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THE UNREGARDED PROPHET: LORD CURZON AND THE PALESTINE QUESTION

DAVID GILMOUR

George Nathaniel Curzon was the most travelled man who ever sat in a British cabinet. During his eight years as a young MP on the Conservative back benches, he spent part of each year on a long expedition to Asia; later, as viceroy of India, he travelled more extensively than any of his predecessors or successors. Although he was as politically ambitious as David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, Curzon aimed for the top not by means of parliamentary oratory and Westminster intrigue but by establishing himself as his country's leading expert on Asian affairs. The knowledge acquired on his journeys made him the most highly qualified viceroy (1899-1905) and foreign secretary (1919-24) that Britain has ever had. This did not often enable him, however, to persuade less knowledgeable colleagues to accept his policies. Indeed, several of the postwar crises in the eastern Mediterranean were caused or exacerbated by the British government's refusal to heed the advice of its foreign secretary.

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An “Explorer of Wildernesses”

Curzon’s early Asian travels—and the books he wrote of them—belonged to a vast and comprehensive project to study the problems of the continent and their implications for British rule in India. Yet he also became engrossed in the histories and cultures of certain countries, as he demonstrated in his magisterial two-volume work, *Persia and the Persian Question*. The memories of his journeys in the Near and Middle East were important for the formulation of his foreign policy in later years.

Palestine was the first Asian land to be explored by the young Curzon. After leaving Oxford University in 1882, he travelled to Greece and Egypt before sailing to Jaffa and riding through northern Palestine to Damascus. Much of his time in the Holy Land was spent comparing places with the events associated with them in the Bible, an experience which depressed and disillusioned him. He was appalled by both the impostures of the local guides and the superstitious credulity of visiting Christians who accepted every fictitious site they were shown. “At Bethlehem of course one is shewn the precise spot where our Lord was born and where the manger stood—also where the shepherds watched their flocks etc.”¹

But he saw and remembered enough of the land to argue nearly thirty-five years later that it could not sustain the Zionist experiment. In a memorandum to his ministerial colleagues of October 1917, he asked whether it was

not obvious that a country which cannot within any proximate period contain anything but a small population, which has already an indigenous population of its own of a different race and creed . . . and which is suited only to certain forms of agricultural and pastoral development, cannot, save by a very elastic use of the term, be designated as the national home of the Jewish people?²

For ten years after Curzon’s return from India, the Conservative party was in opposition and played no part in government until May 1915, when the Liberal prime minister, H.H. Asquith, felt compelled to form a wartime coalition. Curzon, who entered the cabinet with the rather ceremonial title of Lord Privy Seal, at last had a chance to influence policy. But a number of his colleagues, notably the former Prime Minister A.J. Balfour, seemed determined to thwart him.

Balfour was an old friend who had never understood Curzon’s passion for travel. Many years earlier he had expressed bewilderment that Curzon should have become “an explorer of wildernesses” and a “student of effete civilizations.”³ Yet when they were in the same cabinet, Balfour refused to appreciate that his friend’s studies might have gained him certain insights on the world that he himself, who seldom travelled beyond France and Scotland, had not acquired. In October 1915, Cur-

zon opposed a British advance up the Tigris to Baghdad, arguing that any force that reached the ancient Abbasid capital would be in a perilous position, liable to be cut off and surrounded. But the cabinet was swayed by the opinions of Balfour and Sir Edward Grey (the foreign secretary)—neither of whom had been near the area and who were quite ignorant of local conditions—that the offensive was a gamble worth taking.⁴ Britain's greatest military humiliations in the Middle East—defeat at Ctesiphon and surrender at Kut al-Amara—were the direct consequences of this gamble.

