

2. The Marvel of the Balfour Declaration

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(1) JEWISH ACTIVITY IN GREAT BRITAIN AND THE U.S.A. DURING THE FINAL STAGES OF THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

Opportunities for Zionist Activities in Britain and the U.S.A.

Favourable conditions for Zionist action were more prevalent in Britain than in the United States. The activities of Weizmann, Sokolow and other British Zionist leaders began in earnest at the outbreak of World War I, gaining impetus from 1916 onwards. Britain's major role in the war and desire to improve its position, created a sympathetic attitude towards Zionist aspirations among the general public, and central Cabinet figures, such as the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, and the Foreign Secretary, James Balfour.

The situation in the United States, however, was less favourable towards Zionism, despite the close relations between leaders of American Zionism such as Justice Brandeis, Felix Frankfurter, Rabbi Stephen Wise and the White House. The United States had adopted an isolationist stance towards world affairs and the furtherance of Zionist aspirations in Palestine was not seen to be in keeping with its national policy. Until April, 1917, the USA was not involved in world affairs and Zionist leaders found it difficult to publicize Weizmann's plan. The situation was aggravated by the fact that many American Jews, especially those from Eastern Europe, were sympathetic to the Axis nations, which included Turkey (then controlling Eretz Israel) and strongly opposed Russia which was in the Allied camp.

(a) Excerpts from British Cabinet discussions on the Balfour Declaration, September-October, 1917

Cabinet discussions stressed the need to hasten the acceptance of a resolution on a Jewish national home in Palestine, in view of the German Government's intense efforts to gain Jewish support through sympathy with the Zionist movement, especially among the Jews of Russia and the United States. The Foreign Secretary, Lord Balfour, was not influenced by the adverse pressure of anti-Zionist Jews in Britain and their "spokesman" in the Cabinet, Edwin Montagu, Secretary of State for India.

The Cabinet decision of 4 October, 1917, adopted the views of Lord Balfour concerning the prominent role of Zionism among Jews, whilst emphasizing the importance of the position adopted by the President of the USA in this matter.

... The War Cabinet decided (3.9.1917) that: The views of President Wilson should be obtained before a declaration was made, and requested Acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to inform the Government of the United States that His Majesty's Government were being pressed to make a declaration in sympathy with the Zionist movement, and to ascertain their views as to the advisability of such a declaration being made.

Balfour took up the case for the Declaration when the War Cabinet met again on 4 October, as recorded in the Minutes:

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs stated that the German Government were making great efforts to capture the sympathy of the Zionist Movement. This Movement, though opposed by a number of wealthy Jews in this country, had behind it the support of a majority of Jews, at all events in Russia and America, and possibly in other countries. He saw nothing inconsistent between the establishment of a Jewish national focus in Palestine and the complete assimilation and absorption of Jews into the nationality of other countries. Just as English emigrants to the United States became, either in the first or subsequent generations, American nationals, so, in future, should a Jewish citizenship be established in Palestine, Jews would become either Englishmen, Americans, Germans, or Palestinians. What was at the back of the Zionist movement was the intense national consciousness held by certain members of the Jewish race. They regarded themselves as one of the great historic races of the world, whose original home was Palestine, and these Jews had a passionate longing to regain once more their ancient national home. Other Jews had become absorbed into the nations among whom they and their forefathers had dwelt for many generations. Mr. Balfour then read a very sympathetic declaration by the French Government which had been conveyed to the Zionists, and he stated that he knew that President Wilson was extremely favourable to the Movement...

The War Cabinet decided that:

Before coming to a decision they should hear the views of representative Zionists, as well as those who held the opposite opinion, and that meanwhile the Declaration, as read by Lord Milner, should be submitted confidentially to (a) President Wilson, (b) Leaders of the Zionist Movement, (c) Representative persons in Anglo-Jewry opposed to Zionism.

*Doreen Ingrams, Palestine Papers 1917-1922,
London 1972, pp. 10-13.*

(b) **The American Scene — Contacts with the White House**

The British Cabinet's decision on 10 October, 1917, requesting the opinion of President Wilson on the Declaration, transferred the centre of activity from London to Washington. It was now apparent that the decisive factor was the President of the United States.

In the course of time it became increasingly apparent that the President was not personally involved. Jewish leaders, headed by Brandeis, a personal friend and advisor of the President, did not meet with him on the matter, despite its singular importance. Wilson probably felt that the British were attempting to use his agreement to the Declaration as a means of furthering their imperialistic policy. Negotiations were, therefore, handled by the President's adviser, Colonel House.

