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HISTORY

Balfour awakened

On its centennial,
scholars and descendants of
the British statesman discuss
the history of the Balfour Declaration
and what it means today

By GOL KALEV

‘Palestine for the Jews!’ That was the headline in *The Times* of London (November 9, 1917) that informed the world of the British government’s decision to issue a letter that became known as the Balfour Declaration.

The letter, sent by British foreign secretary Arthur James Balfour to Lord Walter Rothschild a week earlier (November 2) stated that the British government viewed with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and would use its best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this objective.

British prime minister David Lloyd George and Balfour were part of a British generation that was inspired by romantic notions of the Jews’ return to their ancestral homeland.

Lord Roderick Balfour, the great-grandson of Arthur’s brother Gerald William Balfour, recently spoke with *The Jerusalem Post* about how these statesmen wholeheartedly adopted such notions.

“They were brought up singing the songs of David, and reading the Old Testament. It was completely natural that Christians should support the return of the Jews to the Holy Land.”

Indeed, Lloyd George said he was taught far more about the history of the Jews than about that of his own people. In 1917, as British forces were advancing through Palestine, he stated that he wished to give Jerusalem as “a Christmas present for the British people.”

But Lloyd George’s great-granddaughter, the renowned historian Prof. Margaret MacMillan of Oxford University, warns not to overestimate the religious motivations. “No doubt they were lovers of Zion, but the declaration was about geopolitical considerations.”

MacMillan, a leading expert on World War I, shared with the *Post* her insight on war dynamics. “Both sides in the war were using every weapon they could find, such as appealing to populations in enemy countries. The Balfour Declaration was driven by British interests, not by altruism.”

Jehuda Reinharz, who has written more than 30 books on Jewish history and served as president of Brandeis University, claims that the Balfour Declaration was not unique. “It was one of many declarations and promises the British made during World War I. What is important is what was done with the Declaration.”

Issuing the declaration was not only consistent with wartime promises given to various groups, it was also in line with previous attempts of world powers to facilitate the return of the Jews.

Over a century prior to the Balfour Declaration, back in 1799, a similar declaration was reportedly issued by the French. This happened as Napoleon was conquering Palestine; he referred to the Jews as the “rightful heirs of Palestine.”

Two decades prior to the declaration, in 1898, the German kaiser became an advocate of the same idea. After meeting Zionist leader Theodor Herzl, he agreed to ask the Turkish sultan to grant the Jews a chartered company in Palestine under German protection.

The sultan declined and Herzl had to resort to other avenues. He discussed with the British government the possibility of giving Jews territory outside Palestine, in the Sinai desert. When that was deemed unfeasible, the British offered territory in East Africa.

Herzl then hired a local British lawyer in 1903 to draft a proposal that became known as the Uganda Scheme. That lawyer was a rising politician named David Lloyd George.

MacMillan believes that her great-grandfather’s awareness of

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**PALESTINE FOR THE
JEW.**

OFFICIAL SYMPATHY.

Mr. Balfour has sent the following letter to Lord Rothschild in regard to the establishment of a national home in Palestine for the Jewish people :—

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 news of the Balfour Declaration as seen in the 'London Times' on November 9, 1917.

(Wikimedia Commons)

British foreign secretary
Arthur James Balfour
(Wikimedia Commons)

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Nations gave a mandate to Britain to put the Balfour Declaration into effect.

In building support for the implementation of the declaration, Weizmann partnered with the Arab Emir Faisal, who proclaimed in an agreement that “all necessary measures shall be taken to encourage and stimulate immigration of Jews into Palestine on a large scale.”

Arab support was corroborated by T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), who upon meeting with the Hashemite emir, wrote to the British Army’s director of intelligence that “the Arab attitude should be sympathetic.”

MacMillan elaborates: “There was no such thing as Arab public opinion. There were some middle-class movements in Baghdad, but for the most part, this area was viewed as a small, backward part of the Ottoman Empire. The Hashemites claimed to represent the Arabs, but in my view, that claim was grossly inflated.”

In fact, the Arabs on the ground in Palestine were not represented, or taken into account.

Prof. Shibley Telhami, the Anwar Sadat professor for peace and development at the University of Maryland, specifies where Palestinian grievances lie. “Part of the historic resentment by Palestinians is that in their view, the second clause of the Balfour Declaration – that nothing shall be done to prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities – was not implemented.”

But Telhami warns not to look only at the declaration’s words. “It was not just what the declaration said. Issuing it legitimized the principle of Zionism.”

Telhami, who was born into a Palestinian Arab family in Israel, says that the focus should be on the consequences of the declaration. “Obviously, Zionism preceded the Balfour Declaration, both politically and with actual settlements on the ground, but having such British support at that time made it easier for the Zionists to establish a state. Balfour set British policy on a path which is inevitably supportive of Zionism.”

Such a path of British support was soon to be interrupted. In the early years of British rule, even before the mandate took effect, the British military seemed to contradict the aims of the declaration. It tended to appoint Arabs,

not Jews, to government positions. It produced official documents and bulletins in Arabic and English, ignoring Hebrew, and was perceived to have applied the well-tested tactic of “divide and rule.”