At the beginning of the war Curzon had deprecated the idea of making promises about the future of the Middle East. Skeptical of proposals for an Arab caliphate and a tribal revolt in Arabia, he considered it folly to promise the Arabs an enormous state on former Ottoman territory. Britain would be in a most unfortunate position, he observed in April 1915, if she gave them pledges which she failed to redeem.⁵ But once they had been made, however erroneously, he saw no option but to humor them. Britain "must be very careful," he told his colleagues two years later, "that any peace program did not work to the detriment of the Arabs and the promises" made to them.⁶ He thus opposed the commitments made in the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration and also criticized the British interpretation of the correspondence between Sir Henry McMahon, the high commissioner in Egypt, and Hussein, the sharif of Mecca. Referring to McMahon's pledge of support for Arab independence in territories conquered from the Turks except in those "portions of Syria lying to the west of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo," Curzon was unable to agree that the high commissioner "really had excluded Palestine when talking about the areas to the west of the towns."⁷

Curzon regarded the Sykes-Picot Agreement as "a millstone round our necks" and dismissed it as "a sort of fancy sketch to suit a situation that had not then arisen." At any rate, he told the cabinet's Eastern Committee at the end of the war, that must be "the principal explanation of the gross ignorance" with which the boundaries had been drawn, divisions so "fantastic and incredible" that they would clearly lead to incessant friction between the French, the British, and the Arabs.⁸ But he believed that the problems it would cause would be minor compared to those promoted by the Balfour Declaration.

The War Cabinet and the Debate about Zionism

By the time that Zionism became an issue for the British government, Lloyd George had succeeded Asquith as prime minister and Curzon had exchanged his ornamental title of Lord Privy Seal for the equally venerable post of Lord President of the Council. His new duties, however, were far more onerous. With Lloyd George and Lord Milner he was

now one of the key members of the tiny War Cabinet which met almost daily to discuss and direct the main areas of the war effort: Its principal task in the summer of 1917 was to decide the strategy for the autumn offensive that led to the hecatomb of Passchendaele. Curzon was also leader of the House of Lords and chairman of a great many cabinet committees dealing with questions as diverse as merchant shipping, a settlement for Ireland, and a proposal to exchange Gibraltar for Ceuta.

Overstretched by working days that seldom ended before two in the morning, he paid little attention to the government's diplomatic negotiations with the Zionist movement. Indeed, he seems to have been scarcely aware of those strange combinations of romanticism and strategic reasoning, zealotry and altruism, pro-Jewish sympathy and professed anti-Semitism, that were converting so many of his colleagues into champions of the idea of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. It was not until reading a cabinet paper circulated in August 1917 by Edwin Montagu, the secretary of state for India and the only Jewish member of the government, that he decided to intervene.

In his paper, Montagu had denounced Zionism as a "mischievous political creed" that would promote anti-Semitism and jeopardize the status of Jews living outside Palestine. It was in any case a futile aspiration, he argued, because there were "three times as many Jews in the world as could possibly get into Palestine if you drove out all the population that remains there now."⁹ Impressed by these arguments, Curzon told Montagu that Zionism would be bad for Palestine and for the Jews.

I agree with you about the absurdity of shunting the Jews back into Palestine, a tiny country which has lost its fertility and only supports meagre herds of sheep and goats with occasional terraced plots of cultivation. You cannot expel the present Moslem occupation. You cannot turn the Jews into small cultivators and grazers. You cannot turn all the various sects, religion and denominations out of Jerusalem. I cannot conceive a worse bondage to which to relegate an advanced and intellectual community than to exile in Palestine.¹⁰

The members of the War Cabinet and other senior ministers debated the issue at the beginning of October. Balfour, who had succeeded Grey as foreign secretary, claimed that a pro-Zionist declaration was necessary to preempt a similar announcement from Germany and to gain the support of American Jews, who might provide financial aid to the Allies, and Russian Jews who, despite the revolution in their country, might help persuade their government to stay in the war. Montagu stuck to the issue of British Jewry, arguing that its homeland was Britain rather than Palestine, and pointing out that most English-born Jews were opposed to Zionism. Curzon, by contrast, concentrated the discussion on Palestine and its inhabitants. According to the cabinet minutes:

He stated, from his recollection of Palestine, that the country was, for the most part, barren and desolate; there being but sparse cultivation on the terraced slopes, the valleys and streams being few, and large

centres of population scarce, a less propitious seat for the future Jewish race could not be imagined. How was it proposed to get rid of the existing majority of Mussulman inhabitants and to introduce the Jews in their place? How many would be willing to return and in what pursuits would they engage? To secure for the Jews already in Palestine equal civil and religious rights seemed to him a better policy than to aim at repatriation on a large scale. He regarded the latter as sentimental idealism, which would never be realised, and that His Majesty's Government should have nothing to do with it.¹¹

Afterward he returned to these themes in a paper for the cabinet. What, he asked, was "to become of the people of this country?" Apart from one hundred thousand Christians, "who will not wish to be disturbed," there were

over half a million . . . Syrian Arabs—a mixed community with Arab, Hebrew, Canaanite, Greek, Egyptian and possibly Crusaders' blood. They and their forefathers have occupied the country for the best part of 1,500 years. They own the soil . . . They profess the Mohammedan faith. They will not be content either to be expropriated for Jewish immigrants or to act merely as hewers of wood and drawers of water for the latter

Curzon also pointed to the problem of Jerusalem which he regarded as

"a city in which too many peoples and too many religions have a passionate and permanent interest" for it to become a "future Jewish capital."¹²

Curzon regarded Jerusalem as "a city in which too many peoples . . . have a passionate and permanent interest" for it to become a "future Jewish capital."

Curzon's intervention came too late to affect an issue on which his only ally was Montagu, an unpopular and distrusted figure, and on which he was opposed by the three most powerful men in the government,

Balfour, Milner, and Lloyd George. At the crucial cabinet meeting on 31 October, he admitted the propaganda value of a pro-Zionist declaration but restated his misgivings and his pessimism about the future of Palestine.¹³ Largely in deference to his anxieties, however, the final version of the Balfour Declaration contained the pledge that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

A Foreign Secretary at Odds with a Foreign Policy

In January 1919, shortly after the end of the war, Lloyd George asked Curzon to take charge of the Foreign Office while he and Balfour went to Paris for the peace conference. Although Curzon did not officially become foreign secretary until October, he immediately tried to restrict Zionist ambitions in Palestine. At the cabinet's Eastern Committee meeting in December he had observed that Zionists were already talking about a Jewish state extending east of the Jordan.¹⁴ The following

month, after seeing a telegram from Chaim Weizmann proposing that Palestine should become a "Jewish Commonwealth," he warned Balfour that such an aspiration would lead to an Arab uprising. When the foreign secretary replied that Weizmann had never asked for a "Jewish Government in Palestine" and that he himself would regard such a claim as "inadmissible," it was clear to Curzon that he was quibbling over the difference between "commonwealth" and "government."

I feel tolerably sure . . . that while Weizmann may say one thing to you, or while you may mean one thing by a national home, he is out for something quite different. He contemplates a Jewish state, a Jewish nation, a subordinate population of Arabs etc. ruled by Jews; the Jews in possession of the fat of the land, and directing the Administration. He is trying to effect this behind the screen and under the shelter of British trusteeship.¹⁵

While Curzon was aware that Weizmann said one thing to his friends but "sang to a different tune in public," he did not know that the foreign secretary was pursuing a similar tactic with himself. Although Balfour told him then that a Jewish government was inadmissible, he had confessed to a Zionist sympathizer the year before that he hoped for a Jewish state, and, at a meeting with Churchill and Weizmann in 1922, he and Lloyd George admitted that the Balfour Declaration "had always meant a Jewish State."¹⁶ Convinced by long acquaintance that Balfour did not really care about anything, Curzon never appreciated the strength of his attachment to Zionism. He believed that the driving force behind this particular policy was Lloyd George who, he thought, "clings to Palestine for its sentimental and traditional value, and talks about Jerusalem with almost the same enthusiasm as about his native hills."¹⁷

In 1922, Balfour and Lloyd George admitted that the Balfour Declaration "had always meant a Jewish State."