The text of the Milner-Amery formula was telegraphed by Balfour to Colonel House on October 8th, with a request for its submission to the President. On the same day, the United States Embassy in London telegraphed direct to Wilson, by-passing the State Department, in the same sense, explaining that the "question of a message of sympathy with the "Zionist Movement" was being re-considered by the British Cabinet "in view of reports that (the) German Government are making great efforts to capture (the) Zionist Movement" (Adler, *The Palestine Question in the Wilson Era*, pp. 305-6, citing Wilson papers). . . . House's intervention is evidenced by a note sent to him by Wilson on October 13th: "I find in my pocket the memorandum you gave me about the Zionist Movement. I am afraid I did not say to you that I concurred in the formula suggested by the other side. I do and would be obliged if you would let them know it." It appears, therefore, that Wilson had had some advice from House but had forgotten to take any action in the matter — a lapse of memory which suggests that he was not greatly interested. The contents of House's memorandum are not known, but he had probably been convinced by Wiseman that the matter was important and urgent and had advised the President accordingly. Having been told by Wilson on October 13th that the formula was approved, House passed this on to Wiseman, who on the 16th telegraphed to Sir Eric Drummond in London:

"Colonel House put formula before President, who approves of it but asks that no mention of his approval shall be made when His Majesty's Government makes formula public, as he has arranged that American Jews shall then ask him for his approval which he will give publicly here."

These last words imply that the Zionists had been informed of Wilson's approval of the formula, but it is somewhat surprising to find that Brandeis does not seem to have been consulted while it was under consideration in Washington. "I cannot help feeling," Wise wrote to him on October 17th, "that it would have been better if the Colonel or Cyrus (Code name for the President) had consulted you prior to assenting to the declarations (sic) submitted."

*L. Stein, The Balfour Declaration,
London 1961, pp. 528-530.*

**(c) The British Scene — the attitude of British Jewry
vis-a-vis the Declaration**

The British Cabinet, meeting on 10 October, decided to consult with the leaders of British Jewry, both Zionist and anti-Zionist. The leaders invited were: The Chief Rabbi Dr. Hertz, Lord Rothschild, Sir Stuart Samuel, Chairman of the Board of Deputies, Dr. Weizmann, President of the Zionist Federation in England, Nachum Sokolov, London representative of the Zionist movement, L.L. Cohen, Chairman of the Jewish Board of Guardians, Philip Magnus, M.P., Mr. S.G. Montefiore, President of the Anglo-Jewish Association.

Referred to herein are:

1. Two opinions opposing the Declaration
2. Conclusions of the Cabinet
3. Decision of the Cabinet to publish the Declaration

1a. Mr. L.L. Cohen, Chairman Jewish Board of Guardians:

The establishment of a "national home for the Jewish race" in Palestine, presupposes that the Jews are a nation, which I deny, and that they are homeless, which implies that, in the countries where they enjoy religious liberty and the full rights of citizenship, they are separate entities, unidentified with the interests of the nations of which they form parts, an implication which I repudiate . . .

1b. Sir Philip Magnus, M.P.:

In replying to your letter of the 6th October I do not gather that I am expected to distinguish my views as a Jew from those I hold as a British subject. Indeed, it is not necessary, even if it were possible. For I agree with the late Chief Rabbi, Dr. Hermann Adler, that "ever since the conquest of Palestine by the Romans we have ceased to be a body politic", that the "great bond that unites Israel is not one of race but the bond of a common religion", and that we have no national aspirations apart from those of the country of our birth . . . I cannot agree that the Jews regard themselves as a nation, and the term "national" as applied to a community of Jews in Palestine or elsewhere seems to me to be the question between Zionists and their opponents, and should, I suggest, be withdrawn from the proposed formula. Indeed, the inclusion of the terms of the declaration of the words "a national home for the Jewish race" seems to me both undesirable and inferentially inaccurate . . . It is essential . . . that any privileges granted to the Jews should be shared by their fellow-citizens of other creeds . . .

2. Conclusions of the Cabinet:

Meanwhile, several letters from Jews in Britain and abroad pressing for the declaration were received at the Foreign Office. Ronald Graham addressed a

Memorandum to Mr. Balfour regretting the Cabinet's delay in giving an assurance to the Zionists as this delay would throw them into the arms of the Germans. The moment, he said, this assurance is granted the Zionist Jews are prepared to start an active pro-Ally propaganda throughout the world. (PRO.FO 371/384).

