Palestine, and its head office moved to London soon thereafter. By then, the WZO's Jaffa office and the Zionists had evolved a workable theory of their own colonisation project.

These early differences, however, did not matter in the long run. The British were never much concerned with the specifics of the Jewish colonies, or even about where the Jews came from. James Finn, the first British Consul in Jerusalem, in 1857 expected the nation to emerge from among those Jews the Tsar had transplanted into Central Asia to do their military service,¹¹ while, less than two decades later, Charles Warren looked to the Sephardic Jews who lived in Barbary and Morocco.¹² It was the language of justification used vis-à-vis the Great Powers and the attitudes towards the natives – that is the combined imperial settler colonial dynamic – that the British had developed and put on offer.

9 Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1979), 56.

10 Green, *Moses Montefiore*, 148.

11 Friedman, *The Rise of Israel*, 75.

12 Charles Warren, *The Land of Promise: or Turkey's Guarantee* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1875), 21.

What all British plans shared was a simple four-part credo: Jewish colonisation, under Turkish sovereignty, and British protection, to modernise a backward land. This was to be a British Jewish *mission civilizatrice* and was understood as good for the British, good for Jews, and good for the Turks, who got to keep the Empire in one piece. And the Arabs? Few ever mentioned them. Laurence Oliphant, one of the last imperial Restorationists, disposed of this problem easily. ‘The war-like Bedouin can be driven out, the peasant Arabs reconciled and placed on reserves like the Indians in Canada.’ In any event, Oliphant wrote, the Arabs ‘have very little claim to our sympathy having laid waste to the country, ruined its villages, and plundered its inhabitants until it has been reduced to its present condition’.¹³

CONCLUSION

What then was the character of the relationship between imperial and Christian Restorationism and Zionism? I suggest that English proto-Zionism started earlier than Jewish Zionism which, in time, filled the role, up to a point, that the British imperial Restorationists had already allocated it. In particular, a great deal of the Zionist language of justification was taken from the lexicon of British imperialism. The British did not merely anticipate or shape Zionism. As well as providing a political vehicle and a security umbrella to Zionism, the British part-furnished the vision of a settler project. It might be most accurate to suggest that the British created the political category into which Jews fitted themselves: the only political community in Palestine to be recognised in the Balfour Declaration.

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13 Tuchman, *Bible and Sword*, 273.



CHAIM WEIZMANN, THE GUARDIAN AND THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

AZRIEL BERMANT

The British Prime Minister David Lloyd George believed that Chaim Weizmann would become ‘the one name that will be remembered in Jewish history a thousand years from now’. Hyperbole, for sure, but [Azriel Bermant’s](#) researches in the Guardian Archive at the University of Manchester reveal that he was indeed central to the discussions that led to the Balfour Declaration.

The 100th anniversary is an opportune moment to revisit the role played by Chaim Weizmann, Zionist statesman par excellence, in the decision by the British government to issue the Balfour Declaration in November 1917. In the decades following the Declaration, Weizmann certainly revelled in the adulation of Britain’s political and intellectual giants, including many leading progressives and liberals. David Lloyd George believed that his would become ‘the one name that will be remembered in Jewish history a thousand years from now’. Winston Churchill described him as the ‘ablest and wisest leader of the cause of Zionism’¹. Richard Crossman, the Labour Member of Parliament and minister in the first government of Harold Wilson, believed that through the course of the twentieth century, ‘the histories of Great Britain and of the Jewish people have been tragically yet providentially intertwined – and the man chiefly responsible for this was Chaim Weizmann’².

CHAIM WEIZMANN

Weizmann was born in Minsk, White Russia (Belarus) in 1874. It was there as an 11-year-old boy that he developed his passion for the Zionist cause, while living under Tsarist suppression and the savagery of the pogroms. Weizmann believed that the rebirth of the Jewish people in their own ancestral homeland had to become a reality and he moved to Britain in 1904 believing that the preeminent global power possessed the means to bring this about. In his autobiography, *Trial and Error*, Weizmann wrote that he sensed that Britain might ‘show a genuine sympathy for a movement like ours,’ while also suggesting that Britain provided better prospects for his progression as a scientist. He added that ‘there were no other reasons that I can recall, except my profound admiration for England’³. Yet, as Chaim Raphael has

1 Norman Rose, *Chaim Weizmann* (New York: Viking, 1986), 246.

2 Richard Crossman, *A nation reborn: the Israel of Weizmann, Benin and Ben-Gurion* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1960), 13.

3 Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error: the Autobiography of Chaim Weizmann* (London: H. Hamilton, 1949), 124.

pointed out in his fascinating essay, 'Chaim Weizmann: The Revelation of the Letters,' the Zionist leader was being disingenuous⁴. A clue to Weizmann's real intentions can be found in a 20 October 1903 report he sent to Menahem Ussishkin and other Zionist leaders of the time, in which he wrote:

I brought the impression away from London that we can accomplish a great deal there. We can win over influential circles; we must manifest our desire for Palestine with deeds rather than shallow phrases. We must place our political activities – or call it what you will, I simply call it propaganda – in the hands of first-rate men, who will patiently win over the sympathies of Europe ...⁵

In January 1906 Weizmann was introduced by Anglo-Jewish leader Charles Dreyfus to Arthur James Balfour, the leader of the Conservative Party. Balfour asked Weizmann why some Zionists were fiercely opposed to the idea of Uganda as a home for the Jews. Weizmann responded that 'the Uganda offer was well meant' but the Jews 'have never accepted defeat and have never forsaken the memory of Palestine'. At the end of the meeting, Balfour stated, 'It is curious. The Jews I meet are quite different.' Weizmann countered, 'Mr. Balfour, you meet the wrong kind of Jews.'⁶

C.P. SCOTT AND THE GUARDIAN

By October 1914, Weizmann was convinced that the Allies would emerge victorious in the First World War, predicting that 'Palestine will fall within the influence of England' and expressed his hope that 'England will understand the Zionists better than anyone else'⁷. A few weeks earlier, on 16 September 1914, Weizmann recorded in his diary that he had met C.P. Scott, the editor of *The Manchester Guardian* (later, *The Guardian*) who was 'quite prepared to help ... in any endeavour in favour of the Jews ... Scott carries great weight and he may be useful'.⁸ This was something of an understatement.

Two months later, Weizmann would write to Scott, arguing that 'should Palestine fall within the sphere of British influence and should Britain encourage a Jewish settlement there, as a British dependency, we could have in 25-30 years about a million Jews out there, perhaps more; they would develop the country, bring back civilisation to it, and form a very effective guard of the Suez canal and – perhaps be a valuable protection against an aggression from

4 Chaim Raphael, *Chaim Weizmann: The Revelation of the Letters* (London: The Anglo-Israel Association, 1974), 246.

5 Meyer W. Weisgal, ed., *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, Volume III, Series A (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 68.

6 Rose, *Chaim Weizmann*, 102.

7 Weisgal, *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, Volume III, Series A, 25.

8 *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Constantinople ... Palestine can easily become an Asiatic Belgium in the hands of the Jews'.⁹

By the end of November 1914, Scott had informed Weizmann of his discussions about Palestine with the British Prime Minister Lloyd George, telling him that the British leader wanted to see Weizmann in the presence of cabinet minister Herbert Samuel. Following his meeting with Samuel, Weizmann wrote to Scott in great excitement on 13 December 1914 about Samuel's 'plans for the establishment of a Jewish community in Palestine under the British protectorate'. Weizmann told Scott that he and the entire Zionist Movement was in his debt for organising the meeting.¹⁰ Weizmann's relationship with Scott was vital in securing *The Manchester Guardian's* support for Zionist aspirations in the months before the Balfour Declaration. In a letter to Scott on 14 February 1916, the president of the English Zionist Federation wrote that it was 'a source of comfort and consolation ... to find your great journal so sympathetic both towards the woes and the hopes of the people of Israel ... We could expect nothing different from an organ which has consistently stood for the most enlightened Liberalism'¹¹. In July 1929, on the occasion of Scott's retirement as editor, Isidor Sandler of the Manchester Zionist Association wrote to him expressing gratitude 'for the great part you have taken in the promulgation of the now famous Balfour Declaration'¹². Scott's response to Sandler was emphatic: 'From the first day that I discussed the Zionist project with my old friend Dr. Weizmann I was convinced of its value not only for the Jewish people but for other nations as a connecting link between East and West.'¹³ Here was early evidence of Weizmann's apparent ability to win over Britain's political and intellectual classes on the question of a Jewish homeland.

WEIZMANN AND LONDON

Fascinatingly, Crossman believed that the British ruling classes were attracted to Weizmann not because of his love of Britain but rather because of his Jewishness:

The attraction of Weizmann for the British was precisely that he was the most Jewish Jew we had met. He impressed us because he was not Western, because he was not assimilated, because he was utterly proud to be a Russian Jew from the Pale, because he had no feeling of double

9 *Ibid.*, 38.

10 *Ibid.*, 79-80.

11 The Guardian Archive, C.P. Scott Papers, Folder Ref: 334/67-152, Ref: 334/73, 14 February 1916. Accessed at the John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester.

12 The Guardian Archive, Folder Ref: 135/233-591, Ref: 135/570, 31 July 1929.

13 The Guardian Archive, Folder Ref: 135/233-591, Ref: 135/571, 2 August 1929.

loyalty, because he knew only one patriotism, the love of a country that did not yet exist.¹⁴

According to this view, Weizmann's talent was in convincing the British political and intellectual classes that the British and Jewish peoples were united by common interests and a shared destiny. Yet, as Avi Shlaim has argued in *The Iron Wall*, Weizmann was mistaken in believing that the convergence of British and Jewish interests would stand the test of time. As Britain withdrew from the promises made in the Balfour Declaration, Weizmann became deeply disillusioned with the British leadership. In a letter to Lord George Lloyd, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, in November 1940, Weizmann could not hide his despair:

The implementation of a new part of the White Paper under a Government mostly composed of men who have publicly condemned it would tell world Jewry that Great Britain has definitely abandoned them to the Arabs, to be a hopeless minority in a Palestinian Arab state ... it would deal a most severe blow to Jewish co-operation with Great Britain.¹⁵

Yet Weizmann clung to the belief that there was no other option but to continue working with London as the Mandatory power. The Zionist leadership perceived the British White Paper of 1939 with its restrictions on Jewish immigration as a severe act of betrayal. Even so, in a letter to Churchill in April 1943, Weizmann would write:

I refuse to give up this hope. I still believe that the final word of Great Britain in regard to Palestine and the Jews has not yet been spoken. The slaughter of European Jewry can only be redeemed by establishing Palestine as a Jewish country.¹⁶

The State of Israel would eventually be established five years later, but it would take many years for Britain's relationship with Israel to fully recover from the tumultuous Mandate period. Tragically, this was something that Weizmann never lived to see. He died on 9 November 1952.