Pro-British Jewish leader Ze’ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky stated at the time: “The British administration behaves as if the Balfour Declaration was an unfortunate slip of the tongue of the British foreign minister.”

Later on, the British limited Jewish immigration to Palestine, and by the beginning of World War II put a complete halt to it. They acted in direct contradiction to the declaration and the mandate, seeming to use their best endeavors to block the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Reinharz underscores the consequences of British reversal. “There is still strong anger at the British to this day for closing the gates of Palestine in 1939 to Jews who were seeking to escape from the Nazi horrors.” But he also emphasizes the immense role the British played. “We should also keep in mind that without Britain, the groundwork for the establishment of the State of Israel would not have flourished.”

Symbolic of that recognition, the Israeli prime minister’s official residence is on Balfour Street (and a former prime minister had a house facing Lloyd George Street).

On the 50th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, the Israeli government invited Lloyd George’s daughter, Megan, to participate in the official celebrations. She asked her great-niece Margaret to join. “That was the first time I heard of the Balfour Declaration” recalls MacMillan, who did not make it to Israel at that time due to the sudden death of Megan Lloyd George.

In the half-century since then, MacMillan has extensively researched the British Empire. Applying her experience, she concludes that it should not be surprising that the British failed to implement the Balfour Declaration.

“The British thought that they would be there for generations to come. They were operating under a mandate, but did not think this would really lead to full independence so quickly. They thought it would just stay part of their empire.”

other nations’ efforts played a role in issuing the declaration. “The British were worried that if they did not support a Jewish homeland, the Germans would.”

Reinharz takes it a step further: “There were a number of declarations in support of Zionism at the time, amongst them from Japan. But all those declarations were meaningless.” He explains that unlike previous and contemporary declarations of support, this time there was both a feasible path to its fulfillment, and motivated Jewish activists who knew how to leverage it. “[Zionist leader] Chaim Weizmann took the Balfour letter and made it into the Balfour Declaration,” Reinharz says.

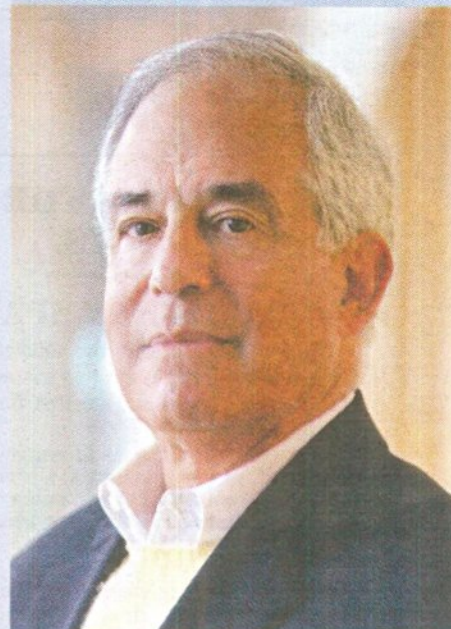
“Messianic times have really come,” Weizmann wrote to his wife as events were unfolding. Four and half years after the declaration was issued, in 1922, the League of



Lord Balfour declares the Hebrew University of Jerusalem open in a painting by Leopold Pilichowski (Courtesy of Hebrew University)



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Some 30 years after the declaration was issued, the British terminated their mandate and withdrew, essentially letting the parties "fight it out."

The Balfour Declaration had run its course and was destined for the dusty shelves of history.

But 70 years later, on its centennial, the declaration has come back to life in a surprising manner.

The Palestinian Authority awakened its memory by demanding an official apology from the United Kingdom, announcing plans to sue the British government for issuing it and even threatening to seek criminal prosecution.

These actions were met with a strong response from British Prime Minister Theresa May. "It is one of the most important letters in history," said May, referring to the declaration. "It demonstrates Britain's vital role in creating a homeland for the Jewish people and it is an anniversary we will be marking with pride."

Lord Roderick Balfour also voiced a strong response to the PA's charges. "It is completely irrational to ask for an apology after the San Remo Conference, which confirmed the Balfour Declaration, and after having the State of Israel approved by world nations. This is just crazy."

Indeed, the foundation of the State of Israel is deeply rooted in international law, but Reinhartz reminds us of a broader basis of legitimacy. "When people accuse Israel of colonialism, they forget that much of the land in Palestine was purchased by various Zionist organizations and individuals. Also, suing Britain for enabling the creation of Israel would open the door to asking how Jordan and Iraq were created and how other Arab countries were carved by European powers."

The PA's awakening of the memory of Balfour raises another question – to what extent should history drive current political decisions?

No doubt there is much to be debated, such as the magnitude of the mass Arab migration to Palestine in the 19th and early 20th centuries and the actual size of the Jewish communities in Jerusalem during the Middle Ages. Similarly, one can discuss Italy's historic rights to South Tyrol, France's claims to Alsace-Lorraine, Muslim ties to Spain and much more.

