

The Balfour Declaration

An early step toward the creation of the nation-state of Israel occurred in 1917, during World War I. At the time, Britain was eager to win Jewish support for its war goals and for a British takeover of Palestine from the Ottoman Empire. About 10 percent of Palestine's population was Jewish and the rest mainly Arab.

On November 2, 1917, James Balfour, the British foreign secretary, issued what became known as the Balfour Declaration. The declaration was prepared after extensive consultation with Zionists. In fact, British Zionists prepared drafts of the statement for the consideration of the British government.

The documents below include two drafts prepared by Zionists and the statement finally issued by Balfour. The first document is an early draft that included wording sought by the Zionists. Advised by British officials that the statement was too long and too specific, the Zionists made it shorter. The British cabinet considered the shorter version, changed its wording, and authorized Balfour to issue it. As it finally emerged, the Balfour Declaration was a single paragraph enclosed in a letter to the second Baron Rothschild, a British member of a prominent banking family who was a supporter of the Zionist movement.

Zionist Draft of July 12, 1917

His Majesty's Government, after considering the aims of the Zionist Organization, accepts the principle of recognizing Palestine as the National Home of the Jewish people and the right of the Jewish people to build up its national life in Palestine under a protection to be established at the conclusion of peace following upon the successful issue of the war.

His Majesty's Government regards as essential for the realization of this principle the grant of internal autonomy [independence] to the Jewish nationality in Palestine, freedom of immigration for Jews, and the establishment of a Jewish National Colonizing Corporation for the resettlement and economic development of the country.

The conditions and forms of the internal autonomy and a charter for the Jewish National Colonizing corporation should, in the view of His Majesty's Government, be [worked out] in detail and determined with the representatives of the Zionist Organization.

Zionist Draft of July 18, 1917

1. His Majesty's Government accepts the principle that Palestine should be reconstituted [established] as the National Home of the Jewish people.
2. His Majesty's 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.

Balfour Declaration, November 2, 1917

Dear Lord Rothschild:

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 favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to [advance] the achievement of this

object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may [damage] 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.

Yours,
Arthur James Zimmerman

Within a year of the Balfour Declaration, British and Arab armies had succeeded in taking control of Palestine and surrounding areas from the Ottoman Empire. In 1920 the League of Nations gave Britain a mandate to rule Palestine, with encouragement for Jewish immigration. During the 1920's and 1930's, especially after Hitler came to power in Germany, Jewish immigrants poured into Palestine. By 1947, 35 percent of Palestine's population was Jewish.

Relations between Jews and Arabs in Palestine became increasingly bitter under the British mandate. British officials tried to appease both sides, but met resistance from secret Arab and Jewish armies and terrorist groups. Unable to persuade Arabs and Jews to agree to a joint Arab-Jewish state in Palestine, the British finally gave up. They asked the United Nations to decide what to do. On November 29, 1947, after extensive study and debate, the United Nations General Assembly approved a plan for the partition (division) of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state, joined in an economic union.

Review Questions

1. How was the tone of the second Zionist draft (July 18) different from that of the first draft (July 12)?
2. Why did the official Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, discuss “non-Jewish communities in Palestine”?
3. How was the Balfour Declaration an attempt by Great Britain to serve its own interests?
4. To what extent did the final version of the declaration meet the expectations of the two Zionist drafts?