3. Decision of the Cabinet to publish the Declaration:

The Cabinet authorized:

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to take a suitable opportunity for making the following declaration of sympathy with the Zionist aspirations: 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 and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

*PRO.CAB 23/4, D. Ingrams, Palestine Papers, 1917-1922
pp. 14-16.*

(d) **Draft Proposals and Final Text of the Balfour Declaration**

Zionist groups in England and the United States attempted to effect substantial changes in the Draft Proposals. Justice Brandeis did succeed in changing "Jewish race" to "Jewish people"; Weizmann suggested including "re-establishment" instead of "establishment" and was rejected.

Reproduced herein are:

1. The suggestions made by Brandeis and Weizmann
2. Draft proposals for the final text

1. The suggestions made by Brandeis and Weizmann.

... the American Zionist leaders found it unsatisfactory in two respects. They disliked the words, "the rights and political status enjoyed in any other country by such Jews who are fully contented with their existing nationality and citizenship," and wished to substitute: "the rights and civil political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country". Brandeis appears to have proposed further the alteration of "Jewish race" to "Jewish people". The two corrections we desired to make were mentioned by Wise at an interview with House on October 16th. On both points the declaration was amended in the sense desired by the American Zionists before its final approval by the War Cabinet on October 31st, and they were not unnaturally under the impression that this was the result of their representations to House (Wise to Brandeis, 17 October 1917: Brandeis papers). In his abovementioned letter to Rothschild of October 12th (Z.A.) Sokolow also wrote: Where it says: "or the rights and political status enjoyed in any other country by such Jews

who are fully contented with their existing nationality and citizenship", I would suggest to limit this sentence to: "or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."

This was three days before de Haas wrote to Brandeis (October 15th — Brandeis Papers):

I telephoned to you today that the Weizmann message came to hand and we went into immediate session about it. Both Wise, Levin and myself feel that the third sentence could well be amended . . . We would favour the following: "or the rights and civil political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country" (There is no mention in the letter of the substitution of "people" for "race").

Dr. Weizmann, President of the English Zionist Federation:

As to the wording of the declaration, may I be allowed respectfully to suggest one or two alterations?

- (a) Instead of "establishment", would it not be more desirable to use the word "re-establishment"? By this small alteration the historical connection with the ancient tradition would be indicated and the whole matter put in its true light . . .
- (b) The last lines of the declaration could easily be interpreted by ill-wishers as implying the idea that, with the re-establishment of the Jewish national home, only those Jews will have a right to claim full citizenship in the country of their birth who, in addition to being loyal and law-abiding citizens, would also totally dissociate themselves from the Jewish national home, showing no interest in, or sympathy with, its successful development. This unnatural demand is surely not in the mind of His Majesty's Government and in order to avoid any misunderstanding I respectfully suggest that the part of the declaration in question be replaced by the following words: "The rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country of which they are loyal citizens."
- (c) May I also suggest "Jewish people" instead of "Jewish race"?

2. Draft Proposals for the Final Text

Zionist Draft, July 1917

1. His Majesty's Government accepts the principle that Palestine should be reconstituted as the national home of the Jewish people.
2. His Majesty's Government will use its best endeavours to secure the achievement of this object and will discuss the necessary methods and means with the Zionist Organisation.

Balfour Draft, August 1917

His Majesty's Government accept the principle that Palestine should be reconstituted as the national home of the Jewish people and will use their best endeavours to secure the achievement of this object and will be ready to consider any suggestions on the subject which the Zionist Organisation may desire to lay before them.

Milner Draft, August 1917

His Majesty's Government accepts the principle that every opportunity should be afforded for the establishment of a home for the Jewish people in Palestine and will use its best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object and will be ready to consider any suggestions on the subject which the Zionist organisations may desire to lay before them.

Milner-Amery Draft, 4 October, 1917:

His Majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish race and will use its 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 in any other country by such Jews who are fully contented with their existing nationality (and citizenship).

Note: words in brackets added subsequently.

Final Text, 31 October 1917:

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.

(2) JEWISH RESPONSE TO THE BALFOUR DECLARATION IN THE MAJOR CENTRES

- (a) U.S.A.: The repercussions of the Declaration as reflected in the Mizrahi organ "Ha-Ivri"
- (b) Britain: In the editorial of the London "Jewish Chronicle." — the mouthpiece of British Jewry
- (c) Russia: The comments of "Ha-Am", a major Jewish daily, published in Moscow with a circulation of 15,000 copies