

## THE BALFOUR DECLARATION WAS MORE THAN THE PROMISE OF ONE NATION

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**By affirming the right of any Jew to call Palestine home, it also changed the international status of the Jewish people.**

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**This is a response to *The Forgotten Truth about the Balfour Declaration*, originally published in *Mosaic* in June 2017**

In 1930, the British Colonial Office published a “white paper” that Zionists saw as a retreat from the Balfour Declaration. David Lloyd George, whose government had issued the declaration in 1917, was long out of office and now in the twilight of his political career. In an indignant speech, he insisted that his own country had no authority to downgrade the declaration, because it constituted a commitment made by all of the Allies in the Great War:

In wartime we were anxious to secure the good will of the Jewish community throughout the world for the Allied cause. The Balfour Declaration was a gesture not merely on our part but on the part of the Allies to secure that valuable support. It was prepared after much consideration, not merely of its policy, but of its actual wording, by the representatives of all the Allied and associated countries including America, and of our dominion premiers.

There was some exaggeration here; not all of the Allies shared the same understanding of the policy or saw the “actual wording.” But Lloyd George pointed to the forgotten truth that I sought to resurrect through [my essay](#). In 1917, there was not yet a League of Nations or a United Nations. But, in the consensus of the Allies, there was the nucleus of a modern international order. The Balfour Declaration had the weight of this consensus behind it, *before* Balfour signed it. This international buy-in is also why the Balfour Declaration entered the



*Sara and Benjamin Netanyahu view the Balfour Declaration at the British Library. Government Press Office Israel.*

mandate for Palestine, entrusted to Britain by the League of Nations. Those who now cast the Balfour Declaration as an egregious case of imperial self-dealing simply don't know its history (or prefer not to know it).

[Nicholas Rostow](#) does know it, and we should be grateful for the efforts he has made to inform wider audiences about the legal foundations of Israel. "It is not just that ignorance of the past can lead to unnecessary policy error," he writes. "As we know all too well from UN resolutions and opinions of the International Court of Justice, such oblivion, willed or not, can and in this case emphatically does lead to gross injustice."

Of course, some of this ignorance and oblivion is indeed deliberate. Consider the way in which Britain "forgot" its own understanding of the Balfour Declaration. In 1922, an earlier British "white paper" interpreted the declaration in light of postwar conditions. Its key determination was that the Jewish people "should know that it is in Palestine as of right and not on sufferance." The mandate then interpreted the declaration to mean that the country's nationality law should be "framed so as to facilitate the acquisition of Palestinian citizenship by Jews who take up their permanent residence in Palestine."

The Balfour Declaration may or may not have implied a Jewish state, but by affirming the right of any Jew to call Palestine home, it changed the status of the Jewish people. There was one small spot on the globe in which Jews had a natural right to take up abode, by virtue of their "historic connection." (The Balfour Declaration thus anticipated Israel's own "Law of Return" of 1950, guaranteeing that "every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh*.")

In issuing yet another "white paper" in 1939, the British took the *opposite* position. That document stipulated that after a five-year period of reduced immigration, "no further Jewish immigration will be permitted unless the Arabs of Palestine are prepared to acquiesce in it." The Jewish right had disappeared; Jews would henceforth be in Palestine on (Arab) sufferance.

The British justification? Between 1922 and 1939, the British had admitted 300,000 Jews to Palestine, and Jews now formed a third of the population. Wasn't that enough?

At that time, there were 9.7 million Jews in Europe. Six years later, six million of them were dead, and even then the British were determined to keep the remnant out of Palestine. They reasoned that if the Jewish proportion was held to a third of the population, the Jews would never be able to found a state. And so the British "forgot" their own determination of 1922, that the Jewish people was in Palestine "as of right."

