

What Was the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and Why Is It Significant?

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Nov 15, 2017 | [Editor's Picks](#), [Essays](#), [Palestine](#), [Politics](#) | [1](#) |



Lord Arthur Balfour in Tel Aviv, c. 1925 (from the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress)

The Balfour Declaration determined British policy under the League of Nations' Mandate, which ultimately facilitated the ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

One-hundred years ago today, the famous—or infamous—“Balfour Declaration” was issued by the government of Great Britain. While most people with basic knowledge about the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians have heard of this

document, few understand what it really was, why it is so significant, and why it remains so relevant today.

The main reason for this lack of understanding among the public is that the history taught in the United States and other Western countries systematically misrepresents the conflict's historical origins. The US government and mainstream media present a narrative lifted wholesale from Israeli propaganda about how the "Jewish state" came into existence, while the Palestinian perspective is hardly acknowledged.

Reflecting this deeply ingrained prejudice against the Palestinians, British Prime Minister Theresa May earlier this week glorified the Balfour Declaration by proclaiming, "We are proud of the role that we played in the creation of [the] state of Israel and we will certainly mark the centenary with pride."[\[1\]](#)

The Balfour Declaration, however, is no cause for celebration among the Palestinians, who fully grasp its true significance. Acting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in July spoke about suing Britain over the Balfour Declaration by observing, accurately, that it determined a course of policy that ultimately culminated in over 700,000 Arabs being ethnically cleansed from their homes in Palestine.[\[2\]](#)

After the First World War, under the League of Nations' Mandate for Palestine, Britain was appointed to rule over the conquered territory of the former Ottoman Empire. The Mandate actually incorporated the language of the Balfour Declaration, which determined the nature of Great Britain's rule over Palestine's inhabitants. While freed from the yoke of Turkish rule, the Palestinians were even more oppressed under Britain's occupation regime.

The basic premise of British policy under the Mandate was that the right of the majority Arab inhabitants to self-determination

must be denied in order for Palestine to be reconstituted as a “Jewish State”. Under the Mandate, it was to the organized Zionist movement that the British pledged their active support, with great prejudice toward the rights of the Arabs, despite meaningless rhetoric to the contrary.

British policymakers understood that the Zionists aimed to disenfranchise and, ultimately, to displace Arabs from the land, but this was cause for no concern—at least, not at first. Over time, however, British officials became perplexed at what they perceived as Arab ingratitude toward their benevolent rule, as represented by their unwillingness to accept Britain’s rejection of their right to self-determination. While there were those Arabs willing to collaborate with the British regime, the Arab leadership consisted mostly of “extremists” who insisted upon independence and democratic governance.

The British policy of supporting the Zionist project naturally led to unrest among the Arab population. Outbreaks of violence began to occur. As the conflict caused by its guiding policy escalated, the British sought to extract themselves from the situation. So, in 1947, Britain turned to the United Nations, which had taken over the international trusteeship system for territories held under Mandate by the defunct League of Nations.

The solution the UN came up with to resolve the conflict was to partition Palestine into two separate states: one for the Arabs and one for the Jews. The famous UN “Partition Plan”, however, was inherently inequitable and, in fact, was premised on the same rejection of Palestinians’ rights that underlay British policy.

The Arabs naturally refused to consent to this abuse, and the partition plan was never implemented. So the Zionist leadership

had to resort to other means. War broke out and, in order to establish their demographically “Jewish state”, the Zionist forces ethnically cleansed hundreds of thousands of Arabs from their homes. This “compulsory transfer” of Arabs had first been proposed by a British commission of inquiry in 1937, since which the idea had become central to the thinking of the Zionist leadership.

The Balfour Declaration’s significance is that it set British policy on a course grounded in a fundamental rejection of the rights of the Arab Palestinians. This rejection of their rights ultimately manifested in a crime that was not unforeseen: the ethnic cleansing of Arabs from Palestine.

It is this fundamental rejection of Palestinians’ rights that remains the underlying root cause of the conflict that persists to this day.

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I. The Conquest of Palestine

Zionist Influence on British Policy

In the late 1800s, the Zionist movement arose for the purpose of establishing a state for the Jewish people. The recognized “father” of modern political Zionism, Austro-Hungarian journalist Theodor Herzl, outlined the project in *Der Judenstaat*, or *The Jewish State*, published in 1896. While several territories were considered for the location of this future state, the most logical, given the Jews’ historical connection to it, was Palestine.

There was just one problem: Palestine was already inhabited, and the people already living in and cultivating the land might not look too favorably upon the idea of it being so reconstituted.

Herzl offered no acknowledgement in *Der Judenstaat* of the existence of the predominantly Arab population of Palestine. [\[3\]](#)

He had, however, already considered how the land's inhabitants were to be dealt with. The prior year, in 1895, he had written in his diary:

We shall have to spirit the penniless population across the border denying it any, by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while employment in our own country. Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly.[\[4\]](#)

Toward that end, in 1901, the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, established the Jewish National Fund (JNF), the main purpose of which was to acquire land in Palestine to be held as the “inalienable” property of the Jewish people.

Financing land purchases would prove no obstacle. However, the existence of the Arab population *would*. It was a dubious assumption, indeed, that they would simply surrender their rights and accede to their own political disenfranchisement and alienation from the land.

Furthermore, Palestine was at that time under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.

What the Zionists therefore needed was *guns*. They had as of yet no army of their own, so hired guns would have to do.

The Zionists needed the backing of a military power capable of conquering Palestine and establishing the necessary regime to enable the Zionist project to proceed. Hence, the Zionists appealed to European governments for support, and particularly that of Great Britain, offering their own services in exchange.

In advertising their services, the Zionists appealed to the racist and colonialist tendencies of British policymakers. In *Der*

Judenstaat, Herzl argued that a Jewish state in the place of Palestine would serve as “an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism” and help safeguard the “sanctuaries of Christendom”.[\[5\]](#)

What was lacking in Herzl’s day, though, was a pretext for their hired gun to engage in the necessary military adventurism. It was the advent of the Great War that presented the Zionist leadership with the opportunity they were looking for to advance their aims.

Specifically, the entrance of the Ottoman Empire into the war in October 1914, against the side of Great Britain and the other Allied Powers, presented them with their opening.

Once Britain was at war with the Ottoman Turks, the Zionists began heavily lobbying British government officials, attempting to sway them to support their colonization project. Politicians whose favor they elicited included future Prime Minister Lloyd George, future High Commissioner of Palestine Herbert Samuel, Chief Secretary of the War Cabinet Mark Sykes, and Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour.

In a 1915 memorandum, Herbert Samuel expressed his agreement with the Zionists’ plan, writing that, with “the British annexation of Palestine”, it would be possible to “plant 3 or 4 million European Jews” on Middle Eastern soil. Leading Zionist Chaim Weizmann counted Mark Sykes among “our greatest finds”, for it was Sykes “who guided our work into more official channels.” By 1916, Weizmann felt confident that the British War Cabinet was “not only sympathetic toward the Palestinian aspirations of the Jews, but would like to see these aspirations realized”.[\[6\]](#)

Chaim Weizmann appealed to one sympathizer in 1916 by arguing that, “should Palestine fall within the British sphere of

influence, and should Britain encourage a Jewish settlement there, as a British dependency, we could have in 20 to 30 years a million Jews out there—perhaps more; they would ... form a very effective guard for the Suez Canal.”[\[7\]](#)

In another letter, Weizmann argued that with the success of the Zionist project, Britain “would have in the Jews the best possible friends, who would be the best national interpreters of ideas in the eastern countries and would serve as a bridge between the two civilizations.”[\[8\]](#)

The government of France, too, Weizmann later noted in his book *Trial and Error*, was persuaded to let the territory fall under British rather than French control, to further “the development of Jewish colonization in Palestine”.[\[9\]](#)

European policymakers’ support for Zionism was not only dependent on their prejudicial attitudes towards Arabs and Muslims. Another deciding factor was European anti-Semitism. The prospect of Jews flocking out of Europe and into Palestine was met with great enthusiasm by Western governments.