Inevitably, with the passage of time, the traditional narrative about Weizmann has frayed at the edges. As Britain's policy in the Middle East has been re-examined, scholars have questioned whether the role of Zionist leaders such as Weizmann have been exaggerated, while the real motivations of British statesmen have been overlooked. Thus, it is argued that British politicians such as Balfour and Samuel were only too happy to support Weizmann in his propaganda campaign, believing that support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine would result in the intervention of Jewry on behalf of the British war effort against Germany. According

14 Crossman, *A nation reborn*, 41. Crossman also noted that Weizmann 'was a Jew who obviously preferred the company of British Gentiles to that of assimilated Jews.' Weizmann was particularly scathing of assimilated German Jews: they turned their back on their fellow Jews while seeking to ingratiate themselves with their host society yet they were never recognised as Germans.

15 The Guardian Archive, W.P. Crozier Papers, Folder Ref: 145/30-44, Ref: 145/40/314a, 22 November 1940.

16 The Guardian Archive, Lewis Namier Papers, Folder Ref: B/N8A/1-150, Ref: B/N8A/204, 2 April 1943.

to this thesis, the Balfour Declaration was influenced less by British strategic interests or high-minded support for Zionism but rather by anti-Semitic perceptions that world Jewry was a force which could rally public opinion in the US and Europe behind Britain. In other words, Weizmann was actually used by the British, but he was hardly an ‘unwitting pawn’.¹⁷ It is possible that Weizmann played on such fears and anti-Semitic images of Jewish power to enlist British support for Zionist aspirations.¹⁸

Balfour himself harboured anti-Semitic prejudices which Weizmann knew only too well. In one conversation, Balfour admitted that he shared many of the anti-Semitic ideas held by his friend Cosima Wagner (the widow of the notoriously anti-Semitic German composer Richard Wagner) and had in the past referred to Anglo-Jewry as an alien presence, ‘a people apart’.¹⁹ In Weizmann’s defence, one has to point out that he was operating in a different era when genteel anti-Semitic prejudice was rife. Weizmann bore such prejudice with equanimity.²⁰ Of greater consequence in his eyes and in those of his contemporaries was Balfour’s support for the rebirth of the ancestral Jewish homeland in Palestine.

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17 For example, this is an argument advanced by James Renton in *The Zionist Masquerade: The Birth of the Anglo-Zionist Alliance, 1914–1918* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007).

18 Jonathan Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 366. The noted Israeli historian, Tom Segev, argued in his *New York Times* review of Schneer’s book that ‘Weizmann successfully pretended that the Jews were in fact turning the wheels of history. For once, the anti-Semitic image of the Jews proved useful — they were believed to be so maliciously dangerous that one would do best to acquire them as allies rather than as enemies’. See Tom Segev, ‘View with Favour,’ *New York Times*, August 20, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/books/review/Segev-t.html?mcubz=1>.

19 Renton, *The Zionist Masquerade*, 18.

20 Rose, *Chaim Weizmann*, 86.



BRITISH POLICY IN PALESTINE 1917–1925

JAMES SORENE

Despite issuing the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and subsequently obtaining the Mandate for Palestine from the League of Nations, the British Government never clearly defined the concept of a Jewish National Home or proposed a concrete policy plan to implement it. In this essay focusing on the years following the Declaration, BICOM CEO [James Sorene](#) argues that this absence of British policy left both Jewish and Arab communities confused and frustrated and ultimately had tragic consequences.

INTRODUCTION

The Balfour Declaration was signed and delivered in London in November 1917 but the Mandate from the League of Nations did not officially begin until September 1923. The Mandate was granted to Britain with the express purpose of ‘putting into effect’ the Balfour Declaration and establishing a Jewish National Home in Palestine, but the first years of British rule amounted to an unsuccessful attempt to reframe this objective in order to meet the concerns and aspirations of the Arab population. As a result, the British government never clearly defined the concept of a Jewish National Home or proposed a concrete policy plan. Moreover, despite concluding early on that the Arabs would not compromise in accepting any kind of Jewish homeland, the British never attempted to impose a solution, preferring instead to fudge the issue and muddle through, which created the impression that British government policy was always evolving and open to amendment. The absence of a clear plan in the early years led the Arab and Jewish communities to function increasingly autonomously and incubate their conflict with tragic consequences.

1917–1920: MILITARY ADMINISTRATION

As the leaders of the World Zionist Organisation celebrated the Declaration, it fell immediately to British civil servants and soldiers to make it a reality on the ground. When General Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem in late November 1917 a British military administration was established from a curious assortment of army officers and members of the British civil service based in Egypt. Yet the administration was impaired on a number of levels. Its day-to-day operation was guided by the principle of the *status quo ante bellum* laid down in the manual

of military law which led to very little activity taking place to develop the Jewish National Home. Moreover, the British lacked trained administrators and suffered from organisational friction between competing centres of power in the Foreign Office and Colonial Office which contributed to the confusion about aims and objectives. The government produced no strategy to implement the Jewish National Home policy and the Balfour Declaration was not officially announced in Palestine as the new policy of the British government until 1920.

The military administration was plunged into crisis when a series of demonstrations in what was the first large scale Arab nationalist activity in Palestine turned violent in February, March and April 1920. The April riots coincided with the war Allies meeting in San Remo to sign a peace deal with Turkey and grant the Palestine Mandate to Britain to implement the Declaration. During the festival of Nebi Musa and Passover, Arab mobs attacked the Jewish residents of the Old City of Jerusalem. The unrest continued for four days and nine people were killed and 244 wounded. The subsequent Commission of Inquiry criticised soldiers for being slow to restore order and negligent in preventing renewed fighting. The controversy led the government to disband the military administration and appoint Sir Herbert Samuel as the first High Commissioner of a new civilian administration.

CIVIL ADMINISTRATION

Samuel saw the ideal of a Jewish state as a distant dream and a long-term objective to be achieved incrementally. On a previous visit to Palestine in early 1920 he was impressed by the strength and seriousness of Arab hostility to Zionism but was convinced that the two movements could be reconciled. He wrote to Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon that his policy would be passive, to create the conditions for the Zionists to carry out their work, to facilitate immigration and leave the Zionists to their own resources.¹ Samuel arrived in June 1920 and took immediate steps to implement the Jewish National Home policy. He opened the country to Jewish immigration and began an extensive road-building programme to employ some of the new arrivals. In July 1920 Samuel met Arab notables in Jerusalem and Haifa and stressed that the gradual establishment of a Jewish National Home would not affect their civil or religious rights.

When Feisal's rule was crushed by the French in Syria, the Arab nationalists in Palestine were thrown into disarray with their original goal to unite with Syria now unattainable. In July 1920 they decided to concentrate all their efforts in Palestine. The third Palestinian Congress was held in Haifa on 13 December and the delegates elected an Arab Executive and demanded a native government elected by the pre-war Arabic speaking population. It is clear from their discussions that existing governing arrangements were seen as temporary and open to negotiation.

1 Bernard Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine 1917-1929* (London: B. Blackwell, 1978), 87.

In February 1921, Samuel decided to reach out to the Arab Executive and met with them to discuss the draft text of the League of Nations Mandate. He asked them to accept the current draft in return for official government recognition, but they refused. The Zionists were very critical of Samuel's reconciliation attempts in light of widespread anti-Zionist agitation by the Arab leadership.

CHURCHILL TAKES CHARGE

In early 1921 the Colonial Office took over responsibility for Palestine from the Foreign Office. Winston Churchill was Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs and the Middle East department was led by Sir John Shuckburgh with T. E Lawrence as Arab advisor and Richard Meinertzhagen as military advisor. In March, Churchill visited Palestine following his attendance at a major imperial conference on Middle East policy in Cairo where it was decided to remove a large chunk of the Palestine Mandate territory east of the Jordan River and create a new kingdom of Transjordan to be ruled by Feisal's brother Abdullah. Churchill met the Arab Executive and was given a memorandum explaining their objections to Zionism and their demand for a native government. One section was clearly influenced by European antisemitic thought and is worth quoting at length:

The Jews have been amongst the most active advocates of destruction in many lands, especially where their influential positions have enabled them to do more harm ... the defeat of Germany must also be put at their door ... We have seen a book entitled 'the Jewish Peril' which should be read by everyone who still doubts the pernicious motives of the Jews ...²

This mode of expression probably led Churchill to conclude that the Executive's fears were driven by prejudice and misunderstanding that could be dealt with in time. A separate memorandum from the Haifa Arab delegation simply rejected outright the idea of transforming Palestine into a home for the Jews.

Churchill told the Arab Executive that the Declaration was manifestly right but he did offer an interesting perspective on Britain's long-term strategy when he said that 'the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jews did not mean to make Palestine the National Home for the Jews'.³ Was this the glimmer of an idea that the Jewish National Home would only take up a portion of the Mandate area? If that was Churchill's intention he didn't expand on it. The idea of partitioning the land only gained momentum in 1937 after several rounds of more serious violence. At this stage Churchill and his officials talked in terms of the civil and religious rights of the Arab community, echoing the language of the Declaration, and avoiding any

² *Ibid.*, 97.

³ Yehoshua Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian Arab National Movement 1917-29*, Vol. 1 (London: Cass, 1974), 96.

reference to political rights and national self-determination for the Arab community. When he met the Zionist leadership Churchill stressed the need for Arab-Jewish friendship and said that the Jewish people ‘cannot suffer the suspicion that it wishes to deny another nation its rights’. If British policymakers had a vision at all it was one of incremental Jewish immigration leading to economic growth that would help persuade the Arabs of the benefits of a Jewish National Home. Churchill left Palestine believing that Arab nationalism was not a political movement with widespread support and hoped that his reassurances assuaged Arab opposition to Zionism. On the contrary, his revised formulation about a Jewish National Home *in* Palestine, and not *in all of* Palestine, reinforced the view among the Arab leadership that nothing was set in stone and the Jewish National Home policy was still up for negotiation.

THE JAFFA RIOTS AND A NEW POLICY

From 1 May and 7 May 1921 violent disturbances broke out in Jaffa and spread around the country. On 3 May Samuel reluctantly declared martial law. The nature and scale of the violence was shocking – 47 Jews and 48 Arabs killed and 146 Jews and 73 Arabs wounded. Samuel concluded that his best option was to immediately suspend Jewish immigration as a concession to Arab concerns, much to the fury of Zionist leaders who believed he was rewarding violence rather than punishing its instigators. London was unimpressed at the speed of Samuel’s reaction. One of Churchill’s senior advisors sent a telegram to Samuel on 14 May 14 stating that ‘the present agitation is doubtless engineered in the hope of frightening us out of our Zionist policy ... we must firmly maintain law and order and make concessions on their merits and not under duress’.

Samuel decided that he needed to make a public statement about British policy in Palestine in order reduce tensions. On 3 June 3 he explicitly stated that the Declaration did not mean Jewish government and that the true meaning of the Declaration was a limited number of Jews could come to Palestine to develop it to the advantage of all its inhabitants. Samuel described his new thinking in a memo to Churchill. He believed ‘a serious attempt must be made to arrive at an understanding with the opponents of Zionist policy even at considerable sacrifices ... the only alternative is a policy of coercion’. On 14 June Churchill told Parliament that ‘no Jews would be allowed into Palestine unless they could be provided for by the expanding wealth and development of the resources of the country’. This was the first time that immigration was linked to Palestine’s economy and its ability to cope with an expanding population, a principle that was developed further in the 1922 White Paper.

