



Balfour Declaration FAQ's

What was the Balfour Declaration?

The Balfour Declaration was a letter from British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour to Lord Walter Rothschild. It was the first statement of support by any government for Zionist aspirations.

It promised that Britain would aid in the creation of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.

Historically, the document represented the beginning of the end of 2,000 years of statelessness and the prospect of a return of the Jewish people to their historic homeland.

Politically, it was the first announcement by any government pledging support for the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.

Internationally, it would underpin Britain's Mandate for Palestine granted in 1920 at the San Remo Conference and ratified by the 52 League of Nations governments in 1922 and separately by the US Congress.

The letter read:

Foreign Office,

November 2nd, 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 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.

Yours,

(signed) Arthur James Balfour

How was the Balfour Declaration drafted?

On June 13, 1917 Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour met with Lord Walter Rothschild, leader of the British Jewish community, and Zionist statesman Chaim Weizmann and suggested they submit a draft document encapsulating their hopes for Palestine that he could submit for Cabinet discussion.

There was also considerable input by Nahum Sokolow, an official of the international Zionist movement.

The formula that the Zionists preferred was submitted by Rothschild to Balfour on July 18, 1917.

Prime Minister David Lloyd George's government debated the wisdom of making any commitment to the Zionists but ultimately decided to move ahead.

There was a great deal of to and fro over the letter's wording.

Ultimately the phraseology was crafted so as to promote a national home for the Jews in Palestine while protecting the political status of Jewish people who would never move there; and, at the same time, to ensure that Arab civil and religious rights would not be prejudiced in the Jewish homeland.

Why was the letter written to Lord Rothschild?

The Balfour Declaration was addressed to Lionel Walter Rothschild in his capacity as leader of the British Jewish community.

Rothschild was the de facto head of Britain's Jewish community serving as a governor of the Board of Deputies, of the United Synagogue, of the Anglo Jewish Association, and of the Jews' Free School.

The letter could hardly be addressed to Chaim Weizmann, who had become a British citizen in 1910, in part because in the Zionist hierarchy Nahum Sokolow was his senior.

Was the Declaration sanctioned by international law?

The Balfour Declaration itself had no legal effect. However it became part of international law at the 1920 San Remo conference where Britain was given a Mandate to administer Palestine and was required to implement the Balfour Declaration.

In this way it was given effect by international law and received express sanction by international agreement.

Around 1918, with the end of the First World War, statesmen and legal scholars went to work on rebuilding the shattered international political system. Besides the terrible toll in human life (17 million dead and 20 million wounded) and financial cost, the war resulted in empires (including the Ottoman) being vanquished.

There was a need for a new international political order. Who would control territories whose inhabitants had not ruled over themselves for many centuries—or not at all?

In 1919 victors and vanquished gathered in Paris for the Versailles Peace Conference; among them British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, his Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon and British elder statesman Arthur Balfour, along with US President Woodrow Wilson and his Secretary of State Robert Lansing.

Did Britain remain faithful to the Balfour Declaration?

Once the ferocity of Arab and Muslim opposition to the idea became plain, the British authorities did everything in their power to head off the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people—or at least one that depended on a Jewish majority.

Lord Curzon, who replaced Balfour at the Foreign Office, had never been overly sympathetic to the Zionist enterprise.

In 1921 the British authorities began limiting the number of Jews allowed to enter Palestine. They did so again in 1929 and, most devastatingly, in 1939—when Europe’s Jews had practically no place to flee from Nazi Germany.

At the same time the flow of Arabs into Palestine went on unhindered.

What was the reaction to the Balfour Declaration at the time?

The momentous news took about a week to make it into the newspapers.

In his autobiography *Trial and Error* Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann relates: “While the Cabinet was in session, approving the final text, I was outside... [British diplomat and strategist Sir Mark] Sykes brought the document out to me, with the exclamation: ‘Dr Weizmann, it’s a boy!’ Well—I did not like the boy at first. He was not the one I had expected.”

But like Lord Walter Rothschild Weizmann knew that delaying the Declaration in order to get more perfect wording would have played into the hands of British Jews who opposed Zionism—and in the end there would have been no Declaration at all.

“A new chapter had opened for us,” Weizmann wrote—“full of new difficulties, but not without its great moments.”

Arab reaction to the Balfour Declaration was mixed.

The Zionist leaders had hoped to win Arab support for the restoration of the Jews to Palestine. They saw a win-win situation that would benefit Jews and Arabs alike.

Two Arab representatives attended a Zionist celebratory meeting of the Balfour Declaration in London’s Covent Garden on December 2, 1917.