This reality was reflected in the report of a joint British-American committee published in 1946, in the wake of the Nazi Holocaust. The *Report of the Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry regarding the problems of European Jewry and Palestine* commented how laws in most European countries barred Jewish refugees from entry, but that, in Palestine, they might “receive a welcome denied them elsewhere.” Even if immigration laws were to be relaxed in Europe, this would take time, and enabling mass emigration of Jews from Europe to Palestine would “have a most salutary effect upon the whole situation.”

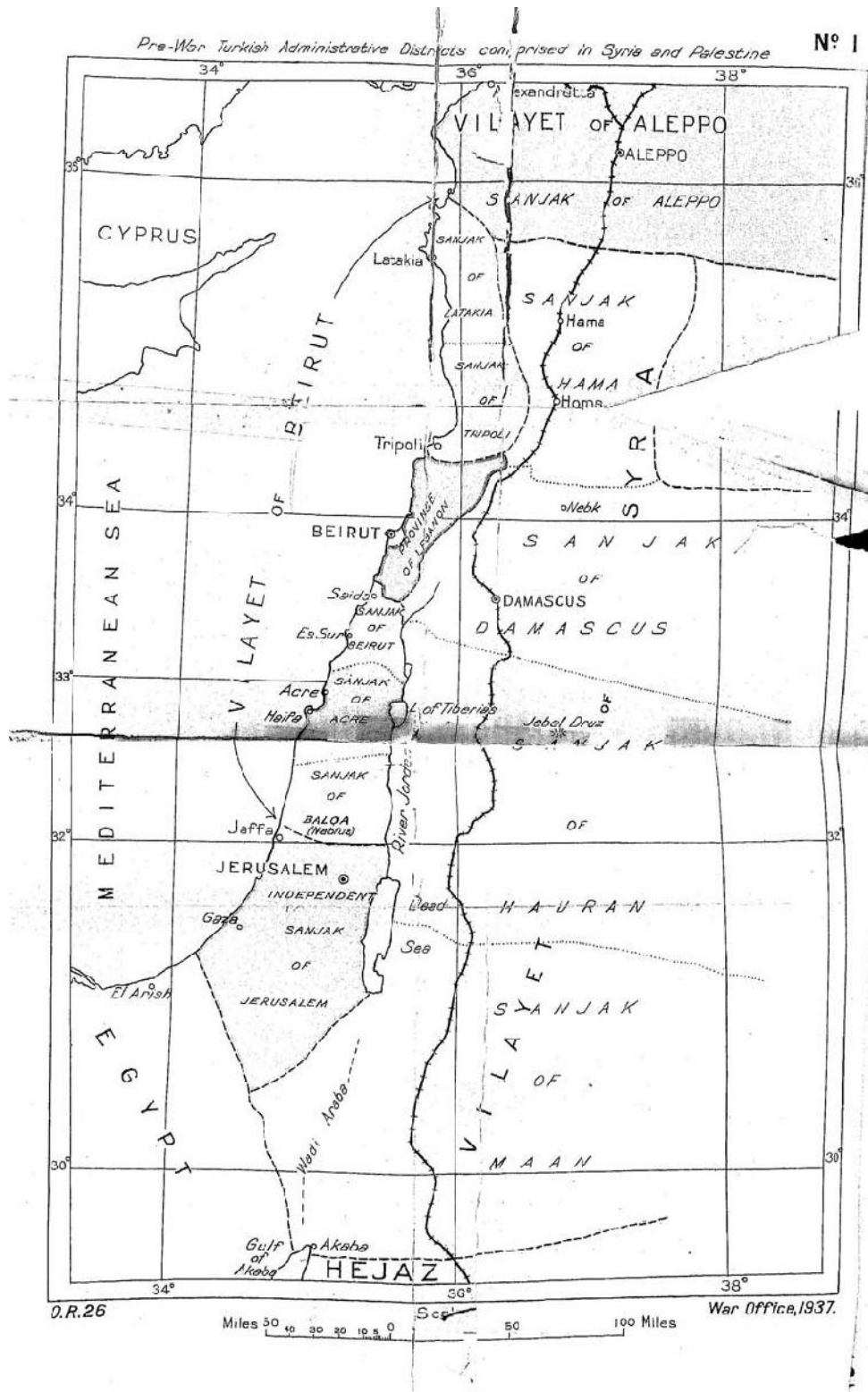
With Western governments being unwilling to take in the Jewish refugees themselves, the committee lectured the Arabs

to accept “the admission of these unfortunate people into Palestine”, adding that, if the Arabs “cannot see their way to help, at least they will not make the position of these sufferers more difficult.”[\[10\]](#)

The third major motive for the British to support the Zionist project was to secure Jewish support for the war effort. However, the British had a conflicting need to also secure the support of the Arabs, including those then living under Turkish rule. British policymakers, disregarding any future problems it might create, set out to do both.

Promises of Arab Independence

Under the Ottoman Empire, the territory known colloquially as “Palestine” was a part of the broader region known as “Syria”. Palestine was comprised of three districts between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Northernmost was the Sanjak of Acre, which lay westward of the Sea of Galilee and south of the Sanjak of Beirut. South of Acre was the Sanjak of Nablus. South of Nablus and westward of the Dead Sea lay the Sanjak of Jerusalem.[\[11\]](#)



A map of Palestine under the Ottoman Empire, from the report of the Peel Commission Report of 1937

To secure Arab support for their war effort against the Ottoman Empire, in June 1915, Britain issued a proclamation assuring

that one outcome of an Allied victory would be independence for the peoples of Egypt, the Sudan, and the Arabia Peninsula.[\[12\]](#)

One Arab leader who responded positively to that message was the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein ibn Ali al-Hashimi. Of the ruling Hashemite family, Hussein was given the stewardship of the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which lay within a strip of territory along the Red Sea in the Arabian Peninsula known as the Hejaz. Within modern day Saudi Arabia, the Hejaz was at the time a province of the Ottoman Empire.

Interpreting the proclamation as a British promise to support “the independence of the Arab countries”, on July 14, 1915, Sharif Hussein wrote a letter to the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, intimating his willingness to side with Britain in the war.

Hussein’s interpretation, however, went beyond the territory Britain had in mind, since “the Arab countries” would include Palestine, where the British government was already determined to establish a prolonged occupation regime. In light of Britain’s territorial designs on the region, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, replied that any discussion of specific boundaries was premature.

Sharif Hussein took McMahon’s letter as inferring “an estrangement” between them. Representatives of the Syrian Nationalist Committee at the same time communicated that if Britain would not assure their independence, they would side with Germany in the war. However, cognizant of Britain and France’s mutual aim of territorial conquest, the Syrian committee indicated that, while the independence of “the Syrian interior” was non-negotiable, they would be willing to sacrifice the “Syrian coast”.

On October 24, 1915, McMahon wrote back to Hussein, expressing his “regret” that Hussein had perceived estrangement between them. Seeing the need to be slightly more forthcoming about the territory within which Great Britain would tolerate the Arabs exercising independence, McMahon disclosed Britain’s territorial designs on “the portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo”.

Directly west of those Syrian districts lay the Sanjak of Beirut, where Lebanon is today, which was *north* of the districts that comprised Palestine along the Mediterranean coast.