For the Zionist leaders these new policy pronouncements were a disaster. Zionism existed to build a Jewish homeland and provide a safe haven for Jewish refugees fleeing persecution, particularly in Eastern Europe. Free immigration was the central tenet of the Zionist

programme and the British government cancelled it. The Zionists argued that the new formulation made no sense. Jewish immigrants to Palestine were provided for by the Zionist organisations and largely worked in agriculture. Rather than draining the public purse, Jewish immigration boosted the economy. In private Churchill assured Chaim Weizmann that his recent statements did not amount to a reinterpretation of the Declaration and did not exclude the possibility of an eventual Jewish majority in Palestine.

On 18 August 1921 the British cabinet discussed a memorandum from Churchill and concluded that the honour of the British government was bound up with the Declaration, yet because of it peace was impossible.⁴ The result of the inconsistency was, as one cabinet minister described it, to estrange the Arabs and the Jews ‘while involving us in futile military expenditure’.⁵ The issue of cost was bearing down on the government in light of the sizeable debts incurred during World War 1 and a vocal newspaper campaign demanding that the Britain give up the Palestine mandate and save money.

The Commission of Investigation after the May riots was published in October 1921 and concluded that the violence was caused by discontent with the government partially due to its Jewish National Home policy and partially due to an Arab misunderstanding of it and the manner in which it is interpreted and sought to be applied. The Middle East department in the Colonial Office advised that a detailed and definitive statement of government policy was crucial to allay suspicion and prevent further violence. After extensive consultations with Zionist and Arab leaders it was clear that a deadlock had been reached. The Zionists viewed the June statements as a serious erosion of the promise of the Declaration and refused to accept it. The Arab leaders were fundamentally opposed to the premise of the Declaration and large scale Jewish immigration.

THE JUNE 1922 WHITE PAPER

The Colonial office hoped that a White paper would help break the deadlock and set out future British policy in Palestine. It was built on two principles: Churchill’s comment in 1921 that not all of Palestine would become the Jewish National Home; and a limit to Jewish immigration linked to economic capacity. The document explicitly recognised the Jewish connection to the land, describing the Jewish National Home as a ‘centre for the Jewish people to take an interest and a pride’. Yet whilst the White Paper accepted that the build-up of the Jewish centre would necessitate immigration, it stated that ‘this immigration cannot be so great in volume as to exceed whatever may be the economic capacity of the country’. The White Paper’s

4 Conclusions of a meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street 18 August 1921, p. 8, point (iv) National Archives Catalogue Reference CAB/23/26 0025.

5 Doreen Ingrams, *The Palestine Papers 1917-22 – Seeds of Conflict* (London: George Braziller, 1972), 144.

publication was followed by the formal acceptance of the writ of the British mandate by the League of Nations on 24 July. The Council of the League of Nations legally confirmed Britain as the Mandatory power for Palestine, and stated that ‘the Mandatory shall be responsible for placing the country under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home,’ and that ‘an appropriate Jewish agency shall be recognised as a public body for the purpose of advising and co-operating with the Administration of Palestine in such economic, social and other matters as may affect the establishment of the Jewish national home’. The Council also provided ‘recognition ... to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country’. This should have been a moment of celebration for the Zionist enterprise as the League of Nations enshrined the concept of the Jewish National Home in Palestine in international law. But they believed that the practical implementation of the policy was being scaled down with the publication of the new White Paper that did nothing to reconcile the parties. The Arabs rejected the White paper on the grounds that it recognised a Jewish historic connection to the land and endorsed further Jewish immigration. The Zionists decided to accept the White Paper grudgingly, but for their leaders this was a watershed moment that convinced them that the build-up of a Jewish National Home would only come about as a result of their own initiative.

Samuel presented a number of ideas to create representative institutions for the communities in Palestine but all were rejected by the Arabs due to their fundamental objection to the purpose of the mandate. All his proposals were born of a paradox that any institution had to grant the Arabs a measure of autonomy in order to be accepted whilst not giving them the power to solve their grievances and halt the development of the Jewish National Home. The Colonial Office instructed Samuel not to repeat his attempts to create national institutions and as a result the Arab and Jewish institutions led their communities in isolation and dealt separately with the Mandate government. Samuel ended his term as High Commissioner in 1925 and remained true to his initial policy of a gradual build-up of a Jewish National Home. He privately suggested it might one day reach 40 per cent of the population. His final report to London stated that the government had not done enough to help the Zionists and that the build-up of the Jewish National Home ‘has not been the work of any government but the outcome of the energy and enterprise of the Jewish people in Palestine.’⁶

Britain was stuck. Committed to the mandate and the Declaration, neither politicians nor officials could find a new way forward. There were strong strategic interests in maintaining British rule in Palestine for the long-term protection of the Empire and the country was an important part of British communication in the Middle East, integral to the defence of Suez and free shipping to India as well as an important link in air traffic to India and the East.

6 Elie Kedourie and Sylvia Haim, *Zionism and Arabism in Palestine and Israel* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1982), 91.

In 1923, Sir John Shuckburgh, head of the Colonial Office Middle East Department, confided to a colleague, ‘We saw them [Jewish and Arab leaders] separately and felt we were telling them different things ... to the Arabs that the Zionist policy was not such a serious matter, that they were exaggerating its importance; to the Jews the toning down of the Balfour Declaration did not mean a diminution of their hopes.’⁷ The result of these conflicting assurances was increased communal autonomy and polarisation between two completely different visions for the same small piece of land.

Shuckburgh’s admission is striking for its honesty and for how early in the mandate period it was expressed. The cabinet minutes and private correspondence of the leading British figures in this drama reveal that they understood as early as 1921 that the inherent contradiction of their policy would lead to conflict. Yet it took another 16 years for a concrete government proposal to partition Palestine to take shape in what was the brutal aftermath of the first wave of the Arab revolt in 1937. Did the British underestimate Arab Nationalism in Palestine or rather overstate their ability to persuade the Arab community to compromise?

The British government and the civil administration engineered a situation whereby their actions and words created the impression that the Jewish National Home policy was not fixed but constantly evolving and changing. The Arabs saw this as an opportunity, and believed that if they continued to stand firm in their resistance to Jewish immigration – rejecting a Jewish National Home and the Jewish connection to Palestine – they would ultimately prevail. The repeated restatements of British policy, including the allocation of significant territory to create Transjordan and the High Commissioner’s response to violent disturbances reinforced this view. The Zionists learnt to adapt to each twist and turn in British policy, however disappointing. Their strategic goal was Jewish self-determination and they compromised on almost every issue to achieve it, accepting partition in 1937 and 1947 while investing significant resources into training and preparing for conflict. Their reward was a partition plan approved by the UN that laid the foundation for the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

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⁷ Evyatar Friesel, ‘British Officials on the situation in Palestine, 1923,’ *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 23 (Spring 1987): 194.



'MACK': AARON AARONSOHN, THE NILI INTELLIGENCE NETWORK AND THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

EFRAIM HALEVY

NILI – an acronym for the biblical Hebrew phrase, Netzakh Yisrael Lo Yeshaker, meaning ‘The Eternal One of Israel will not Lie’ – was the World War One Jewish spy network in Palestine. In this fascinating study, [Efraim Halevy](#), the former head of Mossad, argues that both the victory of the British Army led by General Allenby and the Balfour Declaration itself were in good measure the result of the first successful foray of the Jewish people into modern international intelligence-gathering and espionage.

In May 1916, London and Paris reached a secret agreement on the future of the region which later came to be known as the Sykes–Picot Agreement, named after the two officials who negotiated it. The cause of the Jewish people was absent from that document, even though by that time the World Zionist Organisation led by Dr Chaim Weizmann (who was then living in Manchester) was feverishly trying to get the British government to recognise the interests of the Jews in their historic birthplace from which they had been exiled almost two thousand years before. Weizmann, himself a brilliant Doctor of Biochemistry, was already making a significant contribution to the British war effort by successfully developing a germ that would be key in producing acetone, which was a vital component facilitating the production of explosives. He served in a senior position in the laboratories of the British Admiralty and devoted enormous time and energy in lobbying senior British political figures to meet the desires and rights of the Jewish people in any post-war construction of future Palestine. Yet without in any way detracting from Weizmann’s unique contribution to the war effort and to the network of contacts he created in London to further the political aims of the Zionist movement, it was beyond his capacity to influence events on the ground in Palestine during this critical war period.

Already by mid-1915, the British and French were conspiring to divide the territorial spoils that might fall into their hands should they win the war, and were simultaneously negotiating with various Arab and Muslim leaders in the Arabian peninsula and promising them heaven and earth if they were to help overthrow the Ottoman rule that presided over the entire ‘Middle East’. However, the complex situation in Palestine in the midst of World War One by no means pointed to an all-out victory for the Allies.

The Turks / Ottomans who still ruled over much of the region – long described by the British and French as ‘the sick man of Europe’ – had not given up the fight. Djemal Pasha, the Ottoman Viceroy residing in Damascus, ruled over the entire area from Syria to the Arabian Peninsula, and was not indifferent to the activities of the approximately 50,000 Jews living in Palestine.

Professor Amnon Cohen, an Israel Prize laureate and the leading Israeli authority on the Ottoman period, argues that Pasha paid special attention to three potentially subversive threats in the region, namely, the Christian religious community in Lebanon, Muslim irredentist players, and the Zionist faction in Palestine. The Pasha made it crystal clear to all that the Ottoman Empire was allied to Germany and was determined to win the war. The Turks also forcibly recruited many young Jews into the army.¹

INTELLIGENCE IN WORLD WAR ONE

Jewish patriots joined the armed forces of Britain, France and Germany and saw combat on both sides of the divide. There was no Jewish international unity in World War One – contrary to what emerged in World War Two. The Jewish ‘issue’ and its resolution seemed almost absent from the international agenda.

From the outset of World War One intelligence-gathering became critically important to all sides. The Ottoman Empire naturally had in place a vast system of control over potentially disloyal elements within the territories under its rule. London and Paris were jockeying to succeed Istanbul and its ally Berlin, whose basic goal was to ensure its interests the strategic south-eastern flank under Ottoman rule. On the other side of the divide Britain and France, and later the US, sought to cultivate support within areas under Ottoman control in anticipation of the ultimate fall of the Empire at the end of the war.

What was required was reliable military information concerning the Ottomans and their allies, detailed local knowledge of the areas under Ottoman rule, a list of high-level contacts with local players (such as Princes, Sheiks, Tribes etc.), and an intimate understanding of the conflicting interests between them. It also required identifying local players with combat capabilities and the provision of on-the-spot strategic and military guidance for them. All of this could only be handled by intelligence services and seasoned intelligence officers with experience in the field.