But is there a risk of getting bogged down in the historical mud and focusing less on the present? Should the Palestinians remain stuck in the what-ifs of the past and sidestep the tremendous opportunities of the present?

According to some observers, the Balfour Declaration did not just influence regional political developments, it also had a tremendous impact on world progress.

Roderick Balfour sees it this way: "The Balfour Declaration gave a homeland to all these brilliant people who arrived and produced an amazing contribution to the scientific and medical world of today."

Supporters of Israel often cite such accomplishments; more particularly, that the Jewish state combats famine by turning air into water, and achieves medical breakthroughs that save millions of lives around the world. In short, the Jewish state is improving humanity.

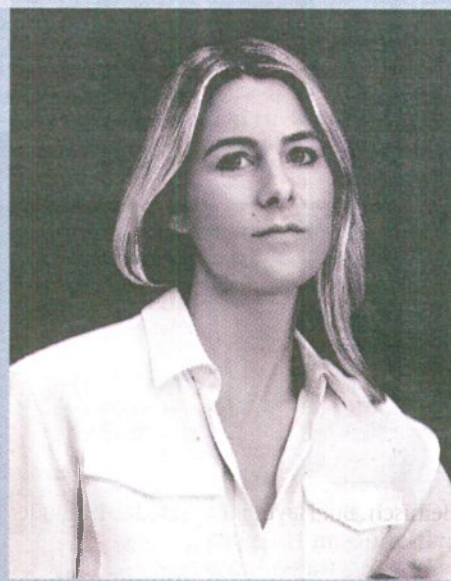
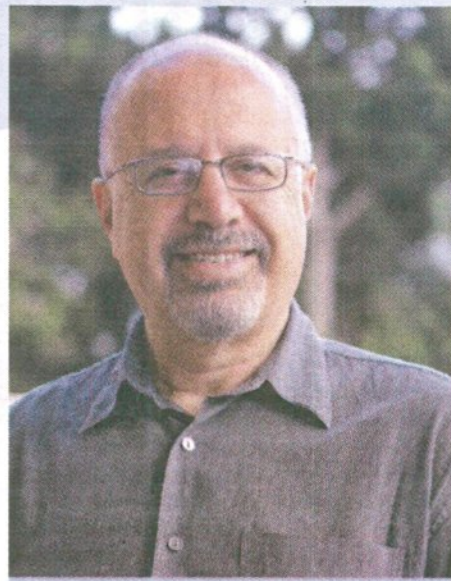
Logically, the Palestinians could be primary beneficiaries of Israel's wealth. There is economic cooperation, Telhami explains, "but the problem is such activities are seen as legitimizing the 'occupation.' It is perceived as normalizing something that is not normal."

This leads us to a debate over whether the Palestinians should participate in Israel's economy, and benefit from its prosperity or boycott it. Are they missing out on access to Israeli wealth, technology and growth opportunities?

Lord Roderick Balfour is clear: "I am very much on the side of the Palestinians. They can only get self-respect and avoid victimhood if the world allows them to build themselves economically."

He points to a structural problem, but one that is solvable. "You cannot have contrasting economies right next to each other. One of the sad things in all this is that Palestinians are not stimulated in promoting their own industries."

Lady Kinvara Balfour, Roderick's daughter, is a creative director, producer and public speaker. She has helped launch several technology start-ups. She stays away from politics, but not from self-empowerment. "I am deeply proud of my ancestors," she says. "I am proud that they dared to question the status quo. I admire people through history that had the courage to change something."



Should the Palestinians change course? Are they embracing a narrative of victimhood and distress that runs against their interests?

Telhami is cautious about such views, but points to a somber reality.

"Palestinians are not a priority for the international community, including for Arab nations. Countries pursue their own interests. The Palestinians should devise strategies that, while not ignoring the international community, find a path that more heavily depends on themselves."

Two hundred years ago, the Palestinian Arabs were not a significant factor in France's plans for Palestine. A hundred years ago, they were not a significant factor in the British plans either.

Today, is there an opportunity for Palestinians to become a factor – to use the success of Israel to foster their own creative and entrepreneurial energies and in doing so, become more dependent on themselves?

"We are not going to change the past," says Reinhartz. "We have to learn to live with history. If we were to unravel history to its origins, there would be no country in the world that could not be accused of injustices. History as a weapon does not work. No side will be able to win all the arguments. You cannot play history backwards."

The Balfour Declaration will always have separate meanings for Palestinians and Israelis. But perhaps its centennial also serves as an optimistic reminder to both sides that, as Theodor Herzl said, if you will it, it is no dream.

Clockwise, from top left:

British prime minister David Lloyd George in 1916. (Wikimedia Commons)

Lord Roderick Balfour (Erez Harudi)

Prof. Margaret MacMillan (Courtesy)

Jehuda Reinhartz (Courtesy)

Lady Kinvara Balfour (Alex Bramall)

Prof. Shibley Telhami (Courtesy)