The Arabs of Palestine therefore took McMahon’s letter to mean that they, too, would gain their independence if they supported the British war effort. Under the same impression, Sharif Hussein declared himself ruler of the Hashemite Kingdom of Hejaz and in June 1916 declared war against the Turks.[\[13\]](#)

“King Hussein called upon all the Arab territories to take their share,” the report of a British commission of inquiry later noted, “and volunteers from Palestine were among the first to join in a revolt which had a single end in view—the independence of the Arab lands, including Palestine.”[\[14\]](#)

Meanwhile, however, Britain and France, in consultation with Russia, had conspired to divvy up their anticipated territorial conquests. In May 1916, they came to a secret understanding that “Palestine, with the Holy Places, is to be separated from Turkish territory and subjected to a special regime to be determined by agreement between Russia, France and Great Britain.”[\[15\]](#)



A map showing how Great Britain and France intended to divvy up the territorial spoils of war in the Middle East under the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 ([UK National Archives](#))

This scheme is today known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, after the officials who negotiated it: British diplomat Mark Sykes and his French counterpart Francois Georges-Picot. The agreement remained a secret until the following year, when the Bolshevik government in Russia revealed its existence. After the overthrow of Russian Tsar Nicholas II and seizure of power by Vladimir Lenin in October 1917, the agreement was found in the government's archive records. To expose Britain and France's plot, the communist government published the agreement in *Izvestia* on November 24, 1917—just weeks after Britain issued the Balfour Declaration.[\[16\]](#)

Underlying Britain's maneuvers and conspiracies throughout this time were the lobbying efforts of the Zionist Organization.

The Balfour Propaganda

By February 1917, the Zionist leadership was engaged in formal negotiations with the British government over the fate of Palestine.[\[17\]](#)

Their lobbying efforts would soon come to fruition.

What had already been decided was that Palestine was to be conquered and placed under a prolonged occupation regime. Also decided was that the government of Great Britain would lend its support to the Zionist's colonization project. The Zionists wanted written assurance of Britain's support, but the existence of the Arab Palestinians was an ever present obstacle. The British, for their part, had to weigh the extent to which they could pledge their support for Zionism with their need to retain Arab support for the war. Hence, what remained to be determined was the specific wording with which the British assurance would be given.

Given Britain's need not to overly alarm the Arabs, the use of the term "Jewish State" was ruled out and "National Home" chosen as replacement.[\[18\]](#) However, there were no illusions among British policymakers that the intent would remain the same.

As noted by the aforementioned British commission of inquiry, known as the Peel Commission, "His Majesty's Government could not commit itself to the establishment of a Jewish State. It could only undertake to facilitate the growth of a Home. It would depend mainly on the zeal and enterprise of the Jews whether the Home would grow big enough to become a State."[\[19\]](#)

An early draft of the policy declaration had read "The policy of the British Government in relation to the future of Palestine will be governed by the principle that Palestine must be reconstituted as the National Home of the Jewish People." The details of how Palestine was to be so "reconstituted" would be worked out with the Zionists as they went. There was no mention of the Arabs already living there.[\[20\]](#)

The verb "reconstituted" and lack of acknowledgment of Palestine's inhabitants, like the use of the term "Jewish State", were further than the British deemed politically feasible. Ultimately, further compromises were made and a mutually agreeable text reached.

In a letter dated November 2, 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour presented Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild, of the famous banking family, with a statement of policy from the British government. The letter stated:

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet:

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

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.[\[21\]](#)

The British may have persuaded the Zionists to accept a watered-down policy statement, but the declaration's use of the term “National Home” and reference to the rights of Palestine Arab inhabitants scarcely concealed the true intent of British policymakers.

As a joint British-American committee later noted, “many responsible persons in the British and United States Governments and among the Jewish people believed that a considerable Jewish majority might develop in Palestine in the course of time, and that a Jewish State might thus be the ultimate outcome of the Balfour Declaration.”[\[22\]](#)

Prime Minister Lloyd George considered that, if the Zionists took full advantage of the Balfour policy, they could establish a majority through mass immigration, and “then Palestine would thus become a Jewish Commonwealth.”[\[23\]](#)

The British Prime Minister also bluntly explained that the Balfour Declaration was issued “due to propagandist reasons”.

The Peel Commission related the circumstances:

The Roumanians [*sic*] had been crushed. The Russian Arm was demoralized. The French Army was unable at the moment to take the offensive on a large scale. The Italians had sustained a great defeat at Caporetto. Millions of tons of British shipping had been sunk by German submarines. No American divisions were yet available in the trenches. In this critical situation it was believed that Jewish sympathy or the reverse would make a substantial difference one way or the other to the Allied cause. In particular Jewish sympathy would confirm the support of American Jewry....

As Lloyd George informed the commission,

The Zionist leaders gave us a definite promise that, if the Allies committed themselves to giving facilities for the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine, they would do their best to rally Jewish sentiment and support throughout the world to the Allied cause. They kept their word.[\[24\]](#)

The British would not keep theirs. However, they had got what they wanted. Both the Zionists and the Arabs would throw their weight behind the war effort.

While the Arabs of Palestine did not revolt en masse against the Ottoman Empire, the Turks quickly discovered they could not count on Arab loyalty, and, as already noted, some Palestinians did join in the fighting on the side of the British.[\[25\]](#)

Just five weeks after issuing the Balfour Declaration, on December 9, 1917, with the help of the Arab forces, Britain captured Jerusalem. As the Peel Commission remarked,

When the British army invaded Palestine in the autumn of 1917, the Arabs, a few thousand of whom had been trained as a regular force, operated beyond the Jordan on the outer flank of the advance. Their co-operation was unquestionably a factor in the success of the campaign which culminated in the capture of Jerusalem on the 9th December, 1917, and in the final expulsion of the Turkish forces from Palestine in the following autumn. [\[26\]](#)



British General Sir Edmund Allenby entering conquered Jerusalem on December 11, 1917 (Public Domain)

II. The Colonization of Palestine

Reassurances of Arab Independence

On January 8, 1918, US President Woodrow Wilson gave a speech to Congress proposing a fourteen-point program for achieving peace. Among his points was the principle that there should be an “adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.”

Foreshadowing the establishment of the League of Nations, Wilson also proposed that a “general association of nations” be established “for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.”[\[27\]](#)

Echoing Wilson, and to reassure their Arab allies, on November 7, 1918, Britain and France issued a joint declaration. Relayed by General Edmund Allenby, who had led the British forces into Jerusalem, the joint declaration stated:

The object aimed at by France and Great Britain in prosecuting in the East the war let loose by German ambition is the complete and definite emancipation of the peoples so long oppressed by the Turks, and the establishment of National Governments and administrations deriving their authority from the initiatives and free choice of the indigenous populations.

In order to carry out these intentions France and Great Britain are at one in encouraging and assisting the establishment of indigenous Governments and administrations in Syria and Mesopotamia, now liberated by the Allies, and in territories the liberation of which they are engaged in securing, and in recognizing these as soon as they are established. Far from wishing to impose on the populations of these regions any particular institutions, they are only concerned to secure by their support and by adequate assistance the regular working of Governments and administrations freely chosen by the population themselves.[\[28\]](#)

As the Peel Commission later noted:

The Arabs of Palestine put their trust in the Proclamation which Lord Allenby issued in 1918 in the name of the Governments of Great Britain and France that it was the solemn purpose of the Allies to further the cause of Arab self-determination and to establish Arab national governments. They understood this Proclamation to be the renewed assertion of the promise made to King Hussein in the McMahon letter.[\[29\]](#)

Foreign Secretary Balfour admitted to the leader of the Zionist movement in the US, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, that the joint declaration “complicated” the situation by “telling people of the East that their wishes would be consulted in the disposition of their future”.

Balfour privately reassured Brandeis, however, that “Palestine should be excluded from the terms of reference because the Powers had committed themselves to the Zionist program which inevitably excluded numerical self-determination.”[\[30\]](#)

The Treaty of Versailles

The First World War ended on June 28, 1919, with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles at the Paris Peace Conference.

The treaty included the text of the Covenant of the League of Nations, Article 22 of which established the Mandate system. The relevant portion stated (emphasis added):

To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant.

The best method of giving practical effect to this principle is that the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are willing to accept it, and that this tutelage should be exercised by them as Mandatories on behalf of the League....