The most prominent was T.E. Lawrence from Great Britain – ‘Lawrence of Arabia’. But he was not alone; there was Curt Prufer from Berlin, who rose to prominence in World War

1 The early life of David Ben-Gurion, the future founding father of Jewish Independence in 1948 with the creation of Israel was both significant and revelatory in this regard. He had arrived in Palestine in 1906, had quickly risen to prominence as a political and Zionist leader, and had insisted on including the aim of Jewish independence in the initial programme of the Zionist movement (Poalei Zion) of which he became a leader. However his initial approach led him to believe that attaining political power in Ottoman Palestine required deep knowledge of the governing system in advance of a possible attempt to enter it at some level and work ‘within it’ to obtain achievements. Hence his decision to study and master the Turkish language, enrol as a student of law at a Turkish University and then return to Palestine and work himself up the ladder. He obviously did not foresee World War One and when it did break out he was among the local leaders to be expelled from the land to Cairo whence he found his way to the United States. He did not even get a chance to play any leadership role during the war – the Jewish community had to contend with the situation without him and anyone else of his stature. Djemal Pasha had been very swift and very effective as far as the Jewish community was concerned.

One and spent part of his time in Jerusalem and who was active on many fronts; and there was William Yale from the Standard Oil Company of New York, who doubled up as an intelligence officer. There was also Edouard Bremond of France, who primarily operated in the Arabian Peninsula.

These figures, together with Djemal Pasha, provide the backbone of a 2010 book titled *Lawrence in Arabia* by Scott Anderson. In a riveting five hundred pages, Anderson places intelligence, in all its facets, centre stage. Anderson also included in this short list one more name, Aaron Aaronsohn, who played a crucial role in determining the results of World War One in the Middle East as the architect of the Jewish spy network, NILI.

THE ORIGINS OF NILI

The vast majority of the Jewish community in Palestine was determined not to confront the powers that be, let alone to play any role in bringing down the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, this approach made possible a relatively friendly liaison between the German Airforce and the Jews during the war. Five German light aircraft squadrons operated from a number of strips from Beersheva to the Jezreel valley and even further north. Towards the end of the First World War – as the Turks were being pushed out of Palestine, Lebanon and Syria – the last remaining squadron moved its command post to Kibbutz Degania, the first Kibbutz to be established in Palestine.² Ultimately, the Jewish community lacked any strong and courageous leadership, and it was left to individuals to assume responsibility at high personal risk for determining a course of action that would lead to a total change in the fortunes of the war in the Middle East.

2 The above data on the German Air presence in Palestine appeared in a weekly (Hebrew) blog of Professor David Assaf, Emeritus Professor at Tel Aviv University, in which he quoted from a publication of Dr. Dov Gavish, a senior lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Two other examples of the friendly relations between Germany and the Jews of the Holy Land: In Scott Anderson, *In Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the making of the modern Middle East* (London: Atlantic Books, 2014), Anderson tells of a rare recruitment by German spymaster Curt Prufer who befriended a young immigrant doctor at the Hadassah Hospital on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem. The doctor, known to her friends as ‘Fanny’ willingly accepted an assignment to travel to Cairo and was briefed to make contact with British officers there. She was initially very successful and served her handler-cum lover well but aroused suspicion and the mission came to an end. She was ultimately able to return to Jerusalem after the war and resume her role as a Hadassah doctor. Her name was Mina Weizmann, the younger sister of Chaim Weizmann, the first President of Israel. She died young and was buried in the Old Tel Aviv cemetery in Trumpeldor Street in the heart of Tel Aviv. While no mention of her was ever made in any of the Weizmann family autobiographies, a few years ago Reuma Weizmann, the widow of President Ezer Weizman (Chaim and Mina’s nephew) was reported to have sought out Mina’s Grave and laid a bouquet of flowers. More information on the story is here <https://faroutliers.wordpress.com/2014/02/14/minna-weizmann-chaims-invisible-sister/>. Also, in 2016 the philatelist community (stamp lovers) in Israel celebrated a hundred years of aerial activity in Palestine. The Postal service issued a stamp commemorating the event with the photograph of a pilot in his gear. Neither his name nor his origin are mentioned on the stamp, but he was Hauptman (Captain) Franz Josef Walz, the commander of the German air contingent in Palestine during World War One. A true friend of the harassed Jewish community in Palestine during World War One and a squadron commander of the German Luftwaffe in World War Two, he was shot down when operating in Russian airspace and died in a Russian prisoner of war hospital.

Enter a small group of fearless youngsters in their 20s and a leader who came forward to take command and control of one of the most dangerous intelligence operations in the history of the Jewish people. First among them was Aaron Aaronsohn, an agronomist who had established a research station at the coastal spot of Atlit, near the village of Zichron Yaakov, and who had previously played a major role in overcoming a plague of locusts that descended on large tracts of land in Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. In fact, after meeting him in the Ottoman headquarters in Damascus in 1915, Djemal Pasha appointed Aaronsohn to the post of overall supervisor of the anti-locust campaign. Aaronsohn and Avshalom Feinberg, his assistant in his research station, created a close-knit intelligence gathering group called NILI, an acronym for the biblical Hebrew phrase, *Netzakh Yisrael Lo Yeshaker*, meaning 'The Eternal One of Israel will not Lie'. Coming from 30 families at most in the Hadera/Zichron Yaakov area and the village of Rishon LeTzion, NILI provided invaluable tactical and strategic information to those British forces based in Cairo who were planning to launch a military campaign to push the Ottoman Army northwards to the Syrian-Turkish border. This campaign was to materialise only two years later.

What were Aaronsohn and his team out to achieve? They believed that they could play a decisive role in freeing Palestine from the Ottoman yoke and facilitating a British military victory. They entertained high hopes that in the event of a British victory over the Ottoman Empire in the Holy Land, the Jewish people might be rewarded for their contribution to the victory in the form of Jewish self-rule or even independence.

In taking their fateful decision to launch a secret operation to gather military and strategic information on Ottoman rule in Palestine, NILI understood that they were engaged in a Herculean effort to reverse the state of play in the Middle East arena in wartime, and to translate success into a strategic opportunity. They must have also understood that they were placing the entire Jewish population in Palestine in physical jeopardy. During the war, beginning in 1915, the Ottomans killed over a million citizens of Armenian extraction living under their rule. The magnitude of that military operation, and the ferocity with which it was carried out, must have chilled the nerves of the approximately 50,000 Jews residing in the Holy Land.

Indeed as the operations of NILI became known, they were treated by many Jews as 'outcasts' and for years were labeled as '*porshim*' – people who had left the fold and who had irresponsibly risked the lives of the entire Jewish community in the Holy Land. They were virtually boycotted by the majority of Palestinian Jews for many years after the war and at best have been treated as no more than a footnote to history.

However, NILI not only provided tactical data but also obtained strategically important information and passed it to the political echelons in Whitehall. They gleaned this information from physical observation and from data supplied by human sources who had infiltrated into the Ottoman Army. Their intelligence – as it came from highly motivated Jewish youngsters – was considered far more reliable than if it had arrived via randomly recruited local low-level Arab sources.

AARON AARONSOHN

The personality of Aaronsohn was at once captivating and, for some, objectionable. He did not confine himself to running the operation from his research station, but also visited Cairo from time to time and became widely known to all the senior echelons of the British 'Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau' (EMSIB). He was a prolific writer on agronomic and related subjects and one of his papers, describing the economy of Palestine, formed the basis of an authoritative document that was widely distributed to British officers. He travelled to Europe and met Baron Rothschild in Paris and William Yale, the American Intelligence officer. In Cairo he befriended both Sir Mark Sykes and William Ormsby Gore, both young British members of Parliament then seconded to Cairo to work with senior officers in intelligence and top level commanders of the British forces in the Middle East, and who were later to play major roles in the issuance of the Balfour Declaration. Both developed a profound impression of Aaronsohn and his abilities.

Aaronsohn did not consider himself beholden or subordinate to the leadership of the international Zionist movement led by Weizmann. Initially he utterly rejected the efforts of the latter to bring him and NILI under the umbrella of the Zionist leadership and rejected demands levelled at him to toe the official line. This was especially significant when he met Lawrence and contradicted the line of Arab-Jewish coexistence in future Palestine less than half a year before the Balfour Declaration, telling Lawrence in no uncertain terms that the Jewish and Arab styles of life were virtually incompatible. Lawrence retorted by saying the Jews had only two choices – 'either coexist or see their throats cut'. In retrospect, the stormy meeting with Aaronsohn had no adverse effect on Lawrence's support for the Zionist cause. At the 1922 Cairo Conference, Lawrence – who was then an advisor to the Secretary of the Colonies, Winston Churchill – was active in ensuring that the crowning of Abdullah as ruler of Trans-Jordan was conditional on his acceptance of a Jewish national home within western Palestine.³ To this end, Lawrence secured a pledge from Abdullah's brother Faisal that 'all necessary measures' would be taken 'to encourage and stimulate immigration of Jews into Palestine on a large scale'. Lawrence advised Churchill that the Balfour Declaration of 1917 was compatible with commitments made to Arab leaders at the time.

When Weizmann expressed fear that Aaronsohn might wreck the effort to get the Balfour Declaration approved, Aaronsohn countered by threatening to disband NILI. After messages he sent to Weizmann to the effect were made known to British officers in Cairo they rushed to ask London to calm him.

That Aaronsohn was a stormy petrel was not in doubt; that he was considered indispensable was no less true. Ultimately, NILI evolved into an intelligence service bereft of a country or a political master.

3 Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews: A Lifelong Friendship* (London: Holt Paperbacks, 2008).

NILI'S INFLUENCE ON THE BRITISH WAR EFFORT

The NILI operation was relatively short-lived. Yet between the years 1915–1917, until they were exposed, they were able to make the difference between victory and defeat for the British Army led by General Edmund Allenby.

A 2010 publication by the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) covering its 40 year history from 1909 to 1949 demonstrated the utility of NILI activities to the British war effort.⁴ Keith Jeffrey argues that ‘in the year 1916, a newly created Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau (EMSIB) began functioning in Cairo – an operation run by it in Palestine and Syria had produced patchy returns’. Yigal Sheffy, an emeritus professor at Tel Aviv University and former senior IDF intelligence officer, has concluded that the best information came from signals and air intelligence methods, and that ‘human sources generally provided traditional field information ... they hardly ever obtained reliable or relevant information on high level policy or intentions’. However, Jeffrey writes that one network called NILI did collect ‘abundant military information through Palestine and South Syria’. He explains that hoping to influence the British into supporting Jewish interests, the group was organised by ‘Mack’ (Aaron Aaronsohn), a fervent Zionist who ran an agricultural experiment station near Haifa, which was conveniently located for sea pick-ups of couriers and agents. In May 1917, an officer in Paris wrote to the director of EMSIB saying, ‘you certainly seem to be getting good stuff through Mack,’ while in June Captain Sir George Mansfield Smith-Cumming (the legendary founder and first Director of the SIS from 1909–1923) noted that ‘they consider him (Aaronsohn) very valuable in Cairo’. No other achievement of EMSIB is mentioned in this authoritative book.

Twenty years later, Colonel Walter Gibbon, who was in charge of Near East intelligence in the War Office at the time, suggested that it was ‘largely owing to the information provided by the Aaronsohn network that General Allenby was able to conduct his campaign in Palestine so successfully’.

In the eyes of EMSIB, NILI was an intelligence network run by the British Bureau; in the eyes of Aaronsohn it was an organ of the Jewish nation.

