



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Balfour Declaration

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### Contents:

1. Content of the Declaration
2. Contemporary views on the Declaration
3. Centenary of the Declaration



# Contents

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| <b>Summary</b>                                  | <b>3</b> |
| <b>1. Content of the Declaration</b>            | <b>4</b> |
| <b>2. Contemporary views on the Declaration</b> | <b>5</b> |
| <b>3. Centenary of the Declaration</b>          | <b>7</b> |

## Summary

The Balfour Declaration, as it became known, was a letter sent on 2 November 1917 by the then Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, to the Jewish community leader Lord Rothschild. The letter expressed support for “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

Many Israelis regard the Balfour Declaration as an historic step on the road to statehood, but others argue that the Balfour Declaration laid the foundations for future conflict in the region. In July 2016, it emerged that the Palestinian Authority was preparing to sue the UK Government on account of the Balfour Declaration. Riyad al-Maliki, its Foreign Minister, claimed that the Declaration “gave people who don’t belong there something that wasn’t theirs.” News of the PA’s proposed lawsuit met with strong condemnation from supporters of the Balfour Declaration. Kenneth Jacobson, Deputy Director of Israel’s Anti-Defamation League, argue that such a move “will only play into the notion in Israel that the Palestinians will never reconcile themselves to Israel’s existence.”

As the centenary of the Balfour Declaration approaches, there has been much discussion as to how this anniversary should be marked in the UK. Mark Regev, Israel’s ambassador in London, has said he hopes to hold a “public celebration together with the British government.” However, the UK Government has not yet announced its plans. Tobias Ellwood, Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, said in June that given the sensitivities surrounding the Balfour Declaration, he would use the word “mark” rather than “celebrate”. Precisely what form the commemorations will take, then, remains to be seen.

# 1. Content of the Declaration

The Balfour Declaration, as it became known, was a letter sent on 2 November 1917 by the then Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, to the Jewish community leader Lord Rothschild. The text of the letter was as follows:

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.

The Balfour Declaration was a clear expression of support for the Zionist cause but it was ambiguous on various points of detail, perhaps intentionally. The use of the phrases "national home" and "in Palestine" (rather than the more specific "state" and "of Palestine") are thought to reflect disagreements within the Cabinet as to precisely what status this "national home" should have, and where its borders should be.<sup>1</sup>

In any event, the existence of the Balfour Declaration helped to facilitate the establishment of the State of Israel. Following the end of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the League of Nations granted a mandate to the United Kingdom to administer Palestine, an area which included the present-day Israel, the Occupied Territories including Gaza and Modern Jordan. The British Mandate was formally approved in 1922. Under the British Mandate, immigration steadily increased the size of the Jewish population and the Jewish sector of the economy grew more strongly than the Arab sector. The British Mandate was relinquished in May 1948 and the State of Israel created. The United States and the USSR immediately recognised the new entity, which did not include Gaza, administered by Egypt, or the West Bank, which became part of Transjordan, or Jordan as it became known.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J Gelvin, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: One Hundred Years of War* (third edition), Cambridge 2014.

<sup>2</sup> [Middle East Peace Process: historical background and a detailed chronology from 1990 to 2010](#), Commons Library Standard Note SN02693, 21 December 2010

## 2. Contemporary views on the Declaration

Many Israelis regard the Balfour Declaration as an historic step on the road to statehood. Kenneth Jacobson, Deputy Director of Israel's Anti-Defamation League, argues:

The declaration coming from the world power, which only months later, was to gain control in the holy land by ousting the Turks in World War II, was a turning point for the Zionist movement.

Founded in 1897 by Theodore Herzl, Zionism had as its original central goal the recognition by a central political power, mostly the Ottoman Turks, of the Jewish right to establish a political entity in Palestine. Having failed with the Turks, the breakthrough with Great Britain gave momentum to the Zionist idea going forward.

We know, of course, that the next 30 years generated many agonies in the relationship between the Zionists and the British. Still, the Balfour Declaration remains a high point in what turned out to be a 50-year struggle for Jewish statehood.<sup>3</sup>

However, others argue that the Balfour Declaration laid the foundations for future conflict in the region. Ahmad Samih Khalidi, senior associate member of St Antony's College, Oxford, argues:

The UK bears a special responsibility due to the insidious and critical role it played in the dispossession of the Palestinians via the iniquitous Balfour Declaration and the terms of the British mandate that enforced it, and the shabby retreat from Palestine in 1948. By accepting the mandate's terms in favour of a Jewish homeland, the UK took on the responsibility for the Palestinians' fate. Without the active sponsorship and facilitation of the mandate, the Palestinians would not have lost their homeland.