In the end, a third of Palestine's population, comprising 600,000 determined Jews, was enough to found Israel even in the teeth of pan-Arab opposition and British hostility. The act of reminding, with which Rostow credits me, should be commended to Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been invited to London by Theresa May, the British prime minister, to "mark" the Balfour centennial. Netanyahu should be sure to link the history of 1917 to that of 1939. The former is a noble chapter; the latter, a shameful one.

**Allan Arkush supplements** my essay with a [valuable appraisal](#) of the possible motives of Britain, France, Italy, the United States, and the Vatican in the crucial year of 1917. Historians who have plumbed the relevant archives have debated these motives, sometimes reaching a consensus, more often not. Support for the Zionist project rested upon a range of considerations, although the predominant one plainly seems to have been self-interest. And yes, Arkush is right that these calculations were made in the midst of war by leaders, not by peoples.

But in no way does this diminish the Balfour Declaration. International legitimacy derives from international politics, with all its contradictions and compromises. UN General Assembly resolution 181 of 1947, which called for the partition of Palestine and a Jewish state, would never have passed if Josef Stalin hadn't put the full weight of the Soviet Union behind it. Why he did so is a fascinating story, but it's irrelevant to the legality of the decision. Nor did the subsequent record of the Soviet Union, combining vicious anti-Semitism with support for Israel's enemies, diminish by a whit the international legitimacy of the resolution the Soviets had supported.

Trade-offs undoubtedly affected the calculations of the principal Allied powers in 1917. Some clearly had to do with the preservation or extension of empire. Yet what is astonishing is that all of these powers somehow converged in opening the door to Zionism. This included not just such traditional rivals as Britain, France, and Italy, all of which had empires, but the United States, which championed self-determination, and even the Vatican, which historically was no more sympathetic to the Jews than was Stalin. This is what makes international legitimacy potent: so many stars must align for it to take hold at all.

Arkush is also certainly right that the "down-to-earth" motives behind the Balfour Declaration no longer speak to some of the citizens of the democracies that endorsed it a century ago. He proposes an emphasis on another, presumably deeper motive behind the declaration: the long-standing Protestant Christian idea of restoring the Jews to Palestine. Balfour and Wilson seemed to have imbibed that idea, as had many members of the British cabinet. Stressing it, Arkush argues, might endow the Balfour Declaration "with greater legitimacy in the eyes of some of today's readers." No doubt this is true, and it is telling that the biggest planned commemoration of the Balfour Declaration, scheduled for the Royal Albert Hall this coming November 7, is the initiative of Christian Zionists.

Yet this supposed lineage is precisely one that Israel's critics also emphasize. I am fresh from an academic conference in which a well-known authority on Israeli "settler-colonialism" gave a paper on "A Century of Balfour Declarations," cataloguing the fervent plans for restoring the Jews to Zion that cropped up in 19th-century Britain. The Israel-defamer Ilan Pappé has similarly given a lecture devoted entirely to this notion, and drawing this conclusion: "A simple history of ideas leads us directly from this Christian Zionist movement of the 19th century to the politicians of the 20th century who would implement these ideas as they would be articulated in the Balfour Declaration." (And for him, the declaration is "the ultimate act of British perfidy.")

In intellectual and academic settings, this emphasis is obviously meant to cast the Balfour Declaration as the romantic excess of Bible-steeped salvation-seekers. Clearly this spin relies for its success upon liberal revulsion at evangelical Christianity. But whatever one thinks of it,

attributing the Balfour Declaration to Christian restorationism isn't likely to validate it for anyone who isn't already an enthusiast of Israel, and of a certain kind.

But as Arkush recognizes, I also don't think much of it on purely historical grounds. First, no hard evidence proves any such "direct" link. One Israeli historian has complained that "accounts of Christian Zionism often read like a dot-to-dot drawing, connecting Lord Shaftesbury, George Eliot, and Laurence Oliphant with some of their lesser-known contemporaries, only to reveal, in due course, a neatly-sketched draft of the Balfour Declaration." In fact, restorationists "were continuously associated with charges of religious enthusiasm, eccentricity, sometimes even madness." Restorationism lurked on the fringe; no respectable Edwardian gentleman would have subscribed to it.