Certain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish Empire have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone. *The wishes of these communities must be a principle consideration in the selection of the Mandatory.*[\[31\]](#)

Writing to Lord George Nathaniel Curzon, Foreign Secretary Balfour observed (emphasis added):

The contradiction between the letters of the Covenant and the policy of the Allies is even more flagrant in the case of the ‘independent nation’ of Palestine than in that of the ‘independent nation’ of Syria. *For in Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country, though the American Commission has been going through the form of asking what they are. The four Great Powers are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.*[\[32\]](#)

The King-Crane Commission

The commission Balfour was referring to was headed up by Henry Churchill King and Charles R. Crane, who were tasked by President Wilson during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 with determining the perspectives of Arabs formerly under Ottoman rule about how they wished to be governed. The purpose, although the US had ultimately declined to join the League of Nations, was to offer policy guidance for how the Mandate system would operate.

The conclusions the King-Crane Commission arrived at, however, were evidently the wrong ones, as their recommendations went unheeded, and the report itself was kept secret until 1922.

In publishing it for the first time, *Editor & Publisher* sensationalized that “It pronounces the doom of Zionism.”

The report, *Editor & Publisher* more soberly noted, laid bare the duplicity of Western governments in conspiring to deny self-determination to the Arabs of the conquered territories. It exposed as pure propaganda Western promises of independence once the war was over. It showed how policymakers rejected the assumption “that the facts of international conditions should determine conclusions”, and how secret pacts had “fixed the outcome of negotiations” with broken promises. [\[33\]](#)

The King-Crane Report noted that the Balfour Declaration was inherently self-contradictory, since furthering the Zionists’ colonization project constituted “the gravest trespass upon the ‘civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.’”

Jews at the time represented only about 3.4 percent of the population of 3.2 million. Obviously, the success of the Zionist project would depend on a massive amount of Jewish immigration, and such colonization should not be undertaken without respect for the rights of the people already living there.

Furthermore, in the commissioners’ discussions with Zionist representatives, “the fact came out repeatedly” that they “looked forward to a practically complete dispossession of the present non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine, by various forms of purchase.”

Noting that President Wilson had laid down self-determination as one of the ends for which the Allies were fighting during the war, the King-Crane Commission concluded:

If that principle is to rule, and so the wishes of Palestine’s population are to be decisive as to what is to be done with Palestine, then it is to be remembered that the non-Jewish population of Palestine—nearly nine tenths of the whole—are emphatically against the entire Zionist program. . . .

[T]here was no one thing upon which the population of Palestine were [*sic*] more agreed than upon this. To subject a people so minded to unlimited Jewish immigration, and to steady financial and social pressure to surrender the land, would be a gross violation of the principle just quoted, and of the people's rights, though it kept within the forms of law.

Representing about 89 percent of the population, Muslims and Christians were “practically unanimous” in their opposition to Zionism. The commissioners had begun their inquiry predisposed in favor of Zionism, but, after examining the “actual facts in Palestine”, recommended *against* lending support to the Zionist project. They accurately foresaw that the Zionists' aims, being premised on disregard for the rights of the Arabs, could not be achieved “except by force of arms.”[\[34\]](#)

The Arabs, however, being cognizant of the Zionists' intention to subjugate and ultimately displace them, were not going to take it sitting down.

On April 4, 1920, an Arab riot broke out in Jerusalem in which five Jews were killed and hundreds injured.

Tasked with determining the underlying causes of the violence, a British commission of inquiry identified them as: (1) Arab frustration that Britain's promise of independence was not fulfilled, and (2) the Arabs' perception of the Balfour Declaration as constituting an implicit rejection of their right to self-determination.[\[35\]](#)

The San Remo Resolution

The outbreak of violence did not suggest to the British any need to alter their rejectionist policy, which remained on course.

The victorious Allied Powers, in consultation with the Zionist Organization, were busy conspiring how to subject the Arabs in order to enable the Zionist's colonization project.

In San Remo, Italy, a conference was held by the post-war Allied Supreme Council to determine the Mandates for formerly Ottoman territories. On April 25, 1920, citing Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, a resolution was issued with respect to Palestine.

The San Remo Resolution appointed Britain as the Mandatory Power and stated that the extent of the territory in which the Arabs would be permitted to exercise independence was yet to be determined.

However, the agreed colonialist aims for Palestine were projected in the policy determination that the Mandatory Power "will be responsible for putting into effect" the Balfour Declaration, the text of which was incorporated into the resolution.[\[36\]](#)

Contrary to the principle expressed in Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant, however, the inhabitants of Palestine were given no say in the selection of the Mandatory Power. What the King-Crane Commission had learned, however, by "going through the form of asking", was that Arab representatives rejected the Mandate system altogether, but that if subjection was unavoidable, they would prefer to be under the administrative governance of the United States.[\[37\]](#)

While the inhabitants of Palestine were not consulted about the choice of Mandatory Power, the European Zionists *were*.

On February 3, 1919, the Zionist Organization had submitted to the Supreme Council its scheme for how the mandate should

operate, including the Zionists' natural choice of Mandatory Power: the government of Great Britain.[\[38\]](#)

The Treaty of Sèvres

Since the start of the foreign occupation, Palestine had been under a joint military administration of Britain and France known as the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (OETA). On July 1, 1920, in pursuance of the policy outlined in the San Remo Resolution, this regime was replaced by a British civil administration headed by Sir Herbert Samuel, who received the title of High Commissioner for Palestine.[\[39\]](#)

On August 10, 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres was signed between the Allied Powers and representatives of the defeated Ottoman Empire. The treaty provided that, in accordance with Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant, Syria and Iraq were to be recognized “as independent States subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone”.

For Palestine, on the other hand, self-determination was totally rejected. Instead, Britain would be “responsible for putting into effect” the Balfour Declaration, the text of which was incorporated into the treaty.

The treaty also determined that “The terms of the mandates in respect to the above territories will be formulated by the Principal Allied Powers and submitted to the Council of the League of Nations for approval.”[\[40\]](#)

As ever, any thoughts the Arab inhabitants of Palestine might have about the matter were deemed inconsequential.

Zionism's Failure to Convince

In May 1921, another series of Arab riots broke out, this time in Jaffa. Forty-seven Jews were killed and 146 others wounded. To determine the causes of the violence, the British government appointed Sir Thomas Haycraft to head up a commission of inquiry. Upon the completion of its investigation, the Haycraft Commission concluded:

[T]here is no inherent anti-Semitism in the country, racial or religious. We are credibly assured by educated Arabs that they would welcome the arrival of well-to-do and able Jews who could help to develop the country to the advantage of all sections of the community. Zionists, for their part, dwell freely on the theme that the realization of the policy of the “National Home” will benefit Arabs as well as Jews; but we feel bound to express the opinion, arrived at in the course of the inquiry, that the Zionist Commission, which is the representative of the Zionist Organisation in Palestine, has failed to carry conviction to the Arabs on this point.

The British government, too, had failed to convince the Arabs, whose distrust was sown at the outset of the occupation regime, which treated Jews preferentially. Jews, for instance, were more easily able to obtain permits for travel and trade, whereas “the Arabs had to follow a cumbersome and lengthy procedure.”

The Zionist Organization’s land and labor policies also sowed distrust. In one case, the Jewish owner of a large plot of land preferred to retain his Arab workers, “who had been employed on his farm since he was a boy.” The estate owner’s reasons were, first, that he did not wish to alienate the Arabs, and, second, “because the pay demanded by the Jewish labourers, and the short hours during which they would consent to work, would make it impossible for him to run his farm at a profit.”

Under coercion from the Zionist Commission, however, the estate owner relented.

When the Haycraft Commission interviewed the acting Chairman of the Zionist Commission, David Eder, “he was perfectly frank in expressing his view of the Zionist ideal.... In his opinion there can only be one National Home in Palestine, and that a Jewish one, and no equality in the partnership between Jews and Arabs, but a Jewish predominance as soon as the numbers of that race are sufficiently increased.”[\[41\]](#)

Zionist Land Policies

The Zionist Organization’s discriminatory land and labor policies were subsequently formalized. The Jewish Agency was splintered out, with the signing of its new constitution in Zurich, Switzerland, on August 14, 1929. Article 3 of the Constitution of the Jewish Agency stated that land in Palestine was “to be acquired as Jewish property”, to be held by the Jewish National Fund “as the inalienable property of the Jewish people.”