Jeffrey also refers to the capture of a NILI member by the Turks and his subsequent torture in prison, and relates Aaronsohn’s request to British intelligence for five thousand pounds to ransom his release. Although Cumming was quoted as being opposed in principal to furnish ransom money for the release of agents, he ultimately agreed to allocate several thousand pounds for this purpose, recognising that there might be strong political justification for such an action. Ultimately the release of the NILI prisoner (who was Avshalom Feinberg) was

4 Keith Jeffrey, *Mi6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service, 1909–1949* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). It was commissioned by Sir John Scarlett, the former Head of the Service 2004–2009, and published under the auspices of his successor Sir John Sawers, who noted in the preface that Professor Jeffrey had unrestricted access to the service archive covering the period of the book.

secured by other means.

NILI AND THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

Cumming likely viewed the handling of NILI in a category that exceeded the bounds of an intelligence-gathering operation and it must have been at his behest that Samuel Aaronsohn, the brother of Aaron who was stationed in London, received a draft copy of the Balfour Declaration to be smuggled into Palestine to encourage NILI operatives on the ground to double their effort to gather more information. Jeffrey rather cryptically tells us that ‘Cumming too liaised with the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann, meeting him several times in 1917 and 1918 to discuss Jewish affairs’.

By the time the British cabinet ultimately discussed the Balfour Declaration and its pros and cons, Ormsby Gore had returned to London from the Middle East and had been appointed assistant secretary to the cabinet. Although Gore had been befriended by Weizmann, he had supported the Zionist cause ever since being privy to NILI and its contribution to the British war effort. Working alongside Sir Sykes, who had met with NILI in Cairo in 1916 and who was now cabinet secretary, they proceeded to guide the British cabinet through several sessions until the last and decisive one held on 31 October 1917 when the British cabinet assembled for its final discussion over the Jewish issue in post-Ottoman Palestine. Two Zionist leaders were invited to be on hand in an anteroom – Chaim Weizmann and Aaron Aaronsohn – the political master of the Jewish people and his intelligence chief. As the door to the inner sanctum opened, Sir Sykes announced ‘It is a boy,’ and the two were invited into the cabinet room to shake hands with Prime Minister David Lloyd George, Foreign Minister Arthur James Balfour, and other cabinet ministers.

Aaronsohn did not know that the Turks had already moved to smash his ring of combatants and that his father Ephraim and his sister Sara were already dead. When the news reached him a few weeks later he was already in the US carrying out a mission for his political master – Chaim Weizmann. In his diary he wrote, ‘The sacrifice has been offered.’

In 1922 Ormsby Gore (later to succeed to the peerage as the fourth Lord Harlech) decided to draw up a note summarising the circumstances leading to the Balfour Declaration. He was prompted to do so because of the absence of existing documentation in government archives concerning this subject, and he felt a duty to commit to writing his recollections based on memory, for the benefit of the new Secretary of the Colonies, Churchill, who was about to take office. He relates that ‘the matter was first breached by Sir Mark Sykes in 1916 speaking to [the Chief Rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish Community in Great Britain] Dr Gaster, and [Jewish Cabinet minister and later the first British High Commissioner for Palestine] Sir Herbert Samuel. Dr Weizmann was then unknown. Sykes was furthered [i.e. influenced] by General Macdunagh DMI (Director of Military Intelligence) as all the most useful and helpful intelligence from Palestine (then still occupied by Turkey) was got through and given with zeal by Zionist

Jews who were from the first pro British'.⁵

THE END OF NILI AND ITS LEGACY

During their intelligence gathering operations, four NILI combatants sacrificed their lives: Avshalom Fienberg was murdered in the Sinai desert en route to Egypt for a meeting with British intelligence; Sara Aaronsohn was captured and tortured by the Turks NILI operatives succeeded in smuggling a revolver into her cell allowing her to commit suicide and Naaman Belkind and Joseph Lishanski were hung in Damascus by the Ottomans.

In 1919, Weizmann invited Aaronsohn to join his delegation to the Paris Peace Conference that determined the parameters of the peace treaties of World War One. During the conference Aaronsohn left for London for a brief visit before deciding to hurry back to Paris. It was an especially stormy day and Tsila Feinberg, Avshalom's sister, who accompanied him to the airport, begged him not to risk the flight in a solitary engine light aircraft over the channel. Her efforts were to no avail and after he took off her fears were confirmed with the plane never seen again and the likelihood that the plane crashed into the sea before it reached France. Tsila's daughter, 97-year-old Tamar Eshel – a former Knesset member and deputy Mayor of Jerusalem under Teddy Kollek – recently told me that her mother was convinced that there had been no foul play.

The NILI operations have become an iconic symbol of the centrality of Jewish – and now Israeli – intelligence in the never ending struggle to assure the security and wellbeing of its citizens in a very tough neighbourhood. NILI was not only characterised by the professional ingenuity of those who created it, but also by their ability to envisage a mission that would and could overcome the apparently insurmountable obstacles of the present. It proved how a handful of determined people can transcend their immediate condition, and through the power of their convictions, win over powerful international figures to support their cause. It required them to 'think big' in imagining that they could harness a great empire of the day – one that 'ruled the waves' – to support an idea that appeared far-fetched by any yardstick.

As we approach the hundred year anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, we should also highlight those who helped bring it about and who laid the cornerstone of modern day Israeli intelligence.

[Efraim Halevy](#) was Director of Mossad from 1998 to 2002. He is the author of *Man in the Shadows: Inside the Middle East Crisis with a Man Who Led the Mossad* (London: St. Martin's Griffin, 2006). He is also an advisory editor of *Fathom*.

⁵ This particular quote is from Sahar Huneidi, *A Broken Trust: Sir Hebert Samuel, Zionism and the Palestinians* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2001), foreword by Walid Khalidi who championed the Arab and Palestinian causes.



BEFORE BALFOUR: THE LABOUR PARTY'S WAR AIMS MEMORANDUM

RONNIE FRASER

[Ronnie Fraser](#) tells the little-known story of the British Labour Party's support for Zionism. Three months before the Balfour Declaration, its War Aims Memorandum made clear that 'The British Labour Movement expresses the opinion that Palestine should be set free from the harsh and oppressive government of the Turk, in order that the country may form a Free State, under international guarantee, to which such of the Jewish People as desired to do so may return, and may work out their salvation'.

Contrary to popular belief, the Labour Party's support for Zionism did not originate with the Balfour Declaration but with the Party's own War Aims memorandum which was published in August 1917, three months before Balfour's letter. The five thousand word memorandum set out a Socialist and Labour vision for the future, once peace had been achieved. It was divided into six sections; making the world safe for democracy, territorial questions, economic relations, the problems of peace, the restoration of the devastated areas and the reparation of wrongdoing, and a proposal to hold an international conference of labour and socialist organisations. Foremost in the Labour party's plans was the establishment of the League of Nations. The section on territorial questions proposed solutions for Belgium, Alsace Lorraine, the Balkans, Italy, Poland and the Baltic provinces, the Jews and Palestine, and addressed the problem of the Turkish Empire, Austria-Hungary and the colonies and dependencies. Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann credited the Jewish socialist group, Poale Zion for the inclusion of Jewish rights in the memorandum.

Poale Zion (the Workers of Zion) was a Marxist-Zionist movement which was founded in Eastern Europe at the turn of the 20th century. The ideology of Poale Zion was a blend of socialism and Zionism aimed at persuading Jewish workers to support Palestine as a Jewish homeland as well as campaigning for Jewish equality in all countries. Poale Zion was active in Britain from 1905 onwards and established branches in London, Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool. Throughout the First World War, the organisation, under the leadership of J. Pomeranz and Morris Meyer, the editor of the *Jewish Times*, campaigned for the granting of political and civil rights for the Jewish people in all countries where they were denied. Their efforts were rewarded when both the 1915 and 1916 Congresses of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) adopted resolutions about the civil and political rights of Jews.¹

¹ For details of the resolutions and the debate see 'Political and Civil rights for Jewish people', 1915 TUC Congress proceedings, 306-7 and 'Political and Civil rights for the Jewish People', 1916 TUC Congress proceedings, 405-6.

In August 1917, the Labour Party published its draft 'War Aims Memorandum' containing the following paragraph on the Jews and Palestine:

The British Labour Movement demands for the Jews in all countries the same elementary rights of tolerance, freedom of residence and trade, and equal citizenship that ought to be extended to all the inhabitants of every nation. It furthermore expresses the opinion that Palestine should be set free from the harsh and oppressive government of the Turk, in order that the country may form a Free State, under international guarantee, to which such of the Jewish People as desired to do so may return, and may work out their salvation free from interference by those of alien race or religion.²

The call for political and civil rights for Jews was vague and ambiguous as it proposed that Palestine should become a 'Free State'; but a Jewish 'return' to the country implied an awareness of the historical connection between the Jews and Palestine. It may not have contained everything the Zionists wanted but this was the first official Labour Party declaration relating to the rights of the Jews as well as the first from any political party in Britain. This paragraph was the only one from the memorandum which was to remain as Labour party policy until the State of Israel was established in 1948.

Two months later on 28 December 1917, a special National Conference was held at the Caxton Hall. Over seven hundred delegates from the trade unions and other bodies affiliated to the Labour Party and the TUC voted to accept the War Aims memorandum which had been submitted jointly by the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC and the Executive Committee of the Labour Party. The same evening a joint deputation from the Labour Party and the TUC met the prime minister at Downing Street, where they had a frank discussion about the proposals embodied in the War Aims memorandum. Following the conference the influential journal *Zionist Review* in January 1918 stated that the inclusion of Jewish emancipation and the recognition of Jewish national claims in Palestine in the War Aims memorandum now had 'the sanction of the whole international Labour movement, but British Labour has the credit of having taken the initiative and Jews throughout the world owe it a deep duty of gratitude'.³

The memorandum was the work of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC and the Labour Party and was drafted by Arthur Henderson, the leader of the Labour Party, and Sidney Webb. The TUC worked closely with the Labour Party at this time because the TUC had established the Labour Party seventeen years earlier in 1900 as the political wing of the trade union movement in order to protect the interests of labour in Parliament. Henderson became the first Labour member of the cabinet when Prime Minister Asquith formed a coalition government in 1915. He continued to serve in the War Cabinet until August 1917 and throughout his time

2 'Labour Peace Aims,' *The Times*, August 11, 1917.

3 *Zionist Review*, Vol 1, no. 9 (January 1918), 169.

as a member of the cabinet he would have been aware of the government's discussions with Chaim Weizmann which resulted in the Balfour Declaration.

There is little evidence available as to why the authors included the section on the Jews and Palestine. Henderson, as secretary of the Labour Party was known to be sympathetic towards Zionist demands for a Jewish homeland in Palestine as well as being aware of the problems of Jewish Labour and the work of the Poale Zion. It is not known if his co-author Webb held similar views. All we can assume is that since he fully supported the aims of the memorandum he was not opposed to the paragraph's inclusion. However, Webb later became an opponent of Zionism as the author of the 1930 Passfield White Paper which sought to limit Jewish immigration into Palestine.

