



The Balfour Declaration

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people... October 31, 1917



Introduction

After dreaming of a Jewish homeland for centuries and only for a Jewish state for a few decades, the Zionist movement received a huge boost in 1917 when the British government declared that it supported the basic principle of Zionism.

Lord Arthur James Balfour, the foreign secretary of Britain, wrote the following words, which marked a turning point in the struggle for a State of Israel:

“His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

The Balfour Declaration was made in the context of one of the most tumultuous times in the history of the Jewish community of Palestine, World War I. This instant lesson will explore the Zionist experience during that conflict and the circumstances that made the Balfour Declaration possible.

World War I

WWI: For several centuries before the First World War Palestine was under the control of the Ottoman Empire. This empire was weak, however, and several lands it controlled broke free in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. World War I, in which the Ottomans sided with the losing Germans and Austro-Hungarians, was to be its ultimate downfall.

Since Russia (along with Britain and France) was the enemy of the Ottoman Empire, the Jews of Palestine initially sided with their rulers, remembering the harsh treatment Jews faced back in Russia. But the Ottomans did not trust the Jews of Palestine and implemented cruel measures—such as prison and forced labor—that convinced most of the *yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine) to switch their loyalty to the side of Britain, which was then fighting for control of the Middle East.

The conditions of war, in which international trade came to a standstill and travel was perilous, were devastating to the *yishuv*. Food was scarce, and medical and other supplies were diverted to the war effort. Thousands of Jews died of starvation or disease at this time.

ZION MULE CORPS: Many members of the *yishuv* saw a British victory as key to a better future for the Jews of Palestine. A Zion Mule Corps was organized to bring

supplies to the British troops, and eventually a Jewish Legion was also established in which soldiers from the *yishuv* fought alongside the British to drive the Ottomans from Palestine.

CHAIM WEIZMANN: But perhaps the greatest Jewish contribution to the British war effort came in the laboratory of Chaim Weizmann, the Russian-born Jewish chemist who later became Israel's first president. Working in Britain, Weizmann discovered a new way to make explosives, with the key ingredient being a natural resource Britain had plenty of—the common chestnut. Weizmann's importance in helping the British manufacture weapons allowed him to lobby British officials on behalf of his pet cause—the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.



January, 1918-Jerusalem: General Allenby, commander of British forces in Palestine, rides through the Jaffa Gate as part of his formal entry into the newly captured city of Jerusalem in January 1918. The British army, led by General Edmund 'The Bull' Allenby, captured the city from Turkish forces on December 9th 1917. British Arabist T.E. Lawrence led many guerrilla raids on the Turkish forces around Jerusalem before the city fell to the British.
UPI/Corbis-Bettmann

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In late 1916 Weizmann and other English Zionists began to pressure Great Britain for a public declaration of support for making Palestine a Jewish home at the end of the war.

Weizmann's personal relationship with the Foreign Secretary, Lord Arthur James Balfour, made such lobbying easier.

The British were favorably inclined toward a declaration of support for Zionism for several reasons:

First, the British government had a perhaps-inflated view of Jewish power in countries around the world. If Britain supported Jewish national goals, they imagined that American Jews could convince America to enter the war on Britain's side; that Russian Jews could convince the just-born Soviet Union to keep fighting; and that German Jews would oppose their country's fight with Britain.

Second, Britain was hoping to be the dominant European power in the Middle East at the end of the war. Because its colony in India was the "crown jewel" of the British Empire, keeping the waterways between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean free of German influence was a priority for Great Britain.

Finally, many British leaders genuinely sympathized with Zionist ideas and were grateful for Jewish participation in the war—from the Zion Mule Corps to Weizmann's chemistry.

The major source of resistance to a declaration in favor of Jewish Palestine came from a surprising source—the Jewish community itself. Some elements of British Jewry were hostile to Zionism, and particularly concerned that if combined Britain and France committed themselves to a Jewish state in Palestine, Jewish life in the Diaspora could be threatened.

After considerable debate over the precise language—with careful attention to all nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and plurals—the Balfour Declaration was issued on July 31, 1917. Britain's allies, such as France and the United States, soon indicated their approval. Predictably, the Arab leaders throughout the Middle East deplored the declaration as improper meddling in Arab affairs and an insult to their rights (even though the final draft of the declaration safeguarded civil and religious rights to non-Jews in Palestine).

For Jews all over the world—and especially in the *yishuv*—the Balfour Declaration was a cause for celebration. Finally a major world power had recognized their national goals and given its blessing to their dream of a land to call their own.

What are some reasons some North American Jews today are anti-Zionist? Are those reasons similar to early twentieth century British anti-Zionism? *Join in your thoughts*



11/14/47-Lake Success, NY: Dr. Chaim Weizmann, former president of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, chats with Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, U.S. delegate to the United Nations, at a meeting. The U.S. and Russia reached virtual agreement on a plan giving the UN Security Council jurisdiction over the UN Commission, which will take over administration of Palestine from the British under the proposed partition plan. UPI/Corbis-Bettmann

Activity

Like many important historical documents, the Balfour Declaration went through different drafts. Below are four versions of the Balfour Declaration in order of when they were written. Underline the key changes from one draft to the next and see if you can guess what each change signified.

Zionist Draft July 1917:

His Majesty's Government accepts the principle that Palestine should be reconstituted as the national home of the Jewish people. His Majesty's Government will use its best endeavours to secure the achievement of this object and will discuss the necessary methods and means with the Zionist Organization.

Balfour Draft August 1917:

His Majesty's Government accepts the principle that Palestine should be reconstituted as the national home of the Jewish people and will use their best endeavours to secure the achievement of this object and will be ready to consider any suggestions on the subject which the Zionist Organization may desire to lay before them.

2nd British Draft August 1917:

His Majesty's Government accepts the principle that every opportunity should be afforded for the establishment of a home for the Jewish people in Palestine and will use its best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object and will be ready to consider any suggestions on the subject which the Zionist organizations may desire to lay before them.

Final Text October 31, 1917:

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use the best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

1. What is the difference between "Palestine... as the national home of the Jewish people" and "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people"? Why do you think that change was made?

2. What do you think was the most important change in the drafts of the Balfour Declaration?