Furthermore, “The Agency shall promote agricultural colonization based on Jewish labour, and in all works or undertakings carried out or furthered by the Agency, it shall be deemed to be a matter of principle that Jewish labour shall be employed....”[\[42\]](#)

A British government report the following year, written by Sir John Hope Simpson, observed with respect to the Jewish Agency’s policies that,

Actually the result of the purchase of land in Palestine by the Jewish National Fund has been that land has been extraterritorialised. It ceases to be land from which the Arab can gain any advantage either now or at any time in the future. Not only can he never hope to lease or to

cultivate it, but, by the stringent provisions of the lease of the Jewish National Fund, he is deprived for ever from employment on that land.[\[43\]](#)

The Hope Simpson Report also commented on the stark difference in Jewish-Arab relations between different Jewish settlements, depending on whether or not the Jewish Agency's land policies were applied. Baron Edmond James de Rothschild, a French member of the Rothschild banking family, had in 1924 established the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association (PICA), which worked alongside the JNF in purchasing land and establishing Jewish settlements. As the Hope Simpson Report remarked:

In discussing the question of the effect of Jewish Settlement on the Arab it is essential to differentiate between the P.I.C.A. colonisation and that of the Zionist Organisation.

In so far as the past policy of the P.I.C.A. is concerned, there can be no doubt that the Arab has profited largely by the installation of the colonies. Relations between the colonists and their Arab neighbours were excellent. In many cases, when land was bought by the P.I.C.A. for settlement, they combined with the development of the land for their own settlers similar development for the Arabs who previously occupied the land. All the cases which are now quoted by the Jewish authorities to establish the advantageous effect of Jewish colonisation on the Arabs of the neighbourhood, and which have been brought to notice forcibly and frequently during the course of this enquiry, are cases relating to colonies established by the P.I.C.A., before the Keren Hayesod [the Zionist Organization's main financial institution] came into existence. In fact, the policy of the P.I.C.A. was one of

great friendship for the Arab. Not only did they develop the Arab lands simultaneously with their own, when founding their colonies, but they employed the Arab to tend their plantations, cultivate their fields, to pluck their grapes and their oranges. As a general rule the P.I.C.A. colonisation was of unquestionable benefit to the Arabs of the vicinity.

It is also very noticeable, in travelling through the P.I.C.A. villages, to see the friendliness of the relations which exist between Jew and Arab. It is quite a common sight to see an Arab sitting in the verandah of a Jewish house. The position is entirely different in the Zionist colonies.[\[44\]](#)

The means by which the Zionists acquired land “legally” also prejudiced the property rights of the Arab peasants inhabiting it. Although the Ottoman Empire had been dismantled, its land ordinances in Palestine remained in effect under the British regime. In the Ottoman Land Code and Registration Law of 1858, the state effectively claimed ownership of the land, its inhabitants being regarded as tenants. Revisions to this law in 1859 allowed for individuals to register for a title-deed to land, but this requirement was largely ignored. Many saw no need, unless they wished to sell. And incentives *not* to register included the desire to avoid granting legitimacy to the Turkish government, to avoid paying registration fees and taxes, and to evade military conscription. Furthermore, land lived on and cultivated by one individual was often registered in the name of another. Whole villages were even registered in the name of local government magnates.[\[45\]](#)

Much of the land the Zionists acquired was purchased from absentee landlords, including many who didn't even live in Palestine.[\[46\]](#) According to the report of a 1929 British commission chaired by Sir Walter Shaw, land acquired from

peasants did not exceed 10 percent of the total land purchased by the Jews. The rest had been acquired from large estate owners, “most of whom live outside Palestine”. As the Shaw Commission noted, by this means, Arab tenants and cultivators were being “deprived of their holdings”, and whole villages evicted.[\[47\]](#)

Furthermore (emphasis added):

The sale of lands over the heads of occupant tenants and the consequent dispossession of those tenants with or without compensation are not peculiar to Palestine but the position there is complicated by two factors which can seldom obtain elsewhere. In the first place the dispossessed tenant in Palestine is unlikely to be able to find alternative land to which he can remove. Secondly, in some cases, the cultivators who were or may be dispossessed have a strong moral claim to be allowed to continue in occupation of their present holding. Under the Turkish regime, especially in the latter half of the eighteenth century, persons of the peasant classes in some parts of the Ottoman Empire, including the territory now known as Palestine, found that by admitting the overlordship of the Sultan or of some member of the Turkish aristocracy, they could obtain protection against extortion and other material benefits which counterbalanced the tribute demanded by their over-lord as a return for his protection. Accordingly many peasant cultivators at that time either willingly entered into an arrangement of this character or, finding that it was imposed upon them, submitted to it. *By these means persons of importance and position in the Ottoman Empire acquired the legal title to large tracts of land which for generations and in some cases for centuries had been in the undisturbed and undisputed occupation of peasants who, though by the new*

arrangement they surrendered their prescriptive rights over the land which they cultivated, had undoubtedly a strong moral claim to be allowed to continue in occupation of those lands. [\[48\]](#)

The Churchill White Paper

Unwilling to accept their disenfranchisement under British policy, Arab leaders made clear to the British Colonial Office their absolute rejection of the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate, which had yet to be formally adopted by the League of Nations.

Consequently, in June 1922, Secretary of State for the Colonies (and later Prime Minister) Winston Churchill issued a policy statement intended to quell Arab unrest while reassuring the Zionists that its policy remained unchanged.

It proved an impossible balancing act.

Churchill's central message was that, although the Balfour Declaration had not called for reconstituting all of Palestine as a "wholly Jewish" state, which was how many Zionists had chosen to interpret it, it did determine that Britain would enable mass Jewish immigration. Already since the start of Britain's occupation, about 25,000 Jews had immigrated, increasing the Jewish population to 80,000. Churchill described this immigration as a "right" of the Jews and assured that it would continue, to be limited only by "the economic capacity of the country at the time to absorb new arrivals."

As for the Arabs' demand for self-determination, Churchill explained that it all had been just a big misunderstanding. The British, in their promise of Arab independence contained in the McMahon-Hussein correspondence, was always intended to exclude Palestine, whose Arab inhabitants were not worthy of

exercising self-determination by virtue of living on land coveted by the Zionists.

Nevertheless, Churchill conveyed, Britain, out of its great munificence, was prepared “to foster the establishment of a full measure of self government in Palestine.” But not just yet, obviously because the Zionist project still had such a long way to go to achieve its goal, and because the Arabs still had so much to learn from the British about “sound methods of government.”

For the time being, Churchill informed the Palestinians, democratic governance must be denied to them since it “would preclude the fulfillment of the pledge made by the British Government to the Jewish people.”[\[49\]](#)

As the Peel Commission reiterated, self-rule could not be allowed since it would “frustrate the purpose of the Balfour Declaration.” While the Arab rejection of British policy was “logical”, British policymakers “were not deterred by the intransigence of the Arab Executive from pursuing the policy they had framed.”[\[50\]](#)

Arabs who were willing to collaborate with the Zionist regime were described as “moderate” by the Commission. Most of the leadership, however, insisted on nothing less than full independence and democratic governance, and were therefore dubbed “extremist”.[\[51\]](#) (The “moderate” Arab, the Commission further instructed, was one who “appeals to his people to accept something less than national independence”.[\[52\]](#))

The “extremist” Arab leadership replied to Churchill in order to communicate their objections to the policy he outlined, as well as his duplicity. They pointed out that under the existing draft Mandate, “the Jewish Agency, which is the Zionist

Organisation, a foreign body, has been given more powers than the actual inhabitants of the country.” They also reminded Churchill that, quite apart from any duplicitous intent of the British government, the actual language of McMahon’s pledge to Sharif Hussein included Palestine “within the scope of the promise”, and Palestine was “entitled to the recognition of her independence.”

The inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the policy paper, the Arabs pointed out, was that it was Britain’s intent “to allow time to elapse during which Jews will have increased in numbers and the powers of Zionism become more established in the land.... We are to understand, then, that self-government will be granted as soon as the Jewish people in Palestine are sufficiently able through numbers and powers to benefit to the full by self-government, and not before.”[\[53\]](#)

III. The Zionist Mandate for Palestine

The Formulation of the Mandate

The draft text of the Mandate for Palestine had yet to be adopted by the Council of the League of Nations, but already the colonization project was well under way. The British had been appointed to rule over Palestine, despite Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant and contrary to the will of Palestine’s inhabitants. And the Balfour Declaration had predetermined that British policy under the Mandate would be to enable the Zionists to advance their aims, with great prejudice toward the rights of the majority Arab population.

While the Arabs were given no say, representatives of the Zionist Organization had been heavily involved in the drafting of the Mandate from the beginning. As early as February 1919, the Zionist Organization had presented to the Allied Supreme Council its scheme for how the Balfour policy should be

executed. Felix Frankfurter, a leading American Zionist (who later became, like Louis Brandeis, a Supreme Court Justice), drafted a more detailed plan the following month.

“From these and other documents”, the Peel Commission commented, “it is clear that the Zionist project had already in those early days assumed something like the shape of the Mandate as we know it.”[\[54\]](#)

The Zionists’ chief antagonist during debates over the text was Lord Curzon, who pointed out that neither the Balfour Declaration, nor the Treaty of Sèvres, nor the San Remo Resolution had conferred to the Zionists any legal claim to the territory of Palestine. (Such authority, needless to say, was not Great Britain’s to give.) Furthermore, the language of the Balfour Declaration as finally adopted had expressed the British government’s support “for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine”, which was “not the same thing as the reconstitution of Palestine as a Jewish national home”.[\[55\]](#)

Another critic of the British policy was Lord Sydenham, who presciently warned Lord Balfour during a Parliamentary debate that “the harm done by dumping down an alien population upon an Arab country ... may never be remedied”. By conceding British policy “not to the Jewish people, but to a Zionist extreme section”, the government had managed “to start a running sore in the East, and no one can tell how far that sore will extend.”[\[56\]](#)

“I sympathize entirely with the wishes of the Jews to have a national home,” Lord Sydenham said during the course of the debate, “but I say that this national home must not be given if it cannot be given without entailing gross injustice upon other people.”[\[57\]](#)

Such warnings, however, like the Arabs' demand for independence, went unheeded.

Thus, on July 24, 1922, nearly five years after the issuance of the Balfour Declaration, the Council of the League of Nations formally adopted the Mandate for Palestine.[\[58\]](#)

The text of the declaration, as in previous documents, was directly incorporated into the Palestine Mandate, which gave Britain the prime directive to “secure the establishment of the Jewish national home” in Palestine. Alluding to the Zionist Organization, it called for recognition of an “appropriate Jewish agency” as “a public body for the purpose of advising and cooperating with the Administration of Palestine”. It also determined that Britain would, in cooperation with the Zionist leadership, “facilitate Jewish immigration” and encourage “close settlement by Jews on the land”.[\[59\]](#)

There were no clauses in the Mandate permitting the majority Arab population any say in how they were to be governed under the British administration, which was, fundamentally, a Zionist regime established with the specific purpose of *denying* the Arabs their rights.

As the Peel Commission later noted, “the acceptance by the Allied Powers and the United States of the policy of the Balfour Declaration made it clear from the beginning that Palestine would have to be treated differently”—that is, the Palestinians could not be permitted independence or democratic governance.[\[60\]](#)

This rejection of the Arabs' right to self-determination was succinctly expressed by Lord Alfred Milner, who told the House of Lords on June 27, 1923, that since Palestine was sacred also to Jews and Christians, “the future of Palestine cannot possibly be left to be determined by the temporary

impressions and feelings of the Arab majority in the country of the present day.”[\[61\]](#)

The Mandate, like the Balfour Declaration, included a few clauses paying meaningless lip service to the rights of the Arabs. “Unquestionably, however,” the Peel Commission noted, “the primary purpose of the Mandate, as expressed in its preamble and its articles, is to promote the establishment of the Jewish National Home.”[\[62\]](#) The Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry likewise observed that, “Though extensive safeguards were provided for the non-Jewish peoples, the Mandate was framed primarily in the Jewish interest.”[\[63\]](#)

The Peel Commission further observed, “Articles 4, 6 and 11 provide for the recognition of a Jewish Agency ‘as a public body for the purpose of advising and co-operating with the Administration’ on matters affecting Jewish interests. No such body is envisaged for dealing with Arab interests.”[\[64\]](#)

Britain’s Miscalculation

In 1936, in a display of mass civil disobedience, the Arabs held a general strike that lasted for six months. The strike was ended, but the revolt against the Zionist regime took on a different character as violence ensued. Lasting from 1936 until 1939, the Arab revolt was eventually suppressed through British military force.

There had been outbreaks of violence in 1920, 1921, and 1929. Previous inquiries into those events had determined that the root cause was Arab anxiety about their future under the regime. Now another commission was appointed to inquire into the causes of the Arab revolt then still underway. The 1937 report of the Palestine Royal Commission—more commonly known as the Peel Commission after its chair, Lord William Peel—forebodingly determined that “the Mandate itself ... had lighted

the fire; and the Mandate itself, however applied or interpreted, was bound to keep it burning....”[65]

British policymakers had, of course, understood that the Arabs wouldn't like the whole arrangement, but they had also underestimated the Palestinians' resolve not to be subjected to foreign rule. “Already by then the Arab leaders had displayed their hostility to the Mandate and all it involved; but it was thought that this hostility would presently weaken and die away.”[66]

Policymakers had calculated that the Arabs would come to realize the benefits of being subjected to their enlightened rule and therefore consent to it. “It must have been obvious from the outset”, the Commission remarked, “that a very awkward situation would arise if that basic assumption should prove false.”

In a remarkable display of cognitive dissonance, the Peel Commission further remarked, as though that assumption *hadn't* proved false:

It would evidently make the operation of the Mandate at every point more difficult, and it would greatly complicate the question of its termination. To foster Jewish immigration in the hope that it might ultimately lead to the creation of a Jewish majority and the establishment of a Jewish State with the consent or at least the acquiescence of the Arabs was one thing. It was quite another thing to contemplate, however remotely, the forcible conversion of Palestine into a Jewish State against the will of the Arabs. For that would clearly violate the spirit and intention of the Mandate System. It would mean that national self-determination had been withheld when the Arabs were a majority in Palestine and only conceded when the Jews

were a majority. It would mean that the Arabs had been denied the opportunity of standing by themselves: that they had, in fact, after an interval of conflict, been bartered about from Turkish sovereignty to Jewish sovereignty.”[\[67\]](#)

The British commissioners were perplexed by the Arabs’ lack of gratitude toward Great Britain:

The fact that the Balfour Declaration was issued in 1917 in order to enlist Jewish support for the Allies and the fact that this support was forthcoming are not sufficiently appreciated in Palestine. The Arabs do not appear to realize in the first place that the present position of the Arab world as a whole is mainly due to the great sacrifices made by the Allied and Associated Powers in the War and, secondly, that, in so far as the Balfour Declaration helped to bring about the Allies’ victory, it helped to bring about the emancipation of all the Arab countries from Turkish rule.[\[68\]](#)

Except Palestine, of course—which does go a little way toward explaining the lack of appreciation.

The Zionists’ Western supporters had failed to anticipate that “so long as poor and backward” a people as the Arab Palestinians, in addition to complaining about having no say in how were governed, would reject “the material blessings of Western civilization”.[\[69\]](#)

Actually, the Arabs of Palestine “had enjoyed the benefits of a democratic rule during the preceding few years under the Turks”, as honorary secretary of the Arab Executive Jamaal Bey Husseini observed in a 1932 journal article.

