

Motives in issuing the balfour declaration



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The British Government's Principal Motives for Issuing the Balfour Declaration.

Passed in 1917, the Balfour Declaration promised European Jewry a national home in Palestine. Though perceived by some as the first major step taken in creating the state of Israel, the Balfour Declaration was much more than the product of Zionist lobbying and sympathies from British politicians. While Zionism gained influence in British circles, the notion of a Jewish state was not the primary inspiration for British control of Palestine. Originally proposed to be an internationally controlled zone, Palestine existed as a buffer between the French imperialist colonies of Syria and Lebanon and British-controlled Egypt. In addition, the British had at their disposal a means of instigating a local uprising to consolidate their hold over Ottoman Palestine. By promising a future nation to Zionists, Britain could also sway American public opinion to support a U. S. presence in World War I (WWI). The far-reaching implications of the Balfour Declaration and subsequent British aspirations would significantly shape the future of Palestine through Jewish and Arab revolt, changing the face of Middle Eastern politics.

Discussion

The long-time imperialist British understood the Middle Eastern environment that they aspired to conquer. There was little hope to consolidate power solely by wresting it from Ottoman hands. The question of controlling Palestine arose, as the Arabs agreed to assist the British forces in fighting the Ottomans on the condition that their land would be under Arab sovereignty. The Arab people had long suffered under the brutal reign of the Ottoman Empire, and “ dissenting anti-imperialist voices echoed throughout <https://assignbuster.com/motives-in-issuing-the-balfour-declaration/>

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula” (Abu-Lughod 1971, p. 55). So while many British felt guilty for the terrible history of the European Jewry, the primary reason for British passing of the Balfour Declaration was the consolidation of its imperialist holdings. Many in Great Britain felt sympathy to the Jewish plight and the Zionist cause, but “ sympathy alone would not have produced the Balfour Declaration”; Jews were favored over Arabs as the group “ better [suited] as its imperial desiderata” (Smith 2001, p. 76). The Zionist movement brought a new party into play, one that relied on British assistance to flourish. “ Contrary to the widely held belief of Britain’s pro-Arabism, British actions considerably favored the Zionist enterprise,” a third party which could be used to manipulate control over the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River (Segev 2000, p. 5). The British, in passing the Balfour Declaration, would essentially be creating a new adversary on which the Arabs could focus while altering the British image of occupying power to arbitrating party. With a growing Jewish presence dependent on Britain, the Empire could keep its hold in the Middle East. The Arabs, on the other hand, fiercely nationalist in their demeanor, would also become dependent on Britain to curb Jewish immigration and expansion in Palestine. With two nationalist movements growing and gaining momentum, there were “ only two possibilities: that the Arabs defeat the Zionists or that the Zionists defeat the Arabs” (Segev 2000, p. 6). While the inevitable war brewed, the British could play both sides, using Zionists as a means to pacify Arab hostility toward the British and manipulating the Zionists to police the Arabs while the British were at war with the Germans. Great Britain’s alignment with the Zionist Movement also had ancillary implications, one of them being the production of acetone. A solvent vital to the production of

munitions, acetone was in short supply during WWI, as most acetone was shipped from Austria. A new means of acetone production was discovered by a young man “ from Manchester—[future Israeli president] Dr. Chaim Weizmann” (Sanders 1983, p. 187). Following his contributions to the British War industry, Weizmann, a Zionist spokesman, became highly regarded in British circles as something of a statesman. It was Weizmann’s campaigning and charismatic allure that brought Zionism to the limelight, aligning Zionist ideologies with British politics. Following Weizmann’s ascension in British circles, the Anglo-Jewish society became highly influential in British expansionism. Interaction with figures such as Weizmann prompted the expedition of the Balfour Declaration. It should be noted that as much as the British favored their leverage over the Zionist Movement, they also used the Balfour Declaration as a means to placate the growing unrest among the growing Jewish population of Palestine. The Zionists of 1917 Palestine were fully aware that war would be forced upon them, either in the guise of British dominance or Arab resistance. The Balfour Declaration assuaged fears of British reneging and focused Zionist attention on the Arab enemy dispersed throughout Palestine. The Zionists, however, were not the only people cognizant of British imperialism and subterfuge. As WWI steadily wore on, the British became more insistent on American involvement. Unfortunately for the British, their imperialistic tactics in Palestine were cautiously approached by the American nation; Britain’s dilemma in gaining US support lay firmly in its imperialist aims.

