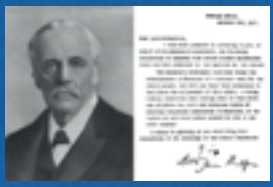


Background to and Consequences of The Balfour Declaration of 1917

Towards the end of the 19th century major changes were taking place in Europe and the Levant (Middle East). These have led to a series of events and circumstances that have most substantially contributed to the continuing conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean region in our present day.

Jewish Zionism

In 1897, Theodore Herzl, a legally-trained journalist of Jewish parentage, organised the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. His motivation he made clear in his book 'Der Judenstaat' (The Jewish State):

> *"The Jewish question persists wherever Jews live in appreciable numbers. Wherever it does not exist, it is brought in together with Jewish immigrants. We are naturally drawn into those places where we are not persecuted, and our appearance there gives rise to persecution. This is the case, and will inevitably be so, everywhere, even in highly civilised countries—see, for instance, France—so long as the Jewish question is not solved on the political level."*

At the time of writing, his views regarding the perceived dangers facing Jewish persons in Europe were perhaps formed – certainly reinforced – by the so-called 'Dreyfus Affair'. (This scandal, which divided France from 1894 to 1906, took its name from a French Army officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus. Of Jewish extraction, he was wrongly accused and sentenced to life imprisonment on a fallacious charge of spying on France and passing secret information to Germany.)

Following the aforementioned Basel Conference, Herzl wrote in his diary:

> *"In Basel I founded the Jewish State. If I said this aloud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, and certainly in fifty, everyone will agree".*

Towards and into the 20th century, while the First World War was on the near horizon, substantial numbers of Jews were returning as immigrants to the land of their patriarchs. In the course of the 1914-18 war, three positions and agreements (of sorts) were independently formulated: these impacted on and conflicted with each other. The resultant scenarios produced extremely unhappy – nay violent – consequences which reverberate through to the present day.

The McMahon - Hussein Correspondence

In the run-up to the War, growing Arab nationalism harboured ambitions to break free from the suzerainty of the dying Ottoman Empire (the originally-named 'Sick Man of Europe'). This development did not go un-noticed by British officialdom.

Seeking support for the British war effort from the Arabs in the Arabian peninsula, and to reduce the danger posed by the Turkish Sultan/Caliph Mehmed V calling for an Islamic 'Jihad' against the Allies, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, made utterly ambiguous promises to the (Arabian) Sharif Hussein of Mecca, that following victory over Germany, the latter would 'inherit' the lands from the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula to Aleppo in the north of modern-day Syria, for the creation of a new and independent Arab nation. This promise should never have been made, and could not, with the French resolute in their claims to Syria and modern-day Lebanon, be honoured. These claims were meanwhile being separately ratified in another secret pact between two - one French, one British - civil servants.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement

The Sykes-Picot agreement was drawn up by a British Government official (Sir Mark Sykes) and his French counterpart (François Georges-Picot): initially the Russians were also involved in this covert plan to carve up the region following a presumed allied victory. In terms of the British and French territorial claims, a 'line in the sand' was drawn from Kirkuk (in modern-day Iraq) to Acre (on the Mediterranean coast), with the French in control in the northern region and the British south of the line.

The 'Line in the Sand'

"I should like to draw a line from the e in Acre to the last k in Kirkuk."
Mark Sykes (1915)

But neither the French nor the British were totally honest with each other.
Mesopotamian oil, the Suez canal and imperialistic hubris combined with long-standing French-English rivalries clouded the scene: intrigue and duplicity abounded.
While the agreement was initially kept strictly 'under wraps', it was later exposed when Russia withdrew from the war (following the 1917 revolution) and 'went public' with the scheme. Needless to say the Sharif Hussein, who thought he had been promised the land, was outraged: the more-so, when the post-war Paris Peace Conference held in 1919 in Versailles, formally discarded the promises made to him by McMahon.
Following the Paris conference, Britain, during a later conference in San Remo, Italy in 1920, was given the 'Mandate for Palestine'.
However, three years prior to these developments, a third most significant decision had been made in the penultimate year of the War.