Curzon endeavored to persuade Zionist leaders and their supporters that their claims must be limited for the sake of racial harmony. "I am just about to see Dr. Weizmann," he wrote to a colleague in April, "who will receive from me no sympathy with the advanced and aggressive aspirations in which Zionism, under his guidance, has lately shown an inclination to indulge."¹⁸ But he was so pessimistic about Britain's ability to reconcile the different pledges of the Balfour Declaration that he favored an American proposal to send out an international commission to consult the inhabitants of the Middle East about their future. Such a commission, he hoped, would "extricate us from the position in Palestine," which would soon be "untenable," and might lead to a United States Mandate instead.¹⁹ Once again, however, Curzon was heavily outnumbered within the British government. Like Clemenceau in Paris, Lloyd George realized that an international commission which invited

Arab opinions on the future status of the area would sabotage those territorial ambitions which Britain and France had secretly proclaimed in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Although the American King-Crane Commission did go to the Middle East in 1919, its report, which found the population not only of Palestine but of the whole of Syria “emphatically against the entire Zionist program” and which recommended its “serious modification,” was not published for three years. This interval allowed the British and the French plenty of time to pursue their plans successfully. At the San Remo Conference in April 1920, they persuaded the new League of Nations to award them mandates in Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia.

As foreign secretary, Curzon was forced by the San Remo decisions to carry out a Palestine policy with which he profoundly disagreed. As his predecessor Balfour told him, “Whether Zionism be good or bad (and, as you know, I think it good), we are now committed to it, and failure to make it a success will be a failure for us.”²⁰ But although he was unable to repudiate Zionism or give up the Mandate, Curzon was determined to pursue a policy in line with “the narrower and more prudent rather than the wider interpretation” of the Balfour Declaration.²¹

His principal struggle was over the wording of the Mandate. An official attempt to include the word “commonwealth” was vetoed by the foreign secretary on the grounds that it was “a euphemism for a Jewish state.”²² A draft Mandate, which he claimed had been drawn up by “someone reeling under the fumes of Zionism,” also provoked Curzon’s anger. Responding to a minute by Sir John Tilley, who had complained about the Arabs being included in “the non-Jewish communities” because it sounded “as if there were a few Arab villages in a country full of Jews,” he proclaimed his agreement with the author.

Here is a country with 580,000 Arabs and 30,000 or is it 60,000 Jews (by no means all Zionists). Acting upon the noble principles of self-determination and ending with a splendid appeal to the League of Nations, we then proceed to draw up a document . . . [that] is an avowed constitution for a Jewish state. Even the poor Arabs are only allowed to look through the keyhole as a non-Jewish community.²³

Curzon was even more indignant about the draft wording of the preamble which recognized “the historical connection of the Jewish people and the claim which this gives them to reconstitute Palestine as their National Home.” On reading it, he denied that the Jews’ connection with Palestine, which had terminated so many centuries earlier, gave them any claim whatever. “On this principle,” he observed, “we have a stronger claim to parts of France.” But pressure from his colleagues and from Zionist leaders was too strong for it to be omitted altogether, and Curzon accepted a blander phrase about the Jews “reconstituting their National Home in that country.”²⁴

During 1920, the foreign secretary was involved in a protracted struggle for control of Britain's Middle East policy. He lost, and at the beginning of the following year Palestine and Mesopotamia were transferred to the Colonial Office under Winston Churchill. Relieved that he was no longer responsible for implementing the Balfour Declaration, Curzon remained anxious, however, about the future of Palestine. He was particularly worried about Arab rights because he realized that the Palestinian leadership enjoyed far less influence than the Zionists with the mandatory government. Until his death in 1925 he regarded the Balfour Declaration as "the worst" of Britain's Middle East commitments and "a striking contradiction of our publicly declared principles."²⁵