As we approach the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration next year, it behooves the UK – whose leaders from Winston Churchill to Gordon Brown to David Cameron have openly professed to be Zionists – to acknowledge its role in the dispossession of the Palestinians, just as it should stand rightful guard against the scourge of antisemitism.<sup>4</sup>

In July 2016, it emerged that the Palestinian Authority was preparing to sue the UK Government on account of the Balfour Declaration. Riyad al-Maliki, its Foreign Minister, claimed that the Declaration "gave people who don't belong there something that wasn't theirs."<sup>5</sup> Within the UK, the Palestine Return Centre has launched a campaign calling on the UK to apologise for the Balfour Declaration. The following is an extract from the press release which launched the campaign:

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<sup>3</sup> K Jacobson, "[Abbas vs. Balfour: Far worse than ridiculous](#)", *Times of Israel*, 27 July 2016

<sup>4</sup> A S Khalidi, "[As Palestinians mourn their Nakba, the UK must acknowledge its responsibility](#)", *Guardian*, 15 May 2016

<sup>5</sup> "[Palestinians gear up to sue the UK - over 1917 Balfour Declaration](#)", *Times of Israel*, 25 July 2016

To raise awareness about the importance to appropriately remember the Balfour Declaration and its damning consequence we have decided to launch the Balfour Apology Campaign (BAC). Our mission is to seek an official apology from the British government for issuing the Balfour Declaration. We believe that the British government's recognition of its destructive colonial past is a necessary step towards achieving peace, justice and reconciliation.

Our Campaign supports a just resolution of the conflict based on the principles of international law where Palestinian refugees living in the Diaspora can enjoy their right of return and obtain their rights. This campaign is aimed at the British government to openly recognise its colonial past in Palestine and act accordingly.

A clear British recognition of the colonial history of Britain would contribute to finding a just and peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>6</sup>

News of the PA's proposed lawsuit met with strong condemnation from supporters of the Balfour Declaration. Kenneth Jacobson argued:

Upon hearing the initial report that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas was asking the Arab League to sue Great Britain for its Balfour Declaration of 1917, I thought this must be a satire of the sort put out by [The Onion](#).

I was wrong as it turned out. Apparently, Abbas is serious. So let's treat his initiative seriously.

[...]

This latest shenanigan by the Palestinians will only play into the notion in Israel that the Palestinians will never reconcile themselves to Israel's existence and that there's no difference between Abbas and Hamas.

There surely is a basis for such thinking, but it is not the whole story. Abbas and the PA have a complicated history that involves at times working with Israeli officials and talking about living in peace with two states.

Positive steps, however, are totally undermined by an action such as this lawsuit. It tells even the most optimistic Israeli that nothing much has changed, that Palestinians still don't accept the meaning of Israel to the Jewish people and that wishful thinking rather than positive practical concepts still govern the Palestinian narrative.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> ["Press Release: On its 99th anniversary... HMG must apologise for the Balfour Declaration"](#), *Palestinian Return Centre*, 2 November 2016

<sup>7</sup> K Jacobson, ["Abbas vs. Balfour: Far worse than ridiculous"](#), *Times of Israel*, 27 July 2016

### 3. Centenary of the Declaration

As the centenary of the Balfour Declaration approaches, there has been much discussion as to how this anniversary should be marked in the UK. Mark Regev, Israel's ambassador in London, has said:

It's being taken very seriously at the highest levels. We're hoping to do a public celebration together with the British government with senior leadership from both sides uniting to celebrate Balfour.

"It's a crucial, historic document. The Balfour declaration is a manifestation of the principles of self-determination of the Jewish people and there's every reason to celebrate. We're doing celebrations here and in Israel and I'm looking forward to it. It's an important milestone."<sup>8</sup>

However, the UK Government has not yet announced its plans. Ian Black, the Guardian's Middle East editor, summarises the sensitivities as follows:

Looking ahead, officials in the UK Foreign Office are brainstorming anxiously about how to mark these agreements [both Balfour and the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement between the UK and France]. It is far harder than remembering the first world war's military anniversaries – Flanders, Gallipoli, the Somme – because while British and allied sacrifices and heroism can be celebrated and honoured, these were political acts that have left a toxic residue of resentment and conflict.

Pro-Palestinian campaigners have demanded Britain apologise for Balfour's pledge – but that seems unlikely given that it was made in very different circumstances from today and cannot be undone. It and the other wartime agreements are likely to feature in statements and public diplomacy designed to generate a "more nuanced understanding" of the UK's controversial historical role.<sup>9</sup>

Tobias Ellwood, Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, said in June that given the sensitivities surrounding the Balfour Declaration, he would use the word "mark" rather than "celebrate".<sup>10</sup> Precisely what form the commemorations will take, then, remains to be seen.

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<sup>8</sup> ["Mark Regev reveals UK and Israel working on public celebration of Balfour"](#), *Jewish News*, 8 June 2016

<sup>9</sup> I Black, ["Middle East still rocking from first world war pacts made 100 years ago"](#), *Guardian*, 30 December 2015

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

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