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# The Balfour Declaration of 1917

*A landmark in efforts to secure a Jewish state.*

BY SHMUEL ETTINGER

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The Balfour Declaration was the first major political triumph of Zionism and the culmination of Jewish independent political activity until that time.

The declaration came in a letter that British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour sent to Lord Rothschild [Lionel Walter Rothschild, the honorary president of the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland at the time] on 2 November 1917. The letter, to be conveyed to the British Zionist Federation, stated that the British government “views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and would use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object.”

[Read the full text of the Balfour Declaration here.](#)

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The declaration came following years of Zionist efforts during World War I to cultivate support from Britain and its allies, in case they wrested control of Palestine from the German-aligned Ottoman Empire.

The [First World War](#) stunned the World Zionist Organization and confronted it with numerous problems. When it became clear that Russia was allied with the Entente Powers of Britain and France, many Jews anticipated a change in Russia's anti-Jewish policy. But they were harshly disappointed, however, in the first months of the war, when Jews were expelled from the front-line areas, seized as hostages and even attacked in pogroms. This disappointment only reinforced the belief of many other Jews, particularly in the United States, who from the first had supported the Central Powers of Germany and Austro-Hungary (which were later joined by Turkey). But even these Jews could not disregard the basic fact that one-half of the Jewish people resided in Russia, the most important center of Jewish life, and that the fate of this country could decide the destiny of its Jews.

The Zionist Organization, which was centered in Berlin, endeavored to continue Herzl's tradition and to avoid arousing the hostility of any political factor. It therefore anticipated events and opened a "Chief Bureau" in neutral Copenhagen in order to be able to continue Zionist activity in all countries. But even among Zionist leaders there were those with conflicting political orientation. Some, such as Vladimir Jabotinsky, claimed vehemently that only the defeat of Turkey could save the Jewish community in Palestine from destruction and open up new horizons for the Zionist movement. He therefore called for active participation in the war on the Entente side. Those with pro-German orientation, on the other hand, argued that only Germany, which wielded considerable influence over the Turkish government could ensure the safety of the *Yishuv* [Jewish settlement in Palestine].

As early as 1915, British Zionists, led by Chaim Weizmann, had begun to attempt to persuade the British government to safeguard Jewish interests in Palestine, out of the hope that after the war the country would be under British trusteeship. Several prominent British Jews, including Sir Herbert Samuel [later the first British High Commissioner for Palestine], presented memoranda to Cabinet ministers in this spirit. The spokesman for the joint Foreign Committee of British Jewry, Lucien Wolf, who cooperated with British Foreign Office in an effort to draw the sympathies of American Jewry to the Allies, also claimed that a guarantee to the Jews regarding Palestine would aid this issue. The Zionist Chief Bureau in Copenhagen sent two representatives to Britain, Yehiel Tschlenow and Nahum Sokolow, to negotiate with the British government. A memorandum that the Zionists submitted to the British government in October 1916 contained the demand that, after the liberation of Palestine from Turkish rule, the rights of the Jewish people in the country be recognized, free immigration be permitted, and the status of Zionist institutions be legalized.

Despite the opposition of Zionist leaders, Vladimir Jabotinsky, Joseph Trumpeldor, and Pinhas Ruttenberg began to agitate for the establishment of a Jewish Legion to fight on the side of the Allies. At first the British authorities expressed reservation with regard to the entire project, but at the beginning of 1915 they agreed to set up the Zion Mule Corps, drawn particularly from the Palestinian refugees in Egyptian camps. This unit was deployed in service tasks (supplying food and ammunition) under the arduous conditions of the Gallipoli Campaign. In the summer of 1917, the 38th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers was established, mainly composed of Jews from London's East End and, after undergoing training, was sent to Palestine and participated in battles there in the following summer. Ruttenberg went to the United States, where, with the aid of David Ben Gurion and Ithak Ben-Zvi, he conducted propaganda to promote volunteering in Jewish units. The volunteer movement encompassed thousands of young men and by the summer of 1918, some 4,000 had arrived in England. They composed the 39th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, only part of which arrived in time to take part in the fighting in Palestine.

The change of government in Britain and the worsening military situation induced the British authorities to respond more strongly to Zionist demands. The Allies hoped that, through a declaration recognizing the justice of Zionist aspirations, they would influence

Jewish public opinion in the United States to aid them in their efforts to persuade the United States to join the war effort. Furthermore, it became known that the German authorities were also contemplating the possibility of publishing a declaration expressing sympathy for Zionist aspirations. For all of these reasons, contact was established at the end of January 1917 between the Zionists and the British Foreign Office in order to define political objectives after the war. At the same time, Sokolow was contemplating negotiations with the French government, and even receiving considerable concessions.

[Meanwhile] in the British Foreign Office and among the military there were those who hoped, with the aid of the Zionists, to include the whole of Palestine within the British sphere of control, in contrast to the secret British-French Sykes-Picot Treaty of 1916, which divided the spheres of influence of the Allies in this area.

In July the Zionists submitted to the British government the draft text of a proposed political declaration, in which Britain would agree with “the principle that Palestine should be reconstituted as the National Home of the Jewish People” and the British government “will use its best endeavors to secure the achievement of this object and will discuss the necessary methods and means with the Zionist Organization.” The opponents of Zionism, both Jewish and non-Jewish, violently objected to this declaration, and eventually, the British government approved a much more guarded wording in the form of the Balfour Declaration.

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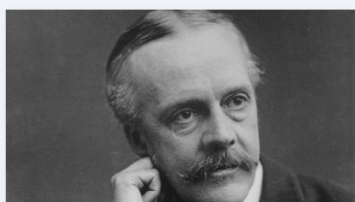
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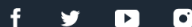
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