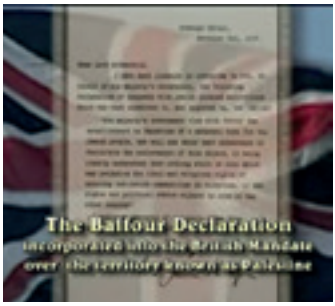
The Balfour Declaration

The aforementioned Zionist movement had taken root in the U.K. and influential and well - connected British Jews, who were close to the political establishment, were very active in their ambitions to see a Jewish state developed and established.

Lord Balfour

Assuming victory, and with the Ottoman Empire heading for disintegration, the British Government declared its support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland, within an area of land that was later to be defined under The Palestinian Mandate given to Britain by the embryonic League of Nations.

On 17 November 1917, Britain, the month before General Allenby entered Jerusalem, issued the Balfour Declaration which formalised the Government's support for Zionist aspirations.



The Balfour Declaration

(Letter from Lord James Balfour)

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 Palestine Mandate, within which the Jews were to have a home, included the area covering both sides of the Jordan river, i.e. modern-day Israel AND modern-day Jordan. However, to appease the Arabs who felt betrayed by Britain's failure to honour the promises earlier made to them, Winston Churchill, then Colonial Secretary, effectively sub-divided the area to create what became known as Trans-Jordan (east of the Jordan).This decision was made at a (British) conference in Cairo in 1921 and Churchill promised Hussein's son, Prince Abdullah (who was later to become King of this new state of Transjordan), that no Jews would enter that land.

With that expedient gesture – since been deemed illegal in international law – the land available for the creation of a home for the Jews at the time of the Balfour Declaration (1917) was reduced by 77%.

Churchill's actions became enshrined in a Government White Paper of 1922, and were ratified soon after by the League of Nations in the July of that year.

Inter- and post-War period

In the period between the two world wars, conflict between the Jewish and Arab communities continued, and indeed increased. Various attempts to draw up a partition plan failed. In the most part the Jews agreed to the various proposals; invariably the Arabs didn't.

At the start of the Second World War, in the wake of the Arab Revolt (1936 – 39) and as Jewish immigration continued, the British Government issued a White Paper in 1939 to severely restrict further Jewish entry to the land.

Jewish survivors returning as refugees to Israel

The Arabs were mollified: the Jews were extremely upset. David Ben-Gurion, then head of the Jewish Agency, declared:

> *"We will fight the White Paper as if there is no war, and fight the war as if there is no White Paper."*

During WWII Jewish soldiers fought on the side of Britain and its allies.

At the end of the war Britain continued, using military force in the process, to bar entry to Israel by Jews who had escaped the Holocaust and German concentration camps. Indeed some were returned to the camps from which they had escaped. Others were imprisoned in detainee camps in the north of Israel (Atlit) and in Cyprus. These actions of the British Government against helpless, homeless and stateless refugees brought international opprobrium down on the Government's head.

Facing Arab hostility and British actions to suppress the civil war, some Jewish fighters resorted to violence; the most infamous example being the bombing of the prestigious King David Hotel by the Jewish underground organisation Irgun .

The British Government realised by 1946/7 that it could no longer control or commit to the process of reconciliation between Arab and Jew. In February 1947, the Government announced that responsibility for Palestine and the Palestinian Mandate would be handed back to the UN, and the troops would be withdrawn from Palestine.

On 29 November 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed an international resolution, with a two-thirds majority of the 46 nations that voted, calling for the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Yisrael (the land of Israel).

In the event, Britain pulled down the Union Jack for the last time on 14 May 1948. Simultaneously, the Jewish People's Council gathered in the Tel Aviv museum to hear David Ben Gurion, as Israel's first Prime Minister, announce what Theodore Herzl had 'prophesied' just over 50 years earlier – the formation of the modern State of Israel.

100 years after the issue of the Balfour Declaration, there is still no agreement on the lines of partition, and the conflict, which commenced around the start of the 20th century, is still running over a century later as perhaps the world's longest-lasting war.