

# The Balfour Declaration

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

**The Balfour Declaration** of November 2, 1917, was the first recognition for two thousand years that Jews had as much right to a homeland of their own as any other nation or people. It was a statement of British support (in principle) for “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.” It was made in a letter from Arthur James Balfour, the British foreign secretary, to Baron Rothschild, a prominent Anglo Jew. It was left suitably ambiguous. British Foreign policy on this and many other issues was intentionally opaque and vague, offering different policies to different parties. The Sykes-Picot secret agreement between France and Britain in 1916 had already laid out an agreed division of the Ottoman Empire between the two countries.

After the First World War was over and the Ottoman Empire that had controlled most of Middle East, was defeated, both Arabs and Jews pursued their own agendas. After the peace, the League of Nations awarded Britain a Mandate over the area that included Palestine and Transjordan. It was confirmed the San Remo conference of April 1920. Both sides were unhappy. There was a lot of behind the doors haggling and promising. But in the end the allies imposed their will, new dynasties and rulers and in effect created the mess the Middle East is in today.

On September 23, 1922, the British Colonial Office issued Article 25 of the Palestine Mandate. The first High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, a Jew, tried to prove his objectivity by trying to achieve a balance of interests. But only succeeded in alienating everyone. It was an impossible situation. Arab nationalism as well as Jewish nationalism hit each other head on. Culminating in the riots in Hebron and Safed in 1929 in which over 70 Jews were killed.

Although there were some Arab leaders like Emir Faisal and Abdullah 1<sup>st</sup> of Jordan who were in favour of co-operation and wanted a compromise. The rest of the Palestinian and Arab world refused. Abdullah was later assassinated. In the second World War the leader of the Palestinian Arabs Al-Husseini allied himself with the Nazis, being assured that the Nazis would exterminate the Jews. Eventually as we know the UN voted for partition and the Arab world declared war on Israel. And that is the root of the sad and violent situation that has continued to this day.

When I first went to Israel as a British teenager in 1958, I was surprised when I encountered so much ill feeling and resentment towards the British Mandate. I was made to feel that being British was an embarrassment.

The British before and after the war had blocked immigration of Jews trying to escape the Nazis to Israel. The post-war foreign secretary of the Labour government was the notorious Ernest Bevin, who was adamantly opposed to the idea of a Jewish State. Those who did manage escape Europe had to face harsh detention camps in Atlit, and then Cyprus. Refugee ships were sent back to Europe or redirected to Cyprus or Mauritius. The British army and police force became notorious for their harsh and humiliating treatment of Jews. There was evidence that many of the volunteers who went to Palestine had anti-Semitic records. Still, the main Jewish community under Ben Gurion, was committed to cooperation with the Mandate forces and participating in the war effort. He famously said, "We will fight the White Paper (which blocked immigration) as if there is no war and fight the war as if there is no White Paper."

Tensions rose. As diplomacy was not working, extreme Jewish groups such as [Etzel \(Irgun\)](#) and [Lehi \(Stern Gang\)](#) began to initiate campaigns of violence against British military and Arab targets. In 1945 the Mandate established [military courts](#), and prescribed the [death penalty](#) for carrying weapons or ammunition illegally and for membership in illegal organizations. Both sides committed atrocities. The British hanged Jews and the Jews retaliated against the British.

It is argued in their defense that the campaigns of the Lehi and Stern Gang contributed as much as anything else to Britain's giving up on Palestine. Britain set a date for complete withdrawal. She ceded responsibility to the UN, which then voted for partition in 1947. But the Arabs rejected the compromise and declared war. Behind the scenes Bevin plotted with the Jordanians. He armed the Arab Legion and negotiated "the Portsmouth Treaty" with Iraq (signed on January 15, 1948), undertaking to withdraw from Palestine in such a fashion as to provide for swift Arab occupation of all its territory to destroy the Jewish state. As the British left, they handed over as much of their hardware as they could to the Arabs. The festering ill feeling towards Israel has been the reason why the Foreign Office has to this day still not allowed the Queen to make a formal visit to Israel. Apologists have argued that it is purely matter of numbers and oil.

It may well be that Sabra arrogance and triumphalism alienated British soldiers and policemen working in Palestine during the Mandate. But my goodness me, they and their masters did more than enough to deserve it. Two wrongs do not make a right of course. But time and again documentaries on the BBC and elsewhere, blame everything on the Jews and completely whitewash the

opposite positions. And if you doubt my objectivity, I refer you to the late Irish diplomat Conor Cruise O'Brien's "The Siege" for a more neutral analysis.

So here we are celebrating the Balfour Declaration while hating the Mandate. While the Palestinians and their supporters regard the Balfour Declaration as the original sin and ascribe all their troubles to it. And the Bernie Sanders of this world side against their own people. Sadly there is no point in pointing out the long history of the Jews in Israel to those American Jews who see themselves as Americans, but only Jewish by accident of birth, and never wanted a Jewish state in the first place. Or the right of every people, yes, actually including Jews, to a land of their own. Prejudice, dogma are far too deeply ingrained now. On both sides indeed because prejudice begets prejudice.

I read a great deal nowadays, and you can see it all over the internet, of Israeli anti-Zionists who agree that the Jews should never have been allowed to have their own land. I have always argued that while Zionism is a political movement and many orthodox as well as non-orthodox Jews are not committed to it politically, you don't have to be a Zionist to want a homeland of your own.

Even the Quran agrees that the Land of Israel is our historical homeland. If we are regarded as colonial interlopers, then so too must those who came into the area with the Muslim invaders long after two Israelite Kingdoms flourished. I will agree that no one's history is without fault. But when there are two claims to the same house either you negotiate or you fight. If we recognize Palestinian rights, they need to recognize ours.

The Balfour Declaration was an important step in eradicating thousands of years of oppression and anti-Semitism. But it is history that validates our claim to go home if we want to.