

The Balfour Declaration - November 2, 1917

There are those who believe that the Balfour Declaration was the most magnanimous (generous) gesture by an imperial nation. Others believe it was the biggest error of judgment that a world power could make.

In this unit, we will discover:

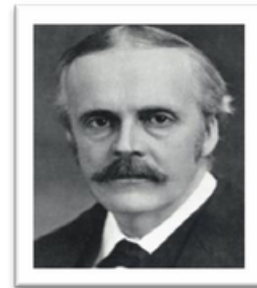
- What was the Balfour Declaration
- Why the Balfour Declaration was so important
- How the Balfour Declaration is relevant today

1. Which of the following Declarations have you heard of?

- a) The United States Declaration of Independence, 1776
- b) The Irish Declaration of Independence, 1917
- c) The Balfour Declaration, 1917
- d) The Israeli Declaration of Independence, 1948
- e) The Austrian Declaration of Neutrality, 1955

What was the Balfour Declaration?

The Balfour Declaration was a letter written in the name of the British government, by Lord Arthur James Balfour, Britain's Foreign Secretary, to the leaders of the Zionist Federation.



2. Read the letter:

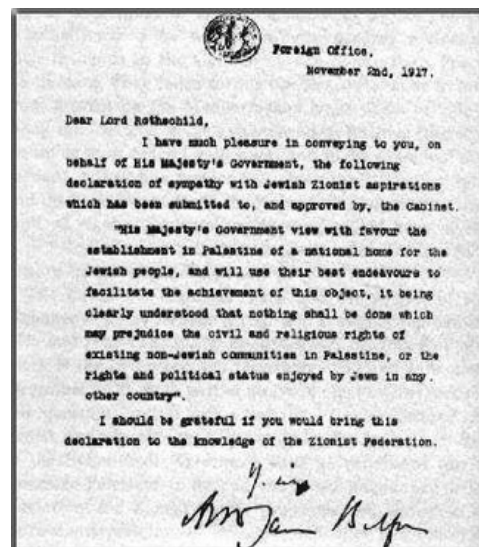
Dear Lord Rothschild,

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 sincerely,

Arthur James Balfour



3. Explain the following terms:

- a) “a national home for the Jewish people”
- b) “will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this objective”
- c) “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”

It was the **first time in history** that a nation recognized the rights of the Jewish people to establish a home in the land of Israel, then called Palestine. Additionally, the British promised to do what they could to help establish that home.

4. Think about:

- a) Where were Jews living at this time?
- b) How was it that if Palestine was the home of the Jewish people, most Jews were not living there?

Two thousand years ago, the Jewish people were living in Palestine (then called Judea, the Latin for Land of the Jews. Judea was eventually conquered by the Romans, who exiled most of the Jews and then renamed Judea, Syria Palestina. From that point, Jews wandered and escaped from country to country, yet they always maintained that Palestine was their national home. But no one cared or listened, until the Balfour Declaration. Now Britain declared that what the Jews had always been claiming was true, and that they would help them to achieve it.

Background

What was so special about Britain and why should the world care about its declarations?

Britain was once a very powerful nation.

The world is made up of many different countries of different sizes. Throughout history, individual nations rose and became superpowers, whose power and influence was felt across the whole world.

5. How many of the following empires have you heard of?


- a) The Babylonian Empire
- b) The Persian Empire
- c) The Roman Empire
- d) The Ottoman Empire
- e) The British Empire

6. It was said that “the sun never set on the British Empire.” What do you think this saying means? _____

- a) British values shone brightly throughout its empire
 - b) The British Empire continues to exist
 - c) Lands in the empire had the same type of weather
 - d) The British Empire was so large, that there never was a moment when it wasn't daytime somewhere in the empire
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Some facts about the British Empire:

- It was the largest empire the world has ever seen.
- The British Empire spanned 35.5 million square kilometers.
- The British Empire covered almost a quarter of all land on the planet.
- English originated in Britain, yet, today it is the national language of **55** countries around the world.
- The Queen of England is still the queen of 16 different countries, including
- Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the Bahamas.

7. Complete the Jigsaw [here](#), to see how large the British Empire actually was in 1917 (all the countries in red). (Click  - restart - to start the puzzle). Alternatively, click [here](#) to see the map.

In 1914, when Britain was at the height of its power, another nation, Germany, sought to challenge it. This led to World War I.

