

A document that still resonates

Arthur Balfour visiting Jewish colonies, in 1925. | Photo Credit: [UniversalImagesGroup](#)

The famous (or infamous) Balfour declaration was issued exactly a hundred years ago on November 2, 1917.

The visionary behind Zionism, Theodor Herzl moulded the Zionist movement into a demand for a Jewish homeland in the last decade of the 19th century. The immediate provocation was the ruthless pogroms carried out by Czarist Russia that caused a large exodus of Jews. These Jewish émigrés had to be settled somewhere; why not give them a homeland of their own? And why not Palestine as their homeland, from where they were forced out (according to the Israeli narrative) centuries ago?

British Foreign Secretary Lord Lansdowne offered unrestricted immigration to Jewish people in Uganda. (Uganda, a colony, was fair game.) Herzl supported Lansdowne's offer as an interim solution. He was supported by majority of Zionist delegates but opposed fiercely by many. But he died soon after, and with him died the Uganda solution.

The Weizmann intervention

By this time, a young academic of Russian origin, a professor of chemistry in Manchester University, Chaim Weizmann had emerged on the scene. He single-mindedly steered the Zionist movement in the direction of turning Palestine into a Jewish state. He eventually achieved his objective and became the first President of Israel in the late 1940s.

Far-sighted as he was, Weizmann realised, as soon as Britain had entered the Great War, that the eventual peace conference would be the best opportunity to push for a Jewish state in Palestine. He and his colleagues began drafting a memo for the British government to give concrete shape to their demand. At the time, almost everyone expected that the war would be over in about a year or so. It dragged on; Weizmann and the group never gave up. He cultivated leading Jews in England and elsewhere. The most significant of them was Lord Rothschild who wielded enormous influence in the British government.

In the summer of 1917, Weizmann and Sokolov launched a strategy to force the issue. They decided to compose a Zionist statement.

Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour would present it to the cabinet for approval whereafter he would inform Lord Rothschild about it by a letter, which would then constitute a declaration of support for Zionism; in effect a Balfour declaration. In July 1917, a group of Zionist leaders drafted a declaration. There were differences among them. One pressed to ask for "as much as possible", including, in particular, the right to control the state machinery, promising the Arabs only cultural autonomy, but "the state must be Jewish". A few days later, a smaller group drafted a single paragraph, to the effect that the British government should recognise Palestine as the national home of the Jewish people and work closely with the Zionist Organisation. Some in the group kept in touch with the Foreign Office, in particular with Mark Sykes (of the Sykes-Picot fame) and had a good idea of what the government could accept. They met a few days later and one of them, Leon Simon, jotted down on a scrap of paper two sentences, which were accepted by the others. The scrap survived and was sold in an auction at Sotheby's, in 2005 for \$884,000. The two sentences were:

"H.M. Government accepts the principle that Palestine should be reconstituted as the national

home of the Jewish people.

“H.M. Government will use its best endeavours to secure the achievement of the object and will discuss the necessary methods and means with the Zionist Organization [ZO].”

The first sentence implied an unbroken link between Jews and Palestine despite years of separation and the second sentence posited the ZO as the official representative of Jewish interests.

Balfour personally supported this small paragraph and drafted a reply for approval of the cabinet, stating: “I am glad to be in a position to inform you that HMG accept the principle that Palestine should be reconstituted as the national home of the Jewish people.” For some reason, Balfour did not send the note to the cabinet. War Cabinet Minister Alfred Milner removed the word “reconstituted” and instead of terming Palestine “the” National Home of the Jewish people, he called it “a National Home for the Jewish people”. The reference to the Zionist Organisation was excised.

It was the Jewish member of the cabinet, Edwin Montagu, who opposed the whole concept. He wanted the foreign secretary to redraft his letter and reject the Zionist statement. His colleagues were taken aback by the vehemence of his opposition.

His argument was that the proposed declaration would prove a rallying ground for anti-semitism all over the world. He had said earlier that there was not a Jewish nation. He felt strongly that declaring Palestine as the homeland of the Jews would imply that persons like him everywhere would lose their citizenship of the countries of their domicile, perhaps not legally but certainly morally and ethically. He had been appointed as the next Secretary of State of India. “How could a Palestinian represent England in India?” he asked. He was, in short, an ardent assimilationist.

When the cabinet met in early September, Montagu stuck to his position with the result that the meeting remained inconclusive. It decided to consult U.S. President Wilson for his opinion.

Weizmann galvanised himself and all Zionists, in Britain and in America. Hundreds of telegrams flooded the Foreign Office. Montagu too got active and prepared an anti-Zionist statement, but had no organised movement behind him. He was isolated. At yet another meeting in October, he repeated his firm position. This time, one more member of the cabinet opposed the proposed declaration, arguing: “Zionism was sentimental idealism, which would be never realised and with which the British Government should have nothing to do.” A decision was deferred again.

The issue was settled, conclusively, when Wilson sent an unambiguous message of support for Zionism.

The War Cabinet met in late 1917 and authorised Foreign Secretary Balfour to write to Lord Rothschild as follows: “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.”

Balfour sent the letter containing the declaration to Rothschild on November 2. Thus was born the Balfour Declaration.

No place for sentiment

At the same time that the British were promising the Jews their homeland in Palestine, T.E. Lawrence was promising an Arab kingdom to the Sheriff of Mecca who, of course, had no idea of the promises to the Jews. They were also negotiating with Turkey in Geneva offering them the privilege to fly the Turkish flag in Jerusalem in return for ditching Germany. England was also concerned, fed cleverly by Weizmann, that Germany too would play the Zionist card.

There is a lesson for India here. England was facing an existential threat. America had not yet joined the war and England was more or less on its own. Whatever helped the British war effort was kosher. Britain could not afford to worry about morality, ethics, or broken promises. National interest alone would decide British policy and actions; sentiment had no place. This is how major powers conduct their foreign policy.

Chinmaya R. Gharekhan, a former Indian Ambassador to the United Nations, was Special Envoy for West Asia in the Manmohan Singh government

The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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