Chaim Weizmann believed that Poale Zion had been 'responsible for the favourable declaration of the Labour Party'.⁴ However Harry Sacher, a leading member of the influential Manchester Zionists group associated with Weizmann, was sure it was due to his group's efforts. According to historian Isiah Friedman, shortly after Lord Rothschild had presented the Zionist draft of their demand to Lord Balfour, Sacher helped persuade the Labour Party 'to include in their manifesto a recommendation that Palestine should be liberated from the Turk and become a free state under guarantee'. After the publication of the memorandum Sacher wrote to his friend Leon Simon that 'this is the biggest score of a diplomatic kind we have made during the war and with our arrogance it isn't Chaim or Sokolow and their wangling's of official personages who have won it but our groups open advocacy'⁵.

There is also the need to consider whether the question of the lobbying by Poale Zion and its demands at the international labour and socialist conferences influenced the authors of the memorandum. Poale Zion was invited to send representatives to the 1917 Stockholm conference, a move which the Zionists viewed as recognition of the Jewish people as a distinct nation and that Henderson and Webb were instrumental in any discussions in that forum on the matter. However unless new evidence is discovered it is unlikely that we will ever know all the reasons why Jewish civil and political rights were included in the memorandum. Since only a few records have survived about Poale Zion's input into the matter we must assume that both they and Sacher played important roles in bringing the Jewish-Zionist question to the attention of Henderson and his colleagues in the Labour party.

The publication of the Balfour Declaration was welcomed by several Labour leaders including Arthur Henderson, George Lansbury and Ramsay MacDonald. The left wing paper *The New Statesman* wrote: 'The British Government's declaration in favour of Zionism is one of the best pieces of statesmanship... It is hard to conceive how anybody with the true instinct for nationality and the desire to see small nations emancipated can fail to be warmed by the

4 Letter from Chaim Weizmann to Louis Brandeis, 5 March 1918, Weizmann Archives at the Weizmann Institute of Science.

5 Isiah Friedman, *The Question of Palestine, British-Jewish-Arab Relations 1914-1918* (London: Routledge, 1991), 254-5.

prospect of emancipating this most ancient of oppressed nationalities.⁶

The Labour Party's support for Jewish civil and political rights strengthened the influence of Poale Zion within the Jewish Labour movement and led to the establishment of a Jewish National Labour Council which campaigned for socialist and Labour Party candidates during the 1918 Parliamentary elections. In 1920 Poale Zion affiliated to the Labour Party, a move which permitted Poale Zion delegates to speak in the debates on Palestine at Labour Party conferences. Between 1920 and 1948 Poale Zion submitted six motions on the subject.

The memorandum is important because it ignited Labour's enthusiasm for Zionism and established Poale Zion as the Jewish voice on Palestine within Britain's Labour Party. Since London was where decisions were made about the political future of Palestine, both the World Confederation of Poale Zion and the Histadrut, the Jewish labour movement in Palestine, sent representatives to London to work with their local people from 1920 onwards until the 1950s. Poale Zion in Britain may have only had a maximum of 2000 members during this period but it built a close relationship with the Labour Party and counted several Jewish Labour MPs within its membership. Both the Dov Hoz (Histadrut) and Berl Locker (Poale Zion) were regularly consulted by the leadership of the Labour Party and by the committee which dealt with imperial questions. As a measure of their appreciation of Hoz's ability and advice, Labour Party leaders turned out in force at his memorial service in 1940 after his untimely death in a car crash.

But ultimately Poale Zion, despite all its close contacts with the party, failed when it mattered. In 1945 it was unable to change the decision of the Attlee government to ignore prior Labour conference commitments on Palestine. However their legacy was that they had laid the groundwork for the Labour Party's support for Israel throughout the 1950s and 60s. 100 years after the War Aims Memorandum was issued, Poale Zion's successor organisation, the Jewish Labour Movement is once again speaking out on Jewish concerns within the Labour Party.

Perhaps Poale Zion's greatest achievement came in 1930 at the Whitechapel by-election which coincided with the publication of the 1930 Passfield White Paper on Palestine which Poale Zion opposed. Labour eventually won the by-election with a majority of 1000 but only after Poale Zion had agreed to campaign for the Labour candidate after he had agreed to oppose the White Paper and Ernest Bevin, the leader of the Transport Workers Union, had promised that the 26 Labour MPs sponsored by his union would also oppose the terms of the White Paper.

[Dr Ronnie Fraser](#) is an independent scholar and Director of Academic Friends of Israel. He was awarded his doctorate in 2014 by Royal Holloway College, London for his research into the British trade union movement and their attitude to Israel between 1945 and 1982.

6 *New Statesman*, 7 November, 1917.



THE WORLD OF OUR FOUNDERS: BEING JEWISH IN PALESTINE AFTER BALFOUR

DONNA ROBINSON DIVINE

[Donna Robinson Divine](#) argues that the Zionist nation-building story, while inspiring, does not reflect the trials, pains and losses of the nameless immigrants who deferred their own happiness to advance the Zionist cause in the years after the Balfour Declaration. Zionism promised that a Jewish state would disrupt the grim pattern of Jewish history while providing Jews with a new way to perceive themselves. But very much like Jewish prayer, Zionist history was written in the first person plural. Only in the last generation or so have Israelis begun to assess what it took for individuals – the founders of Israel – to sacrifice personal desire for the sake of the Jewish homeland.

INTRODUCTION

The colonisation of Palestine brought men and women of diverse backgrounds together in the most unfamiliar of circumstances, it also forced them to confront the *dissonance* between Zionist theory and practice. Imagining a homeland that fully liberated Jews from their marginal and subordinate existence was much easier than bestowing on it the absolute harmony of the utopian Zionist vision. Few have ever asked how ordinary Jews who came to live in Palestine in the 1920s experienced the Land of Israel. Did they really find a new home to which they felt belonging? How did Palestine's Jews live in the shadow of the radical difference between the home they left behind and the homeland they encountered? Are we sensible of the traumas and the losses these pioneers endured?

Immigrants, many teenagers or in their early twenties, separated from the comfort of family and birthplace, had to struggle not to feel themselves to be strangers in the new land. As Jews outside Palestine, they could embrace Zionism and its vision of a national home as an abstract ideal. In Palestine, Jewish immigrants could not help but see the national home as an unforgiving climate, an alien landscape, and an assortment of newly formed bureaucratic institutions whose rigidity and incomprehensibility shaped their lives. In Europe, Zionists could freely picture the future Jewish society; in Palestine, their daily activities formed it. The differences were profound. The Zionists recognised the need not only for fresh policies to accord with the post-war times, but also for a new paradigm that would make sense of the radically new circumstances for the immigrants.

The Hebrew poems and songs composed during the British Mandate – and the discourse surrounding the Jewish National Home – did not simply legitimise a new Jewish identity; they also formed it. The incorporation of Palestine into the British imperial domain after 1918 provided the impetus for the creation of a Zionist narrative about the building of the Jewish national home.¹ [Although it did not always accord with the reality](#), this narrative generated the framework for scholarship for many decades, ensuring that historical accounts of those pre-state years were marked by an emotional intensity but not always with genuine historical accuracy. Surely, a more careful accounting – one not caught up in the spiritual charge of Zionism’s ambitions for transforming the Jewish people – is overdue?

UNACKNOWLEDGED SUFFERING

Before 1917, Zionists who settled in Ottoman Palestine were called immigrants – Mehagrim – while from the very first years of British rule, they were deemed Olim – people who ascended, a term once reserved for those who came to the holy land as an act of piety or for those called to bless the Torah in synagogue worship. It was in the 1920s that 1882 was declared ‘the First Aliyah’ and 1904 ‘the Second Aliyah’. 1919 came to be seen as the start of the ‘Third Aliyah’, and the dawn of a new age peopled by idealists elevating agricultural labour and Hebrew into a sacred duty and service.

Zion began as an other-worldly ideal. To make it an actuality, Zionists were determined to bring back to life a language formerly reserved for prayer and holy texts as a vehicle to modernise Jewish life in the Land of Israel. No wonder the Balfour Declaration was alarming to many Zionists who feared that British sovereignty might move the site of political action away from the Land of Israel to London while a new language – English – would set the course of public life, both developments inevitably clashing with and compromising the purity of their visions. Zionist visionaries could not, of course, detach themselves from conflicts over policies on immigration or employment practices. Nor were they willing to do so, even though they were often fighting for a lost cause. But they could shape the way people understood and interpreted these matters. And so, to confront what they perceived as the dilemmas of national identity produced by becoming part of the British Empire, Zionists invented a new and powerful lexicon about a Jewish nation remade, a new collective identity formed, a land with no natural resources reclaimed, and a new Jewish society forged by a collective act of will.

Zionist leaders dramatised these notions by presenting the agricultural collectives as emblematic of the Jewish National Home. In fact, these collectives never encompassed more than a tiny percentage of Palestine’s Jewish population [under one per cent in some years]. They were presented as bound together by a shared commitment to the principles of freedom, love of the

1 My analysis follows the path-breaking article by Hizky Shoham, ‘From The third Aliyah to the Second in Retrospect: Periodization of Immigration Waves,’ *Zion* (2012), 1-36. [Hebrew]

land, physical labour, and revitalising the Hebrew language – all this seemingly accomplished by sheer will – ‘Yesh Me-Ayin’. In truth, while Zionist leaders may have wanted to remake the Jewish people and produce a new kind of social and cultural order, they also knew – but would not admit – that a radical disjunction persisted between national claims and national realities.

For example, while the Zionist narrative depicted agricultural communities as the future, most Jewish immigrants to Palestine – artisans, skilled labourers, proprietors of small workshops – focused on the present streamed into cities in search of a better life. They embraced many Zionist ideals – speaking Hebrew, at least on the street, and valuing Jewish labour – but they sought no social transformation. Rather, they transplanted their values and organisations [including synagogues] from the homes they had left behind. In their synagogues, they created self-help associations devoted to imparting skills and education and distributing aid to the needy – work never acknowledged in the Zionist narrative. That they never found their lives reflected in the national ethos caused substantial but unacknowledged suffering. It goes without saying that the religiously observant among them found almost no echo of their values in the dominant public culture.

And did the immigrants who embraced Zionism’s romantic ideals find the spiritual fulfilment they anticipated from working the land as members of communal groups? The communes formed to clear areas for new roads at the beginning of the mandate period leave us a record of the difficulties experienced by individuals seeking to live by the stipulations of the Zionist narrative. Scores of young men, together with a few women, journeyed to what was then a remote part of Palestine – the Jezreel Valley – in anticipation of uniting with the land as a means of personal growth and social change. Of the several memoirs of this experience, one is particularly valuable. *Kehilyateinu* [*Our Community*] is a collective diary written to furnish evidence for the new social order and to show how communal interests could triumph over individual thoughts and feelings. However, instead of showcasing Zionism’s redemptive vision, the voices in this text possess their emotional power precisely because they describe what happened when people attempted to put those theories into practice. The diary is at its most compelling when disclosing the grief of activists heavily burdened by straining for perfection in their new community.