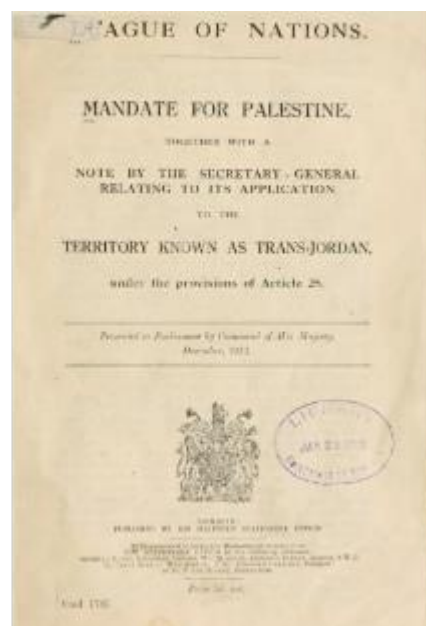
In 1917, Germany was defeated, leaving Britain the undisputed world superpower.

Not only that, Britain had now conquered Palestine. The home of the Jews was now part of the British Empire.

Therefore, what Britain declared about the future of Palestine was crucial.

Another crucial factor that made the Balfour Declaration important, was the establishment of the **League of Nations**, created in the aftermath of the World War I. The League of Nations was created by the countries of the world, to be the world governing body. It would bring together all nations. They would make united decisions regarding world conflicts.

One of the decisions of the League of Nations was to ratify (validate) the Balfour Declaration and to mandate (instruct) Britain to implement it, i.e. to make Palestine an independent Jewish country.



Watch the following video from a debate in the House of Lords (the upper house of Britain's legislature, Parliament). Lord Turnberg explains the legality of the Balfour Declaration:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3mVpqcF4I8&feature=youtu.be>

[Transcript: It is sometimes said that the declaration was a purely British affair, but that would fly in the face of the evidence. Despite their history of anti-Semitism, the French had already given their written approval for a Jewish home in Palestine, as had the Italians, the Americans and the Japanese, and even the Pope was favourably disposed. So it was not simply Britain and Balfour. However, it was not a legal document in any way. It was not a treaty and had no status in international law. It was simply an expression of support—the Government looking with favor on a Jewish homeland—sent in a letter to Lord Rothschild. It could easily have gotten lost at any time. It was only in 1920 at San Remo and two years later in Geneva, that the League of Nations gave the mandate for Palestine to Britain and, furthermore, mandated it to provide the Jewish home there. All 51 nations of the league voted for it, with none against. The League of Nations spoke of a Jewish nation for the first time and of “reconstituting” it in Palestine. Balfour had only spoken of “establishing” it, yet here it wrote of “reconstituting” its ancient rights. It was this basis in international law that gave legitimacy to the Zionists’ claim to a Palestinian home, and it was this agreement that was accepted in full by the UN in 1947.]

8. How many countries recognized the Balfour Declaration?

- a) Just Britain
- b) Britain, France, USA, Italy, Japan, and the Vatican
- c) All 51 countries of the League of Nations
- d) The General Assembly of the United Nations

The ratification of the Balfour Declaration by the League of Nations meant that the **world** recognized the legal claims of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel and mandated Britain to implement it.

Opponents of the Balfour Declaration

Others view the situation differently. They claim that Britain made the Balfour Declaration because they wanted to colonize (populate) Palestine with Jews, who were sympathetic to them, to strengthen their grip on Palestine. This is called imperialism. Therefore opponents of the State of Israel today, claim that the Jews colonized Palestine under the authority of British imperialism.

9. Watch the following excerpt from Britain's parliament. Lord Sacks explains why the opposite is true. He claims that rather than being an example of colonialism, the Balfour Declaration in fact was “a reversal of Imperialism.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVZFMENtBAs&feature=youtu.be>

[Transcript: My Lords, the Balfour Declaration in 1917 was a significant moment in history for three reasons. First, it was a momentous reversal of imperialism. It gave back to the Jewish people the home that had been seized by empire after empire:

Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans, and the Christian and Muslim empires that fought one another for centuries for control of the Jewish land. Secondly, what eventually became the State of Israel was the only non-artificial creation among a host of artificial states, among them Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Libya, which had never been states before and thus still exist in a condition of ethnic, religious and tribal strife. Only Israel had previously existed as a nation state, which it had done 3,000 and 2,000 years ago...]

10. What does "a reversal of Imperialism" mean? —

- a) That the British Empire would stop being an empire
- b) That for the first time an empire voluntarily "unconquered" its land - i.e. it aimed to help the inhabitants of its land become independent
- c) That Britain could not control its lands anymore
- d) That Britain was colonizing a distant land with its own people to ensure it would always remain British

Note: Soon after the Balfour Declaration, Britain began reversing its imperialism, by granting independence to many of the nations it ruled, beginning in 1919, with the Independence of Afghanistan and ending in 1979 with St. Lucia.

11. Explain according to Lord Sacks why:

- a) The Jews in Israel are not colonizers
- b) Israel is different from all the other states in the region?