Second, since the opening of the archives, it's clear that all of the British players reasoned in very "down-to-earth" terms. They debated Palestine just as they debated Egypt and India. "As official records show," argued the historian Isaiah Friedman, "sentiment did not determine policy." Jon Kimche titled his book on the Balfour Declaration *The Unromantics* for just this reason. The declaration, he concluded, was "a strictly functional and unromantic bargain with the Zionists."

**Colin Shindler** [returns](#) to the question of the role of personalities in the gestation of the Balfour Declaration. My rediscovery of Nahum Sokolow seems to have fascinated many readers. After the Great War, word of Sokolow's diplomatic deeds spread across the Jewish world, often in exaggerated form. This was attested by the novelist and playwright Sholem Asch in 1923:

In the ancient prayer houses of the land of Poland, in the twilights between the afternoon and evening prayers, the young men used to sit near the stove and tell stories about Sokolow, about his journeys to the royal courts, about his encounters with emperors and princes, and with the Pope, all of whom loved to converse with him and hear him express in 70 tongues his wisdom and his learning, and consulted with him how to govern their peoples. And Sokolow, in his sagacity, pointed them toward the right path, told them against whom to conduct war and with whom to make peace, never omitting an opportunity to be an advocate on behalf of his fellow Jews.

At the time Asch wrote this, Sokolow was the subject of as much legend as was Chaim Weizmann, if not more. I agree with Allan Arkush, who describes as "shocking" the lack of a scholarly biography of Sokolow. But Zionist (and Israeli) leaders often have been remembered and celebrated for reasons that go beyond their impact on history.

One reason is that they have talented disciples determined to "cherish" their memories by publishing critical editions of their papers, establishing institutes bearing their names, and settling old scores along the way. Weizmann had such a disciple in Meyer Weisgal. Vladimir Jabotinsky, whose role Colin Shindler emphasizes, had one in Joseph Schechtman. And both leaders wrote autobiographies. It's unthinkable that the wartime actions of Weizmann or Jabotinsky could ever be forgotten. Shindler himself is laudably engaged in uncovering new aspects of Jabotinsky's contribution, as he has done in his response to me.

Sokolow had no associate of this caliber. His most devoted disciples were his daughter Celina and his son Florian. Celina, who acted as his personal secretary and physician, kept his London house as a shrine to him for decades after his death, refusing to send his massive archives to Israel because its government would not establish a special institute to house them. (She thought it should be situated facing the Knesset.) She finally surrendered the papers and letters to the Central Zionist Archives, but there are no critical editions of anything. Florian, a journalist, wrote a readable if unscholarly biography. It was a poor substitute for the autobiography Sokolow never wrote.

But another reason is just as substantial. There needs to be some present purpose to remembering. Weizmann and Jabotinsky, like Herzl and Ben-Gurion, left legacies. Their lives continue to be read as parables. Admittedly, for historians, the maintenance and repair of the historical record is its own reward, but what can we point to in the actions of Sokolow in 1917 that has a claim on Zionist and Israeli collective memory?

First, his accomplishment is a reminder that it is neither wise nor prudent for Israel to rely on a single friend. Had Sokolow not secured the assent of other powers in 1917 for the hoped-for British declaration, it would not have come about. And had he not returned to regain their approval in 1918, it would not have become binding international law. It is always crucial to “work” the great capital—London in 1917, Washington today. But a diversified diplomacy also aggregates the power that resides in other centers around the globe. Such aggregation gave Zionism the Balfour Declaration, the UN partition plan, and Security Council resolution 242. Absent it, Israel or its actions may yet be robbed of their international legitimacy, especially if the “unshakable bond” with its great friend begins to unravel.

