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Britain/Israel

One hundred years of the Balfour declaration

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV514 - November 2017 -

Publication date: Thursday 2 November 2017

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On November 2, 1917, the British Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur Balfour writes to Lord Walter Rothschild, who was a major figure in the Zionist movement:

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.

What does this tell us?

First, that the colonization of Palestine started before 1948.

Second, the British Foreign Secretary is actively expressing specific support to the Zionist cause.

Third, Balfour is also legitimizing the Zionist aim to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Fourth, though Balfour wrote the declaration to Lord Rothschild, the audience was the Zionist movement and the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland, established in 1899 to campaign for a "permanent homeland for the Jews in Palestine." At the time the Zionist Federation was headed by Herbert Samuel, who was actually working on the Uganda project [a short-lived idea for Jewish settlement in east Africa "ed].

Rothschild and Chaim Weizmann had submitted a draft of a public declaration. Further drafts were discussed by the British Cabinet during September and October, with input from Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews but with no representation from the Palestinian population. The release of the final declaration was authorized by 31 October.

Rothschild himself was not part of the World Zionist Organization, but had funded the first agricultural colonies of the first major wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine in the 1880s " retrospectively named the "First Aliyah" " and transferred the colonies to the Jewish Colonization Association in 1899.

In declaring that it's okay for the British to support the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, the intended audience was the Zionist Federation. In a typical colonial move, the indigenous people of the land were not consulted or considered, otherized and defined in the Balfour declaration while the future colonizers were centered.

The Balfour Declaration then not only legitimized the Zionist project in Palestine and transformed it into a contender in international relations. It in effect precipitated the spread of Zionism among British Jews.

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Prior to that time, only some 8,000 out of Britain's 300,000 Jews were considered Zionists. The Declaration also led to a spike in Zionist sympathies among U.S. Jews from 7500 in 200 societies in 1914 to 30,000 members in 600 societies in 1918 and 149,000 members in 1919, although still a small minority of the Jewish population.

The second half of the declaration was added to satisfy opponents of the policy, who had claimed that it would otherwise prejudice the position of the local population of Palestine and encourage antisemitism against Jews worldwide.

Balfour was saying that the Zionist project was approved as long as it did not affect the "locals." "Nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine," referring to the Palestinians "but not by name.

He is also not saying Arabs or Muslims. What does it mean not to identify the people of the lands by name, but to name a colonial group in a colonial context? It speaks of (1) Balfour's colonial-centered perspective, (2) his familiarity with the Zionist movement, and (3) his acknowledging Zionism as part of his world view.

At this time, World War I was still going on. The Ottoman Empire was in control of Palestine as well as the rest of the Arab world. What would be postwar British Mandate for Palestine hadn't been established yet, so the British were basically preparing for Zionism as a colonial outpost in Palestine.

According to Ottoman statistics studied by Justin McCarthy, the population of Palestine in the early 19th century was 350,000, in 1860 it was 411,000, and in 1900 about 600,000 of which 94% were Arabs. In 1914 Palestine had a population of 657,000 Muslim Arabs, 81,000 Christian Arabs, and 59,000 Jewish Arabs.

It's necessary to pay attention to every single word when we are analyzing these events. Balfour's not talking about Palestinian Jews. He's talking specifically about the Zionist movement. So the long-existing non-Jewish and Jewish communities in Palestine are marginalized here.

Balfour then refers to the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in other countries. Why is he saying that? If Palestine is going to become the place where a homeland for the Jews is going to be, why should Jews be in any other country? Why do you think he's saying that, if they would all move there? In fact, the great majority of Jews had no intention of doing so, and would have considered the suggestion outrageous.

What is Zionism?

There was a debate in the Zionist movement before, during and after the first Zionist conference in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland. The conference was organized by Theodor Herzl, who is often referred to as the father of Zionism. "Father" obviously is gendered, but so was the Zionist movement.

What is the Zionist movement? What is Zionism? It's about the establishment of a Jewish state centered around "Jewishness."

Why is it called Zionism? It's a call back to a religious identification in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, with "the Land of Israel" as the homeland for the Jewish faith. But Zionism means specifically an ethno-religious nationalist movement "a mixture of a religious identity along with an ethnic identity (even if many Israeli Jews are not

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religious, and many do not come from a European ethnicity or experience).

That's a contradiction that has never been resolved. But where does the identity come from? It's traced to the persecution of the Jewish experience throughout Europe. It was manifested in pogroms.

What are pogroms? In Russia, Jewish communities were literally driven out. Their homes were burned and businesses were confiscated. Jews were made to be scapegoats for feudal Christian landed "gentry."

Jews were constructed as scapegoats by the ruling elites in Europe. In Russia, the riots were called pogroms. At some times, Jews were held captive in ghettos. People are locked into their communities, locked in at night. The doors are closed at a certain time. There's a curfew at seven pm "much like the apartheid wall in Palestine now....

So that's where the story of Zionism and the colonization of Palestine begins, and the Balfour Declaration was one of its pivotal moments.

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