His purpose in writing was to comment on a new constitution for Palestine the British at that time were planning to force on the Arabs. Under its terms, the executive powers of government would remain “totally and exclusively vested in the British High Commissioner”, who was also to serve as the Chairman of the Legislative Council. Any legislation pertaining to taxation and government expenditure was “to be initiated by the High Commissioner only”. The High Commissioner also had a veto power over any legislation passed by the council, and “All legislation to be passed must be in accord with the provisions of the Mandate”.

As Husseini remarked (emphasis added):

The Constitution of Palestine ... was cooked and canned in London and dispatched to Palestine for consumption.

It is obvious that the British Government evaded the usual [democratic] procedure in laying down the Palestinian Constitution in order to give full protection to the Balfour Declaration, which would be very roughly handled and finally abrogated by a democratic government. The Secretary of State for the Colonies (Mr. Churchill) in 1922 stated that “the Balfour Declaration precludes, at this stage, the establishment of a National Democratic Government.” *It may be argued, however, that if the creation of a democratic government in this age of democracy falls within the sphere of the meaning of the term “civil rights,” then these rights must preclude the execution of the Balfour Declaration, which lays down the condition that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.”*

Husseini deduced that, if the Arabs would not relent in demanding respect for their right to self-determination, and if the Zionists would not relent in demanding that the Arabs surrender that right to be able to establish the “Jewish national home”, the clash between the two peoples “was and will ever be inevitable.”[\[70\]](#)

Casting further doubt on the presumed “blessings of Western civilization” showered upon the Palestinians under the Mandate were the acknowledgments of British officials that the regime they were imposing on the Arabs was no less oppressive than the Ottoman Empire’s.

John Hope Simpson remarked in 1930 that “the Arab fellah is little if at all better than he was during the Turkish regime.”[\[71\]](#)

The Peel Commission admitted, “It was not to escape oppression but to secure independence that they assisted the British forces and threw in their lot with the Allies.”[\[72\]](#)

The Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry observed how, unlike the autonomy Arab villagers enjoyed under the Turks, the British regime in Palestine lacked the consent of those it governed: “District and local officials, Arab and Jew alike, bear only limited discretion and responsibility, even in their own communities.”[\[73\]](#)

As the Shaw Commission acknowledged, under Turkish rule, the Arabs of Palestine had established local self-government under which even the peasant “had a voice in the control of his village, and indirectly through the system of secondary elections, in the control of the affairs of the larger administrative units up to the Ottoman Empire itself.... This position is contrasted with that obtaining to-day when self-government in Palestine is limited to municipal areas and even there is exercised under strict supervision.”[\[74\]](#)

Such admissions notwithstanding, as the Peel Commission so starkly demonstrated, British policymakers sustained their perceived benevolence through extreme cognitive dissonance. The racist, colonialist assumptions underlying British policy were scarcely concealed under the thin veil of lofty rhetoric emanating from British officials.

Another stark illustration was provided by Lord Balfour in a speech on July 12, 1920, in which he complained about the Arab Palestinians' ingratitude for everything Britain's enlightened leadership had done for them while at the same time explicitly rejecting their right to self-governance.

Referring to the "difficulties" Great Britain's self-contradictory policies had created, Balfour remarked:

Among these difficulties I am not sure that I do not rate highest, or at all events first, the inevitable difficulty of dealing with the Arab question as it presents itself within the limits of Palestine. It will require tact, it will require judgment, it will require above all sympathetic good will on the part both of Jew and Arab. So far as the Arabs are concerned—a great, an interesting and an attractive race—I hope they will remember that ... the Great Powers, and among all the Great Powers most especially Great Britain, has freed them, the Arab race, from the tyranny of their brutal conqueror, who had kept them under his heel for these many centuries. I hope they will remember that it is we who have established the independent Arab sovereignty of the Hedjaz. I hope they will remember that it is we who desire in Mesopotamia to prepare the way for the future of a self-governing, autonomous Arab State. And I hope that, remembering all that, they will not grudge that small notch—for it is no more geographically, whatever it may be historically—that small notch in what

are now Arab territories being given to the people for all these hundreds of years have been separated from it.[\[75\]](#)

Sharing Balfour's sentiment, Lord Alfred Milner told the House of Lords on June 27, 1923, that since land considered holy by Jews and Christians lay within its boundaries, "the future of Palestine cannot possibly be left to be determined by the temporary impressions and feelings of the Arab majority in the country of the present day."[\[76\]](#)

The 'Compulsory Transfer'

In 1937, the Peel Commission Report was published. In addition to determining the underlying causes of the Arab revolt, it proposed a solution: partitioning Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states.

The problem was that, even within the area suggested for a Jewish state, there would remain 225,000 Arabs. The Commission concluded that, "Sooner or later there should be a transfer of land and, as far as possible, an exchange of population."

The Commission then drew attention to the "instructive precedent" of an agreement between the governments of Greece and Turkey in the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish War of 1922, in which it was determined that "Greek nationals of the Orthodox religion living in Turkey should be compulsorily removed to Greece, and Turkish nationals of the Moslem religion living in Greece to Turkey."

The Commission expressed hope "that the Arab and the Jewish leaders might show the same high statesmanship as that of the Turks and the Greeks and make the same bold decision for the sake of peace."[\[77\]](#)

However, the Commission was not unmindful of “the deeply-rooted aversion which all Arab peasants have shown in the past to leaving the lands which they have cultivated for many generations. They would, it is believed, strongly object to a compulsory transfer....”[\[78\]](#)

As Israeli historian Benny Morris has written, “The fact that the Peel Commission in 1937 supported the transfer of Arabs out of the Jewish state-to-be without doubt consolidated the wide acceptance of the idea among the Zionist leaders.”[\[79\]](#) With the Peel Commission having “given the idea its imprimatur”, “the floodgates were opened”, and by “a virtual consensus”, the Zionist leadership “went on record in support of transfer....”[\[80\]](#)

The Zionist leader who would become Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, expressed his acceptance of the partition plan as a pragmatic first step toward the ultimate goal of establishing a Jewish state over all of the territory of Palestine.

While the extent of the proposed Jewish state may not have been to Ben-Gurion’s liking, the idea of “compulsory transfer” deeply resonated.

“My approach to the solution of the question of the Arabs in the Jewish state”, said Ben-Gurion in 1938, “is their transfer to Arab countries.” The same year, he told the Jewish Agency Executive, “I am for compulsory transfer. I do not see anything immoral in it.”[\[81\]](#)

As the years passed, the violence escalated, and Jewish terrorist organizations arose that set their sights not only on Arabs, but also on the British. The more extreme Zionists viewed the British regime now as more of a hindrance than a help to their project.

When the League of Nations was dissolved after World War II, the Mandate trusteeship passed to the newly formed United Nations. With the situation spiraling out of control, in 1947, the British government sought to extract itself from the chaos its policies had sown by turning to the UN.

The UN General Assembly appointed a committee to examine “the question of Palestine” and make recommendations. Resurrecting the idea from the stillborn Peel Commission plan, the UN committee proposed partitioning Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states.

By this time, due mostly to immigration, Jews constituted about one-third of the population, but they had still only acquired about 7 percent of the land. The majority Arabs owned more land than Jews in every single district of Palestine, including Jaffa, which included the main Jewish population center, Tel Aviv.

The UN committee nevertheless suggested allotting 55 percent of Palestine’s territory to the Jewish state, while the Arabs would get about 45 percent for their state, with Jerusalem remaining under international trusteeship.[\[82\]](#)

The Arabs, naturally, rejected the plan as inherently inequitable—just another shadow of the long arm of the Balfour Declaration.

That fateful declaration three decades prior had determined the course of policy throughout the Mandate period. And it was the same rejectionist framework that the UN committee adopted, despite being contrary to the UN Charter and the organization’s declared purpose to maintain peace by fostering “friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples”.

The UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) candidly observed,

With regard to the principle of self-determination, ... it was not applied to Palestine, obviously because of the intention to make possible the creation of the Jewish National Home there. Actually, it may well be said that the Jewish National Home and the *sui generis* Mandate for Palestine run counter to the principle.

Rather than concluding that therefore the Mandate was null and void and that Palestine's independence should forthwith be recognized and a democratic government established, the UN committee simply adopted the rejectionist framework on the basis of their judgment that there were "no grounds for questioning the validity of the Mandate".[\[83\]](#)

The committee's partition plan, despite violating the principles of the UN Charter, was formally adopted by the UN General Assembly in Resolution 181 on November 29, 1947. The resolution referred the matter to the Security Council, where the plan died.

The US ambassador to the UN, Warren Austin, pointed out to the Council on February 24, 1948, that partitioning Palestine to create a Jewish state could only be accomplished through force of arms. He further observed on March 19 that the UN had no authority to use military force to partition Palestine against the will of the majority of its inhabitants.

The Mandate under UN trusteeship was due to expire in just two months, on May 14, 1948, and upon its expiration, the British would withdraw from the conflict situation British policy had created. Austin warned the Council that war would break out between the military forces the Zionists had by then amassed, and the Arab Palestinian militias and regular armies

of neighboring Arab states. He argued that the UN *did* have the authority to intervene to prevent this threat to international peace. The Security Council, however, took no action.

By that time, under the watchful eye of Western government officials, the Zionist forces had taken it upon themselves to implement the “compulsory transfer” proposed by the Peel Commission, in order to establish their “Jewish State”. Ethnic cleansing operations had already been underway for several months. By the time the Mandate expired two months later, *prior to the entrance into the war of the regular armed forces of the neighboring Arab states*, 200 Arab towns and villages had been destroyed and a quarter of a million Palestinians had fled or been forcibly expelled.

Upon expiration of the Mandate and the withdrawal of British forces, the Zionist leadership under David Ben-Gurion unilaterally declared the existence of the State of Israel, citing Resolution 181 as constituting “recognition by the United Nations of the right of the Jewish people to establish their State”.

It bears reemphasizing, however, that [Resolution 181 neither partitioned Palestine nor conferred upon the Zionist leadership any legal authority](#) to declare sovereignty over territory they were only just beginning to conquer by military force and ethnic cleansing.

Neighboring Arab states militarily intervened to stop the political disenfranchisement and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, but only managed to hold on to the territories known as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. By the time armistice agreements were signed between the provision government of Israel and the Arab states, [more than 700,000](#)

[Palestinians had been ethnically cleansed from their homes by the Zionist forces.](#)[\[84\]](#)

The Zionist movement had advertised Palestine in their propaganda as “a land without a people for a people without a land”. The opposite truth of the matter was starkly highlighted by Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan in an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in 1969 (emphasis added):

We came to this country which was already populated by Arabs, and we are establishing a Hebrew, that is a Jewish state here. In considerable areas of the country we bought the lands from the Arabs. Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages. You do not even know the names of these Arab villages, and I do not blame you, because these geography books no longer exist; not only do the books not exist, the Arab villages are not there either. Nahalal arose in the place of Mahalul, Gevat—in the place of Jibta, Sarid—in the place of Haneifs, and Kefar Yehoshua—in the place of Tell Shaman. *There is not one place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population.*[\[85\]](#)

Conclusion

The Balfour Declaration issued by the British government one century ago, on November 2, 1917, determined the course of British policy throughout the Mandate period—and well beyond. Its reverberations are still felt today in the violence we see in the Middle East today, and in the oppression of the Palestinians under the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza that has persisted since the “Six Day War” of June 1967.

The Zionist project was premised on an absolute rejection of the rights of the people inhabiting the land they wanted to reconstitute as “Jewish state”. Although there was a possibility

for peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs in an independent state of Palestine under democratic governance, this option was rejected by the Zionists. The policies of the Zionist Organization precluded good-neighborliness and cooperative development of the Palestine economy.

The Zionists' fundamental rejection of Palestinians' rights was formally adopted by the British government in the Balfour Declaration. Despite watering down the text and paying lip service to the rights of the Arabs out of the need to retain their support for their war effort, the Balfour Declaration scarcely concealed mutual aim of Great Britain and the Zionist Organization of reconstituting Palestine into a demographically "Jewish state", with great prejudice toward the rights its Arab inhabitants.

The British government had numerous reasons to employ its armed force toward advancing the Zionist project. The racist, colonialist attitudes of British policymakers predisposed them to look with favor upon establishing an occupation regime in Palestine. The rights of Palestine's inhabitants were of negligible concern, factoring in only when requiring British officials to periodically spout lofty rhetoric in attempts to engineer the Arabs' consent for their own disenfranchisement. An occupation regime in Palestine would enable the British to hold back the "barbarians" and gain a foothold in the oil-rich Middle East. Places considered holy to all three religions could potentially be taken from the control of the Arabs and placed under the control of European Jews and Christians. And it would ensure the support of European and American Jewry for the war effort then underway.

After World War II, the British had another huge motive to sustain their Zionist policy and see it through to the end: *the*

problem of resettling Jewish refugees from World War II could be resolved without European countries having to absorb them.

The resulting displacement of Arabs, a demographic prerequisite for the envisioned “Jewish State” to come into existence, would not be their problem—or so they assumed.

The fact is that the Palestinian refugee problem and Israel’s ongoing occupation regime *are* a problem for Great Britain—and for the rest of the world. The British government could not wash its hands of responsibility by withdrawing its forces upon the expiration of the Mandate on May 14, 1948. British policymakers could not wash their hands of the blood that was spilled—on all sides—as a direct consequence of their decisions.

The Balfour Declaration was a propaganda tool intended to gain Jewish support for Britain’s war effort while retaining the Arab support they needed to succeed in their campaign against the Ottoman Empire. The document’s true significance is that it set Great Britain on a policy course premised on the rejection of the human rights of the Arabs, and which ultimately facilitated the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of them from their homes in Palestine.

Afterword

There is also significance in the great pride British Prime Minister Theresa May feels with respect to Britain’s role in the creation of Israel. It is indicative of the same kind of cognitive dissonance so starkly demonstrated by the Peel Commission and Lord Balfour himself.

The conflict persisting today between Israelis and Palestinians is *still* being enabled by world governments, with the US long since having taken on the leading role. To learn more about the

US role and events that have unfolded over the past decade, read my book *Obstacle to Peace: The US Role in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*:

[Click here to learn more about the book or to order your copy now.](#)

As I explain in *Obstacle to Peace*, to inhibit governments from enabling the oppression of the Palestinians will require a paradigm shift. A critical mass of citizens of the enabling countries must cease tolerating the cognitive dissonance and delusions of grandeur of the government officials purporting to represent them.

The governments of the world are not going to get the job done. It is up to *us*.

To effect this necessary paradigm shift, news consumers must cease directing resources toward a mainstream media establishment that systematically misrepresents the nature of the conflict and serve the politically and financially powerful by engineering public opinion to be supportive of existing government policy.

There needs to be a greater number of conscientious consumers who choose instead direct the required resources toward independent journalists and publications that actually help them make sense of the world around them by *properly* informing them.

Independent journalists and publishers, for their part, must dig deeper, acquire better analytic skills, and learn to more *effectively* communicate ideas and information to news consumers and make their voices heard.

You can help make a positive impact right now by *sharing this essay*.

If you find value in the knowledge you've gained by reading this content, which is freely offered but produced at a cost of both time and money, and if you have the means, please also consider making a financial contribution to *Foreign Policy Journal*:

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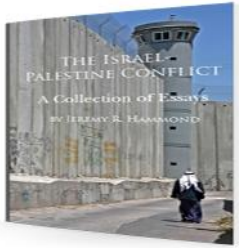
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