Second, the Sokolow story is a reminder that in the diplomacy of a nation, there is no substitute for true men and women of the world. Sokolow happened to have a gift for languages, which eased his way across Europe and America. This versatility was a source of wonder and strength. (And of this amusing anecdote: Sokolow, on a visit to America, appeared before an audience of immigrant Jews and asked them which language he should use for his speech: Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Polish, German, English, or French? “Give it in French!” someone shouted. “The others we already know.”)

But proficiency in many languages (Italian and Spanish could be added to the list) would not have sufficed. The Zionist activist Shmaryahu Levin wrote this assessment of Sokolow in his memoirs:

Had Jews possessed a state of their own, Sokolow would have been its most distinguished diplomat. From his early manhood he displayed those gifts and talents which are commonly looked for in the higher international diplomacy. His bearing, his social approach, his manner of speaking of and around matters, his very dress, distinguished and festive, marked him as one born to shine in the “big world.” Among all the Jews I have met, or whom I have had the occasion to observe, there is not one who approaches Sokolow in his character of the synthesis of Europeanism—not even among the Jews of Western Europe. They, at most, were polished Frenchmen, Englishmen, or Germans. Sokolow was Europe itself.

The Zionist leader Nahum Goldmann, who traveled with Sokolow, characterized him as a shapeshifter: in conversation,

he had an amazing capacity for adjusting to his partner. Talking to a ḥasidic rabbi he turned into a Ḥasid; dealing with a French statesman he became a charming *bel esprit*, and, as somebody once said half in jest and half in malice, conferring with the Pope he became a Catholic.

For a man who began life as an observant *yeshiva bokher* in a provincial Polish town, he traveled an astonishing distance. In 1918, while in Paris, he confided to his diary: "I know all the departments of Downing Street and the Quai d'Orsay better than I knew, back then, the *beit midrash* of Plock," the town on the Vistula where he spent his childhood.

The challenge for modern Israel is to identify those of its young citizens who show the potential to travel just as long a road as Sokolow's, and then open it before them. Restoring Sokolow as a role model might help.

**As November approaches**, we will see signs of unease among liberal supporters of Israel, who have been persuaded that the Balfour Declaration bears the stigma of empire. Critics of Israel cite it "as evidence for their allegations that Israel is a colonial cancer in Southwest Asia," laments one pro-Israel Jewish student, who concludes that it should not be commemorated at all: "When we allow Israel to be labeled a product of the widely hated British Empire, we surrender both our agency and our purpose."

But why allow Israel to be so labeled? As I've shown, the Balfour Declaration was a pledge made by Britain to the Jewish people on behalf of the Allies, including the United States. In the League of Nations mandate, the establishment of a Jewish national home formally became an international legal obligation, entrusted to Britain for implementation. Arthur Koestler was wrong: the Balfour Declaration wasn't only the promise of "one nation." Sweeping the Balfour Declaration under the rug would simply be a surrender to partisan distorters of this history. But since Palestinians and their friends won't leave it under the rug anyway, why not simply teach the truth about it? The purpose of my essay was to promote just that.

But the centennial should not be marked only as a milestone in Israel's legitimacy in the world. It was also a turning point in the standing of Zionism among the Jews. A wave of euphoria swept the Jewish world, from New York and London to Kiev and Odessa. "After November 1917," wrote Isaiah Friedman, "Jewry was never the same again. . . . The Zionists had won a tremendous victory. Henceforth, they became the central and most dynamic force within Jewry."

That couldn't have been said after the first Zionist congress in 1897. But with the Balfour Declaration, world Jewry entered the Zionist era. We owe the most poignant expression of this to Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the reviver of modern Hebrew. He left instructions as to how the year of his death should be recorded on his tombstone. The inscription reads that he died on "26 Kislev, Year Six to the Balfour Declaration."

This is the Jewish world we still inhabit today. The British later faltered in their adherence to the Balfour Declaration, as did many of the Allies who first backed it. The Jews did not, and they kept its promise.