How did the international community bring the Mandate to a close?

Continuing Arab opposition to the Jewish homeland idea raised a new possibility: the partition of western Palestine—the area between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea—into two states: one Jewish and one Arab.

In May 1947 a special committee of the UN General Assembly recommended that this area be partitioned into Arab and Jewish states. Eastern Palestine had previously been transformed into Transjordan.

On November 29, 1947, by a vote of 33 to 13 with 10 abstentions, the General Assembly voted in favour of Partition.

Who was Arthur Balfour?

Arthur James Balfour was born in 1848 into a wealthy well-connected family. His trajectory included Eton and Cambridge and by 1874 he had become a member of parliament. He was appointed private secretary to his influential uncle, Lord Salisbury (1830-1903), when the latter was Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

Had he not entered politics Balfour might have turned to scholarship. In 1879, he wrote *Defence of Philosophic Doubt* which sought to find a balance between respect for science and religious belief. His health was described as “delicate” and his manner one of languor. Lloyd George quipped once that Balfour’s place in history would be fleeting “just like the scent on a pocket handkerchief.”

In actual fact, he became one of the most important figures of his era.

Who was Lord Rothschild?

He was a Zionist, naturalist, and philanthropist. Born into the Rothschild banking family, Lionel Walter Rothschild (1868-1937), took on the business and civic responsibilities necessitated by his position. He served as a Conservative member of the House of Commons and on the boards of various Jewish communal institutions. His attachment to Zionism was heartfelt and of incalculable value to the movement — yet his greatest passion was reflected in his lifelong commitment to the natural sciences.

Who was Chaim Weizmann?

In 1917 Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952) was the indefatigable leader of the Zionist lobby.

The campaign for a British declaration on behalf of Zionism was led by Weizmann. He had his first conversation about Zionism with Arthur Balfour in January 1906 in Manchester. At the time, Weizmann was a university science professor. Balfour had been Prime Minister from 1902 to 1905.

Years later Weizmann would become the first President of the State of Israel.

Weizmann led the Zionist movement away from neutrality in the Great War (WWI) and towards a consistent pro-Allied, pro-British stance.

Born in the Russian Empire, Weizmann immigrated to Britain in 1904 and was appointed lecturer in chemistry at Manchester University.

What motivated Jewish opposition to the Balfour Declaration?

The Jewish opponents of Zionism circa 1917 included those who had turned to other 'isms' such as communism; or those who were fervently Orthodox and believed that God's supernatural intervention was a prerequisite to the Jewish return to Zion; or those in the Reform and Liberal movements who saw themselves as British, German, or US citizens of the Mosaic faith.

But those directly active in opposing the Balfour Declaration and political Zionism generally did so largely on pragmatic grounds.

The pragmatic anti-Zionist Jews of the early 20th century fully accepted Palestine's special significance to the Jewish people.

Take Lucien Wolf for example. He was an opponent of political Zionism and director of the Conjoint Foreign Committee which largely concerned itself with battling anti-Semitism. Its Palestine position was articulated in March 1916:

'In the event of Palestine coming within the spheres of influence of Great Britain or France at the close of the war, the Governments of those Powers will not fail to take account of the historic interest that country possesses for the Jewish community. The Jewish population will be secured in the enjoyment of civil and religious liberty, equal political rights with the rest of the population, reasonable facilities for immigration and colonisation, and such municipal privileges in

the towns and colonies inhabited by them as may be shown necessary.'

And Edwin Montagu, the most persistent opponent of political Zionism inside the David Lloyd George Government nonetheless advocated on 23 August 1917:

'That the Government will be prepared to do everything in their power to obtain for Jews in Palestine complete liberty of settlement and life on an equality with the inhabitants of that country who profess other religious beliefs.'

And while his aim was to head-off political Zionism, on 14 September 1917, Montagu came back with yet another alteration for the Government to consider:

'His Majesty's Government accepts the principle that every opportunity should be afforded for the establishment in Palestine for those Jews who cannot or will not remain in the lands in which they live at present, will use its best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, and will be ready to consider any suggestions on the subject which any Jewish or Zionist organisations may desire to lay before it.'

Like their adversaries, the anti-Zionists of the early 20th century were products of their milieu.

Montagu had recently been appointed secretary of state for India. And he worried how any declaration would affect his standing amongst Indian Muslims.

The opponents of Zionism worried—among other things— that hard won Jewish rights in Western Europe would be withdrawn if Jews had their own national home. That said, there were no Jewish voices which argued against immigration to Palestine or its special place in Jewish history.