By 1917, the British Empire found itself at a standstill in its war against the Germans. With supplies dwindling and the economy suffering, Britain was in

dire need of a broader base of allies willing to join the war. The American industrial machine had not yet been drawn into the war, as it was Wilson's policy that America not be involved militarily. While Britain and its allies were more than welcome to purchase and trade with the American nation, it was not until after 1917 that Wilson sent American troops to aid the British. The staunch American opposition to imperialism, most notably in the Monroe Doctrine that stated the American intent to defend any nation fighting to resist imperialism, tried relations between the two English-speaking nations. The British were cognizant of American opposition to " a British occupation of Palestine in principle as suggesting imperialist intent" (Smith 2001, p. 73). It followed naturally that America would be reluctant to join the British, especially given that Great Britain was the largest imperial power in the world. With the strain in US-Great Britain relations kept in mind, the British found the perfect cause to tout as incentive for American involvement in the war. Using Palestine, the British could simultaneously sway Jewish public opinion back in the Empire's favor while justifying its claims in the Middle East. Aiding Zionism would rally " American Jews close to Wilson [to] persuade him to support the occupation" and Great Britain (Smith 2001, p. 73). The opinion of many British leaders was that " the Zionist idea [had] in it the most far-reaching political possibilities" including the elicitation of " Jewish forces in America" and around the globe (Smith 2001, p. 72). American support was necessary not only because of the military advantage it would garner, but also because American Jewry was precariously close to taking Germany's side. Great Britain's alliance with Russia was one that shook the favor of American Jews. Germany, long rumored to have considered supporting the Zionist movement, was a major threat " because

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most American Jews were inclined toward Germany” due to Britain’s Russian alliance; most Jews associated the Russians with its inhumane pogrom policy (Smith 2001, p. 73). The Germans did not have a hold on Palestine, as they were allied with the Ottomans who were struggling to maintain their Arab holdings. Zionism’s importance in rallying support for the British side compounded, as the British, not the Germans, were the power most able to control Palestine. It was speculated that America’s Zionist leanings would inspire it to take the British side in WWI in order to ensure British control over Palestine remained. Zionism “ thus provided a cloak under which Britain could appear free from any annexationist taint while ensuring its own control of the area” (Smith 2001, p. 73). British hopes were realized as America’s 1917 involvement in WWI led to the subsequent victory over Germany. Historians have long underestimated the American Jewish lobby and the part it played in propagandizing the American public opinion toward the war. Prior to the Balfour Declaration, most Americans were intent on maintaining an isolationist stance to the war. Following the passage of the Balfour Declaration, however, “ American Jewish groups undertook publicity designed to encourage greater commitment to the war effort”; after all, if the British lost the war, there would be no way to ensure a Jewish state as only the British were in the position to control Palestine (Smith 2001, p. 76).

The consequences of the British attempt to control Palestine were devastating. Following the Balfour Declaration, the Arab population became incensed, launching a wave of attacks and massacres against Jewish settlements throughout Palestine (Abu-Lughod 1971, p. 17). Following the 1917 passing of the Balfour Declaration, the Arabs were only more convinced

of British duplicity, deciding that they could not rely on the British to effectively stop the immigration of European Jews to Palestine. The 1936 Arab Revolt would soon ensue, prompting the British to finally take action and quell the rebellion. However, many British leaders “ soon reached the conclusion that the Balfour Declaration had been a colossal blunder, unfair to the Arabs and detrimental to the empire’s interests” (Segev 2000, p. 334). The White Paper of 1939 was passed ensuring “ the Jews would constitute no more than a third of Palestine’s population” (Segev 2000, p. 440). The Arab Revolt’s apparent successes, in turn, prompted the Yishuv to also take up arms against the British. Sensing the British were losing hold over Palestine, the extremist contingent of the Zionist underground wasted no time in mounting attacks such as that on the King David Hotel in 1947 that resulted in the deaths of more than 90 people, including many Jews. Like the Arabs, the Zionists felt betrayed by British imperialist stratagems, commencing with the creation of underground groups such as the Irgun and LEHI. Like the Arabs, the Zionists armed themselves, mounting attacks against British fortifications and buildings symbolic of British hegemony. Though the British “ should have left at the height of Arab discontent in 1939, they waited nearly ten years” to vacate, earning them the enmity of the Zionist underground (Segev 2000, p. 312). The passage of the White Paper of 1939 proved to both populations that the British would not accede to either side’s demands; both the Arab and Zionist contingencies of Palestine took part in political assassinations interspersed with guerilla warfare and terror. LEHI went as far as assassinating U. N. mediator Count Folke Bernadotte “ of Sweden” while simultaneously launching “ a vitriolic Israeli press campaign against him” (Smith 2001, p. 203). Unable to keep their word to either side,

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the British “ divide and conquer” strategy only furthered the loss of their hold over Palestine.

Conclusion

The Balfour Declaration was a necessary step for Britain to consolidate its power over the Middle East. By garnering Zionist favor and using its sovereignty to open immigration channels to Palestine, the British Empire conquered Palestine just as it had used its imperialist subterfuge to divide and conquer the Indian subcontinent. Ensuring the existence of a Spartan state constantly on the brink of war such as Zionist Palestine meant the British could keep Arab nationalism at bay long enough to defeat the Germans and significantly weaken the Ottomans. Though the Arabs and Zionists were enemies, they both were against the Ottomans and eventually opposed British sovereignty. By passing the Balfour Declaration, the British had made a single, deft move, encouraging the development of the state of Israel while simultaneously earning the support of the U. S. to fight off the Germans. However, the consequences of the Balfour Declaration were far-reaching as not even the British could manipulate the wills of so many parties. The Arabs and Zionists eventually rose up in arms against Britain separately, and in doing so caused a chain of events that would not only lose Britain the whole of Palestine, but would also cause a rift between two people who should have lived together in one nation united.

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