Shortly before he died, Curzon observed that all the prophecies he had made at the time of the Balfour Declaration had come true. Had he lived until 1948, they would have come truer still. Yet he was the only senior figure in the British government at the time who foresaw that its policy would lead to decades of Arab-Jewish hostility. Balfour, who as chief secretary for Ireland had had considerable experience of sectarian problems, promoted an even more spectacular antagonism in Palestine through ignorance and disregard for its Arab inhabitants. The other great imperial figures of the era—Churchill, Lloyd George, and Milner—were similarly shortsighted, expecting the Palestinians to accept an alien and romantic dream that required their lands and their birthright.

"One of Curzon's characteristic weaknesses," wrote Churchill after his death, "was that he thought too much about stating his case and too little about getting things done."²⁶ But concerning Palestine, at any rate, the criticism was unfair. The case was well presented and the arguments were prophetic, but it was impossible for him to "get things done" when opposed by his most powerful colleagues. Curzon's foreign policy successes depended on allies or the absence of enemies. With Milner's help he was able to force the cabinet to end Britain's protectorate over Egypt and recognize her as an independent sovereign state. After Lloyd George and Churchill left office in 1922, he could reverse their pro-Greek policy and reach a settlement with Turkey in the Treaty of Lausanne. But over Palestine his isolation was so complete that he could achieve little, both to the disadvantage of Britain's foreign policy and to the lasting detriment of the indigenous Arabs.

NOTES

1. Curzon to Lord Wolmer, 3 April 1883, Selborne Papers.

2. "The Future of Palestine," 26 October 1917, CP 112/266.

3. Balfour to Curzon, 2 January 1893, copy in Balfour Papers, Add. MSS 49732.

4. Minutes of Dardanelles Committee, 14 and 21 October 1915, CP 112/161.

5. Curzon to Lord Cromer, 22 April 1915, Cromer Papers, FO 633/24.

6. Minutes of War Policy Committee, 3 October 1917, CP 112/136.

7. Minutes of Cabinet Committee, 5 July 1923, CP 112/266.
8. Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T.E. Lawrence* (London: Heinemann, 1989), pp. 590-91.
9. "The Anti-Semitism of the Present Government," 9 October 1917, CP 112/267.
10. Curzon to Montagu, 8 September 1917, Montagu Papers AS3/2/9.
11. PRO, CAB 23/4.
12. "The Future of Palestine."
13. PRO, CAB 23/4.
14. PRO, CAB 27/24.
15. Balfour to Curzon, 20 January 1919 and Curzon to Balfour, 26 January 1919, PRO, FO 800/215.
16. Richard Meinertzhagen, *Middle East Diary* (London: Cresset Press, 1959), p. 9; M. Gilbert, *World in Torment* (London: Minerva, 1990), p. 621.
17. Curzon to Balfour, 20 August 1919, CP 112/208.
18. Curzon to Lord Derby, 30 April 1919, CP 112/196.
19. Curzon to Balfour, 25 March and 20 August 1919, CP 112/208.
20. Balfour to Curzon, 13 October 1920, CP 112/288.
21. Curzon to Allenby, 16 July 1920, CP 112/799.
22. PRO, FO 371/5199, cited in Doreen Ingrams, *Palestine Papers, 1917-1922: Seeds of Conflict* (London: J. Murray, 1972), pp. 96-97.
23. *Ibid.*
24. PRO, FO 371/5248, cited in Ingrams, *Palestine Papers*, pp. 102-3.
25. Curzon to Bonar Law, 14 December 1922, Bonar Law Papers, 111/12/46.
26. Winston Churchill, *Great Contemporaries* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1937), p. 281.