Although conventional Zionist pieties discouraged expressing disappointment with work – which the ideology associated with personal and collective liberation – the glamour of physical labour dissipated quickly. Disappointment when backbreaking physical labour did not produce either personal fulfilment or an intimacy with the land could trigger melancholy and self-doubt. To give substance to the claim that true unity with the land would yield harmony and a sense of fulfilment, pseudo-marriage ceremonies were invented and performed to bind men to the land and presumably infuse them with an intense sense of their mission. In one such ceremony, the self-proclaimed bridegroom pronounced the following words as blessing: ‘This land is not an ordinary bride ... [but] as husband I give myself to the bosom of my new bride and thus will we all be given to the belly of this holy earth.’

Many of these young commune Zionists were desperately lonely. The encampments were isolated from one another and from the Jewish urban centres in Palestine. Members attempted to supplant friendships between individuals with ‘erotic’ attachments to community. Song and dance were expected to release libidinal energy that would, then, match individual desires with collective needs and principles. Ironically, people who were determined to reject the religious culture of the Diaspora experienced the kind of singing and dancing introduced by those with family ties to European Hasidism as elevating.

To be sure, the erotic release so frequently associated with song and dance was more properly the provenance of the *Siha* or discussion, dubbed the commune’s *Guide to the Perplexed* by one commune member, recalling the great medieval philosophical text of Moses Maimonides, and suggesting that the *Siha* was the movement’s most fully elaborated procedure for energising passions for the new social order. But as the diary demonstrated, the *Siha* discharged many other functions. For some, it operated as a mechanism of oppression, coercing people to express their private thoughts and emotions. The *Siha* thus evolved into what one member called a *Vidui* or confession, becoming a discipline intended to cleanse members of their sins and act as solace for individual failures. The particular sins disclosed – missing home, lapsing into Yiddish, longing for the music of Beethoven and Chopin rather than the sound of jackals – gave individuals a clear picture of their failures, naming instances when words, actions, or feelings did not conform to the movement’s utopian expectations.

It is important to state, again, that in these communes at this time, there were very few women and even fewer women’s voices published in this diary or any other. Although Zionist visionaries emphatically proclaimed men and women equal, many diary entries conjured up the idea of women as a source of sexual tension and communal division. When acknowledged at all, women were generally mentioned for their capacity to produce children. The commune asserted a special masculine relationship to spiritual regeneration, but as far as we can tell, expressions of homoerotic passions did not shape sexual relations: this was a sexually repressed community.

It was one thing to imagine physical labour as the only way to achieve spiritual fulfilment, quite another to experience it as such. It was one thing to believe in equality and a totally communal life with no separation between public and private – another thing to live that way. It was one thing to do away with religion – another to live without the warmth of family and synagogue, particularly on holidays. It was easy to criticise traditional worship but hard to replace it with something genuine and appealing. It was one thing to denounce Rabbis, another to marry without one. It was one thing to denounce religious rituals, another to bury loved ones without them.

HEBREW AND SILENCE

And it was one thing to insist on speaking Hebrew; it was quite another thing to comply with the demand. For Hebrew not only mobilised the impulses for revolutionary change, it also disciplined

them. Hebrew weighed heavily on the minds of these visionaries because transforming a language once reserved for sacred texts into a tongue used by common people for daily needs symbolised the transformation of what had been understood as a religious community into a nation.

Labour, exertion, and sacrifice stood at the centre of the Zionist movement's self-conception. To cast off the stain of the Diaspora, Zionists were supposed to engage in pioneering; both cultivating the land and speaking Hebrew were symbolic of the national project. Language would form the new Jew. Using one's original mother tongue was not only considered a form of laziness but also condemned – wherever it was manifest – as an act of betrayal. While the home was perceived as the bastion of the mother tongue – with women typically less skilled in Hebrew than their male counterparts – it was also targeted as a site for social change. Zionists believed it was absolutely reasonable to urge people – even to shame them – into taking on the burdens of speaking Hebrew during leisure activity and in their individual interactions within the family. There could be no day of relaxation from the task of creating the nation. When poet laureate, Haim Nachman Bialik was caught speaking Yiddish on the Sabbath and was asked – how can this be? He replied: Yiddish speaks itself but Hebrew is labour [*Melacha*] and is forbidden on the Sabbath.

The revival of Hebrew was intended to order the experience of immigrants, shape their world outlook, and rationalise their place in the developing community. For those who loved the language and loved hearing the rhythm and rhyme of antiquity, bringing Hebrew into daily life created a deep sense of home. But for most immigrants, the pressure to adopt Hebrew alienated them from the words that could give full expression to their experiences. The limited vocabulary meant that the losses people felt could be neither acknowledged nor mourned.

SONG, POEM AND THE REVERIES

The experience forced many to leave the utopian projects but they did not concede that they had lost faith in their restorative powers. Instead, a silence was draped over the difficulties and the vision was turned into a public ethos or ideology, leaving its distinctive mark on Palestine's Jewish culture and on conventional histories of the creation of the Jewish National Home. In particular, students and the young generation of poets and writers in Tel Aviv took to its themes of land, nature, and love with great avidity. Young teens made a point of affirming and identifying with these values not by joining communes but rather by becoming familiar with the Land of Israel by hiking and by singing the songs and reciting the poetry stirred by the reveries of the Zionist narrative. Consider, 'Lo Sharti Lach Artzi'² written by Rachel, a young poet who described her homeland as gloried not by heroic deeds on a battlefield but rather by a tree planted on Jordan's calm shores and by walking through

2 I do not sing to thee, my homeland, tales of heroic deeds that brought you glory and fame; I rather planted a tree where Jordan's shore rests peacefully; my feet only conquered a path winding through the fields. Lo sharti lach artzi, ve-lo fearti shmach; be-allilot gevura, bishlal kvarot; Rak etz yadei natoo chof yarden shoktim; Rak shvil kvshoo raglei al pnay sadot.

its fields. To believe that Palestine could be conquered with the plow and simultaneously raised to glory through poetry was to believe that souls could be remade.

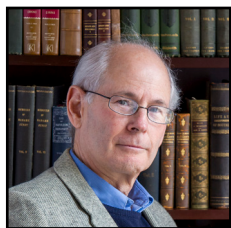
Only in song and poem could an independent Jewish society in the Land of Israel be imagined as the fulfilment of the Zionist vision of pure transcendence. The aesthetic functioned as a compensation for the losses associated with wrenching immigration and profound social and cultural change. The more the preconditions for transformation seemed beyond Zionist control, the more that the Jewish community fixated on language as a substitute for political action. And for this, there was plenty of warrant in Jewish history.

BALFOUR AND THE JEWS OF PALESTINE

The British Mandate's Balfour policy exacerbated the tensions between Zionism's original utopian idealism and its new need to meet the standards set by their imperial overlords. Zionists had to come to terms with the fact that the promise to found the state on the purest of visions could not be kept. But that promise had given Palestine's Jews a sense of meaning as they negotiated the turmoil. People who crossed oceans and continents found themselves in a land unlike anything they could have imagined, subject to collective Zionist pressures, their unease not easily disclosed without violating the stoicism which took on the aspect of a moral imperative. The Zionist nation-building story did not reflect the trials and pains of the nameless immigrants who deferred their own happiness and desires to advance the Zionist cause. Zionism promised that a Jewish state would disrupt the grim pattern of Jewish history while providing Jews with a new way to perceive themselves. However, very much like Jewish prayer, Zionist history was written in the first person plural. Only in the last generation or so have Israelis begun to recover and assess what it took for individuals to sacrifice their own personal desires for the sake of the homeland.

The world of the two million Jewish immigrants who left Russia for a new homeland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – the world of Israel's founders – is gone. Claiming that only sovereignty could confer on Jews the capacity to control their own destiny, those Zionist pioneers, unfortunately, could not liberate Israeli citizens from the ongoing burdens of having to defend their land. But Zionist founders – admirable and flawed as they may have been – did hand down a Jewish state, a Jewish society and a Jewish culture all made in a vibrant living Hebrew language. Even those disappointed in having to suppress their own personal desires could pronounce the *Shehechiyanu* blessing for having lived to witness that day in May 1948, to have contributed to its achievement, and to have helped remake Lord Balfour's declaration in a Zionist image.

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'WEIZMANN CORRALLED THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT BEHIND THE ZIONIST MOVEMENT': AN INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN SCHNEER

[Jonathan Schneer](#)'s book *The Balfour Declaration: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* was praised by *Simon Sebag Montefiore* as 'an excellent and compelling portrait of the intrigues, characters and diplomacy that created the modern Middle East.' The late Sir Martin Gilbert wrote of it, 'Why did Britain offer the Jews a home in Palestine? Had they not already offered Palestine to the Arabs, two years earlier? This extraordinarily well-documented and revealing book gives the answers.' Tony Judt called it 'the best modern history of the Balfour Declaration.' Schneer spoke to *Fathom*'s Sam Nurdling about his book shortly before events in London marking the centenary of the Declaration.

Samuel Nurdling: *Why did you decide to write the book?*

Jonathan Schneer: I decided to write the book after reading Margaret McMillan's *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*, on the Paris peace conference. I wondered what I could do that might have the same impact. Also, I promised my father that I would go through his papers and organise them when he passed away. While doing so I came across a menu dating from the 1920s, from the Waldorf Astoria, a fancy hotel, in New York City. The menu was for a dinner honouring Chaim Weizmann. I realised that my grandfather who had attended this dinner and saved the menu, had been a Zionist. I had had no idea. My grandfather was a prosperous, respectable, upwardly-mobile Jewish immigrant to NYC, who came over in the 1890s. So that piqued my interest. These were the main reasons I wrote the book.

ZIONISM AND ARAB NATIONALISM BEFORE AND DURING THE WAR

SN: *What was the state of Jewish and Arab (and perhaps Palestinian) nationalism at the onset of the First World War?*

JS: With regard to Jewish nationalism, the modern Zionist movement was founded by the Austrian journalist Theodore Herzl, as a response to anti-Semitism. He wanted to help Jews move to Palestine, their historic home, but the Ottomans wouldn't allow it at least not in great numbers. The main aim of the pre-1914 Zionist movement was first to pressure the Ottomans to allow the immigration of Jews into Palestine in large numbers, and when that failed, to persuade one of the great powers to apply pressure on the Ottomans.

Herzl himself, despairing of quick success, accepted a British invitation for Jews to move in

massive numbers to its East African Protectorate. This became known as 'the Uganda Scheme'. In doing so he split the Zionist movement. There was also a body within the nationalist movement called the 'Territorialists'. They argued that if Jews were unable to get into Palestine now, they nevertheless needed a safe haven in Uganda, or, indeed, anywhere. In the UK in 1914 there were Territorialists organised in the Jewish Territorial Association (ITO) and there were the Zionists who belonged to the English branch of the World Zionist Organization (WZO). There were about 300,000 British Jews, of whom 8,000 belonged to one or another Jewish nationalist body, and of those 8,000, half lived in London.