The Fulfilment of the Balfour Declaration

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was the fulfilment of the Balfour Declaration. Israel's existence has been the source of serious conflict. Many have argued that this conflict would not have arisen were it not for the Balfour Declaration and that Britain should therefore, regret the Declaration.

12. Watch how Baroness Deech responds:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3lfxk-YnJY&feature=youtu.be>

[Transcript: What do we regret and what do we celebrate? We regret that Israel was not established 10 years earlier, which would have largely prevented the Holocaust. We regret the 1939 White Paper, which all but halted Jewish immigration to Palestine when most needed. We regret that anti-Semitism continues to thrive, often in the guise of anti-Zionism—an extraordinary phenomenon when one considers that there is no anti-Turkeyism, anti-Chinaism or anti-Saudiism, to quote but a few egregious examples of repression of the population.

We celebrate self-determination for the Jewish people after thousands of years of dispersal and persecution. We celebrate the miraculous success of Israel; its world leadership in innovation; its 13 Nobel Prize winners; its development of everything from the Intel processor to the five-minute cell phone charger, from radiation-free X-rays to desalination of sea-water, from genetic counselling for the Bedouin to the epilator; its diversity and freedom of speech. It has liberated Jews and given them pride and shown what a persecuted people can do when given control over their own destiny in a tiny state.]

13. How would world history have been different had the Balfour Declaration been implemented earlier? (What happened 10 years before the State of Israel was established? Note: The White Paper of 1939 was a British policy to restrict Jewish immigration to Palestine, as a result of the Arab Revolt.)

14. Imagine you are on a university campus. Students are claiming that the Balfour Declaration was illegal. An empire (Britain) stole a people's land (the Palestinians) and gave it to another (the Jews), and so, the State of Israel is illegal. In light of what you have learned in this lesson, how would you respond?

In April 2017, the Palestinian Authority called upon Britain to openly apologize to the Palestinian people for the Balfour Declaration. The UK government responded:

“The Balfour Declaration is an historic statement for which Her Majesty's Government does not intend to apologise. We are proud of our role in creating the State of Israel.”

The Balfour Declaration may have been just nine lines long, but it changed history.

Rav Kook and the Balfour Declaration In 1914, Rabbi Kook went to Switzerland for a rabbinical convention. While he was there, World War I broke out. He was stranded and could not return to *Eretz Yisrael*.

He spent the war years in London and became the rabbi of an important synagogue there, for three years.

That was a crucial time for him to be in London. The British were fighting against Turkey (an ally of Germany) for control of *Eretz Yisrael* and were debating whether to recognize it as the Jewish homeland. A number of important and influential British Jews were against Zionism and sent a letter to the British government in the name of the Jews of Britain, asking it not to recognize *Eretz Yisrael* as the Jewish homeland. When this letter was sent, Rav Kook organized all British synagogues to send an alternative letter to the government stressing their commitment to the Land of Israel. The British press reported Ravi Kook's protest more widely than the original letter and he was even mentioned in Parliament as the true voice of British Jewry. The British government subsequently issued the Balfour Declaration, recognizing the Land of Israel as the Jewish homeland. Shortly after, the war ended and Rav Kook was able to return home.

The Balfour Declaration and The Three Oaths

The Talmud in ***Ketuvot*** 110b describes two oaths that God made the Jewish people promise, and one oath for the gentiles:

- ☒ The Jews would not storm the wall (i.e. move to Israel en masse)
- ☒ The Jew would not rebel against the nations of the world
- ☒ The nations would not oppress the Jews too much

Some argue that the waves of aliyah were a violation of the first oath and that the attempt to establish a Jewish State was a violation of the second oath.

Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, a leading Religious Zionist rabbi, wrote a booklet which has nineteen different refutations to this claim. Below are three of the refutations:

- a) The three oaths are part of the midrashic literature of the Talmud. Midrash is not used to decide Jewish law. None of the major rabbinic deciders of Jewish law included the oaths as part of their legal decisions. They only interpret them allegorically.
- b) Since throughout history, the gentiles broke their side of their bargain, the other oaths are no longer binding on the Jews. The constant horrible pogroms and persecutions of Jews long before the advent of Zionism, which ultimately led to the murder of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust, constituted a total violation of the oath of the nations. Therefore, the other oaths were no longer valid. The Jews now had the green light to establish the State of Israel.
- c) The establishment of the Jewish State was not a rebellion against the nations of the world. In fact, on three occasions the world powers gave their consent:
 - (i) 1917 - The Balfour Declaration. The British Empire, the rulers of *Eretz Yisrael*, said that it viewed: "with favor 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.”

(ii) 1920 – The League of Nations, the world governing body, mandated the British government to implement the Balfour Declaration.

(iii) 1947 – The United Nations, the successor to the League of Nations, voted to establish a Jewish State.

Therefore, Israel was established not in rebellion against the nations of the world, but rather through their agreement.