

Declaration

BALFOUR DECLARATION

TREATY AT A GLANCE

Completed (Ratified)
November 2, 1917, at London

Signatories

Great Britain and the Zionist Federation (these were the concerned parties; the Balfour Declaration was not a formal treaty, so there were no formal signatories)

Overview

This statement of British policy concerning Zionism endorsed the establishment of "a national home" for the Jewish people in Palestine. Its substance was written into the League of Nations mandate for Palestine (1922).

Historical Background

Zionism, the dominant Jewish nationalist movement, is closely identified with Theodor Herzl and other individuals and groups active in the late 19th century. However, its roots are as old as the commencement of the Jewish Diaspora, the Babylonian Exile of the sixth century B.C.E., during which the Jews longed for Zion (Jerusalem). But it was not until the emancipation of the Jews in 1791 during the French Revolution that organized Zionist movements began to appear. Then, during the 19th century, largely in response to rising nationalist sentiment throughout Europe coupled with persecution of European Jews, especially in Russia, Jewish political activists, including Moses Hess, David Luzatto, Leo Pinsker, Zvi Kalischer, and Yehudah Alkalai, worked to raise the national consciousness of ghetto Jewry. Financiers such as Moses Montefiore, Edmond de Rothschild, and Maurice de Hirsch backed several plans for the return of Jews to the Middle East. In 1897 Herzl's World Zionist Congress, held at Basel, Switzerland, created a worldwide political movement.

Terms

After some 20 years of struggle, the Zionist Congress secured the so-called Balfour Declaration, contained in a November 2, 1917, letter from Balfour to Lord Rothschild.



The Balfour Declaration (Letter from Balfour to Lord Rothschild), 2 November 1917

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 favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors 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.



Consequences

Shortly after the Balfour Declaration, British general Sir Edmund Allenby invaded Palestine, capturing Jerusalem in December. In 1922 the League of Nations approved a British "mandate" over Palestine and neighboring Transjordan, and the provisions

of the Balfour Declaration were written into the mandate.

The mandate was intended to encourage the development of self-government, and indeed Transjordan (modern Jordan) became autonomous in 1923 and was recognized as independent in 1928. However, in Palestine, independence was withheld because of apparently hopeless conflict between Arab and Jewish claims. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Arab-Jewish violence was often intense, especially as more and more Jewish immigrants fled to Palestine from Nazi-dominated Europe. From 1936 to 1939 Palestine erupted into civil war. Finally, in 1939 the London Round Table Conference produced a White Paper promising the creation of an independent Palestine within a decade and

limiting Jewish immigration to 1,500 individuals per month until 1944, when Jews would no longer be admitted to Palestine.

Zionists turned from Britain to the United States for support, demanding, in the May 1942 Biltmore Conference in New York, the formation of an independent Jewish state—a demand that attracted much U.S. support. Following World War II, large numbers of Holocaust survivors sought homes in Palestine. By 1947 a war-weary Britain turned the entire problem over to the United Nations, which voted to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. On May 14, 1948, the eve of Britain's evacuation, Palestine's Jews proclaimed the state of Israel.