As for Arab nationalism, there was not yet a modern Arab nationalist movement as we understand the term nationalism, but there were proto-nationalists. For example, there were pan-Islamists. They hoped that a revived Islam would strengthen] the Ottoman Empire (which was being eaten away by the European powers) and also the Arabs within it. Others called themselves 'Ottomanists'. They too looked forward to a revived Ottoman Empire (although not necessarily to a religious revival) within which Arabs would play a greater role. And finally there were 'Arabists'. They looked forward to a stronger Ottoman Empire in which the Arab provinces would have autonomy – something like the Home-Rule that Ireland looked for in the UK in 1914.

After 1908 when the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) took over the Ottoman Empire, Arabism became stronger. There were both above-ground and below-ground Arabist societies. They organised a conference in Paris in 1913, and this is very close to modern nationalism, although the participants were not yet demanding independent Arab states. During this time the Grand Sharif Hussein, who would play a great role in the war and who became what we would recognise as a modern nationalist, was an Ottomanist but he may have already been privately dreaming of an autonomous or even independent Arab kingdom within the Ottoman Empire led by himself.

With regard to Palestinian nationalism, before 1914 there were only a few intellectuals and clerics who were thinking at all of Palestine as a separate entity, and they tended to see the area of Palestine as a territorial bridge linking the Arabian Peninsula with Egypt and Africa. And although they were worried about the Jews immigrating to the area and thus swamping the bridge, there was no organised Palestinian nationalist movement before 1914.

SN: *Despite Arab nationalism being in its infancy at the onset of the war, it had much more traction in the Foreign Office than Zionism. So why did the Arabs fail to achieve what the Zionists would later achieve with the Balfour Declaration?*

JS: The Arabs did not have more traction in the Foreign Office than the Zionists before the war. Before 1914, the British interest was to have a stable Ottoman Empire. So they regarded Arab nationalists (such as they were) as troublemakers. The war changed everything. When the Ottoman Empire decided to enter on the side of Germany, it became Britain's enemy too,

and so the British interest turned to how to defeat them. That is why they encouraged Hussein to rebel against the Ottomans. This is why the Arabs gained traction in the Foreign Office.

The answer as to why the Arabs did not succeed in the way the Zionists did is extremely complex. Essentially the Zionists persuaded the British government that Britain had a much better chance of winning the war if so called international Jewry supported them. So the government offered up the Balfour Declaration. That contradicted what they had offered the Arabs. But the Arabs did not have a Weizmann, or Weizmann's high-powered circle of advisors, to argue their case in London. That may have been the crucial difference.

SN: *You write that Zionism's rise in British foreign policy was far from inevitable. What do you mean by this?*

JS: As noted above, during the pre-war years it was in Britain's interest to keep on good terms with the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman leaders were quite happy for Jews to migrate to the Empire, but they didn't want a large concentration to settle in Palestine and upset the Arabs. Since this was in the Ottomans interest it was in the British interest too. Once the war began, Britain no longer worried about Ottoman interests. Now it might consider massive Jewish immigration to Palestine if that would help them win the war. If it wasn't for World War One, however, I don't know that the British Government would have done that, or that the Zionist movement would have gotten very far, or that there would have been the Balfour Declaration. The Ottoman decision to side with the Germans and Austria-Hungary is what made possible Zionism's rise.

SN: *You dedicate a chapter to the correspondence between Hussein bin Ali, Sharif of Mecca, and Lieutenant Colonel Sir Henry McMahon, British High Commissioner to Egypt. The Hussein-McMahon correspondence is often cited by people who argue 'Perfidious Albion' – i.e. that Britain was engaged in duplicity and double-dealing. What was behind that correspondence and why was it made so ambiguous?*

JS: Well, first of all, translating certain words from English into Arabic and vice-versa presented problems. But more basically, both parties intended for the letters to be ambiguous. McMahon self-consciously made promises in order to entice the Grand Sharif Hussein to rebel against the Ottomans. He explained as much in a letter he wrote to Lord Hardinge at the Foreign Office where he explained he was using 'nebulous' terms and phrases because the important thing was to get Hussein to act, and Britain should abstain from academic haggling over precise terms.

On the other side, Hussein ignored the ambiguities because he desperately needed British help if he was going to launch the insurrection at all. Now it is true that McMahon pointed out that France might have post-war plans in the Middle East which he could not anticipate and that would have to be dealt with later. That was an unambiguous warning. But if you think about it, it was ambiguous at the same time, because it left open what those French terms might be. Hussein accepted this ambiguity because he didn't want any conflict with Britain when he was launching a rebellion against the Turks.

THE MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THE DECLARATION

SN: *Historians have offered numerous reasons to why the British issued the Balfour Declaration, such as strategic imperial interests regarding the Suez Canal; Christian-Zionist sentiment among British leaders; the desire to court the power of 'world Jewry'; to stop Jews building their own relations with Germany; to abrogate the Sykes-Picot agreement. How would you rate these factors in terms of importance?*

JS: All those played a role. The over-riding aim of Britain during 1914–1918 was to win the war; once Weizmann convinced British leaders that world Jewry, this powerful subterranean world force, could help Britain to that goal then I believe that was what mainly led to the Balfour Declaration. Weizmann further convinced the British that most Jews were Zionists and that Zionists wanted Palestine above all else, and so the British government basically tried to bribe the Jews to their side by offering them Palestine.

SN: *Other historians have argued that, in pursuit of its wartime interest, Britain had promised Palestine to three parties – Arabs, Jews and international powers. You write that Palestine was actually a four-time promised land, the last being to the Turks. What was British thinking behind offering continued Ottoman suzerainty over Palestine?*

JS: Put yourself in Lloyd George's place; the question is how to win the war. What's happening in the Middle East is only a small part of this; he also has to deal with Russia's collapse on the Eastern Front and he's trying to deal with the great German threat on the Western Front. He's got to figure out how to get Britain out of this terrible fix. One small part of the answer was to encourage the Arabs to rebel against the Ottomans; another was to win over world Jewry. But even better would have been simply to detach the Ottoman Empire from the Central Powers. This would have contributed more to winning the war than the support of Jews or Arabs. Therefore, part of the deal he suggested to the Ottomans was to let them keep their flying their flag over Palestine. He was prepared to pay that price. If it had gone that far, the Zionists and the Arab rebels would have thought that Lloyd George had betrayed them. But he could live with that if it meant winning the war.

Sentiment had only a small part to play. Christian Zionists were sentimental about the Zionist cause, and there were men in the Foreign Office who admired the Arabs. However, with the British Empire literally at stake, sentiment was not the most important aspect.

ON CHAIM WEIZMANN, NAHUM SOLOKOW, AND SIR MARK SYKES

SN: *As much as the rise of Zionism was not inevitable in British foreign policy, neither was the rise of its most prominent leader, Chaim Weizmann. What made possible Weizmann's transformation from chemist to the leader of Political Zionism?*

JS: Once again, the starting point is the war. If it hadn't been for the war who knows if we would be talking about Chaim Weizmann today. But once the war began, why was it that Weizmann and not someone else emerged as the great leader? Well, Weizmann, first of all, saw right away that the British government and the Zionists shared a common goal – to defeat Turkey. He was the man who could really make this clear to both sides.

Additionally, he was a chemist. He figured out how to derive acetone from grain rather than wood. This was a great discovery for the world of British munitions, and it probably expedited Weizmann's connection with the then Minister of Munitions Lloyd George in 1914.

Moreover, Weizmann had a unique charisma. He charmed one leading British figure after another: C.P. Scott, the editor and proprietor of *The Manchester Guardian*; Herbert Samuel; Lord Balfour; various Rothschilds.

Here is one of his secrets; he employed a kind of political jujitsu. He used the strength of his opponent to his own advantage. A common anti-Semitic canard was that the Jews had an enormous subterranean power; e.g. over finance in the US or over the pacifist movement in Russia. In effect, Weizmann said to men like Balfour and Lloyd George and Mark Sykes, 'Yes, we do have that power,' and he convinced them. This ability to turn anti-Semitism to his advantage, coupled with his extraordinary charm and charisma, probably made him unique even within the Zionist movement. It also probably distinguished him from the leaders of the Arab movement as well.

SN: *One of the perhaps forgotten figures in Zionism's rise is Nahum Solokow. How would you rate Solokow's importance to Zionism's success? Were his achievements as important as Weizmann's?*

JS: I think Solokow was extremely important. He served as Zionism's chief diplomat in the years before World War One. During the war he played a role second only to Weizmann. When the Zionist leaders got together in a hotel in Russell Square to hammer out the wording of the declaration, Solokow was the leading figure.

His other enormous achievement was to extract from the French government and the Italian government statements very similar to the Balfour Declaration. Moreover he obtained from the Pope an avowal of friendship. If I were re-writing the book I would lay greater stress upon Solokow's achievements.

However, Weizmann remains more important than Solokow. Basically it was Weizmann who corralled the British government behind the Zionist movement – British Zionists believed the British imprimatur was more important than that of any other government. British Zionists looked forward to a British mandate over Palestine, not a French one. They believed that the French would want the Zionists to become French, while the British would allow them to retain their identity as Jews. It never occurred to them to ask the Italians to be the protecting power in

Palestine, and the idea of the US in this role, while possibly attractive to them, was not realistic.

It is not clear to me that Solokow could have done what Weizmann did, which was to win over the British power elite to the Zionist idea.

SN: *Sir Mark Sykes is most known for his infamous 1916 agreement with French minister Francois Picot. Yet he also had a major role in the story of the Balfour Declaration. How did Sykes view Jewish and Arab nationalism and what brought about a change in his position on Zionism later in the war?*

JS: Sykes is indeed a fabulous character. He was born to wealth, the son of a baronet, and had extraordinary social connections and experience. What most marked him out was his self-confidence and imagination, as well as his flexibility and adaptability. If you had met Mark Sykes ten years before World War One you might have thought him a charming advocate of British imperialism, with the conventional ideas that such men then had. He was an anti-Semite and a racist. But he also had an expert's knowledge of the Middle East from having lived and travelled in the region for many years. I think the Sykes-Picot agreement probably reflects this earlier Sykes. It's an old fashioned imperial carve up of the Middle East in Britain and France's interests, with little regard paid to the needs and aspirations of the people who lived in those territories.

And yet this man changed, and in the end he was trying to fit the British Empire into a Wilsonian, liberal, world view. I think he came to sympathise with Arab aspirations for more control over their lives. He came to sympathise with Zionism and the Jews, who he had previously despised.

All that being said, like Lloyd George and Balfour and every other British government figure, Sykes was striving above all for British victory in the war. He came to believe that the Jews and the Arabs could help Britain win the war, which explains the various plans that he later devised.

SN: *What are the legacies of the Balfour Declaration?*

JS: Well, not in order of importance: Arab nationalists felt that the British had betrayed them by allowing mass Jewish immigration into Palestine. I think they are right to believe that the Balfour Declaration was the opening of a door that had previously been shut, and that was the door to eventual Jewish domination of Palestine. So for the Arabs that is a bitter legacy.

On the other side of the coin, if you were a Zionist then, by opening that door, which is the most important thing in the world, the Balfour Declaration made possible the Jewish state of Israel. Looking at it simply as an historian, the Balfour Declaration was the most significant step towards foreign legitimization of a Jewish state in Palestine.

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