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WAR-TIME CONTINGENCY AND THE BALFOUR DECLARATION OF 1917: AN IMPROBABLE REGRESSION

WILLIAM M. MATHEW

Rejecting deterministic views of the 1917 Balfour Declaration as an expression of the inevitable work of history returning Jews to their ancient homeland, this article argues that Britain's fateful endorsement of the idea of a national home for Jews in Palestine was, in fact, the result of a combination of fortuity and contingency related primarily to World War I and the concerns and personalities of the British politicians involved. The article highlights the historic improbability of the Declaration and its implementation in the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, noting the regression it represented at a time when British imperial policy aspired to more flexible accommodations with colonial populations.

FOR MANY ZIONISTS in the early twentieth century, the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine through the British government's Balfour Declaration of 1917 and its League of Nations Mandate of 1922 represented, momentarily, the now-imminent return of a diasporic people, comparative aliens in gentile societies, to their ancient home in the Levant. The mystic Zionist, Abraham Isaac Kook, saw it all as an expression of divine purpose, a great restorative sweep of God-driven history.¹ Such ideas were rooted, albeit with a political twist, in the ancient Jewish sense of a "sacred" history and a related metaphysics of material events.² There was an even grander reclamation: a "return to history" (*ba-shiva la-historia*) itself. Until that point, lacking territoriality and incoherent as a nation, the Jews had been, in David Ben-Gurion's words at the time of the Balfour Declaration, "extricated from world history."³ Now, through the official agency of the British, they were poised for a dramatic reentry.

REGRESSION

To the disinterested historian, however, what commands attention is not some working through of ineluctable religious or secular historical forces but rather the sheer short-term contingency, much of it war related, of the

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enabling factors underlying both the Declaration and Britain's Mandate over Palestine in which it was ultimately incorporated. If there was any great movement of events, it was more a regression than an advance, involving as it did the establishment of a European settler community in an already well-peopled and well-charted territory. Britain's sponsorship of the Zionist project stood in contradiction to the "Wilsonian" spirit of the times, in which self-determination for formerly imperialized societies had been, notionally at least,⁴ a significant concern in post-World War I political dispositions.

The British were remarkably explicit in their denial of democratic rights to the Palestinian Arabs. The author of the Declaration, Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, insisted, in an oft-quoted remark, that the aspirations of Zionists were "of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land,"⁵ and that Arab claims to Palestine were "infinitely weaker than those of the Jews."⁶ These views were consistent with the Declaration's promise of protection for the "civil and religious," but *not* "political," rights of the so-called "non-Jewish" population of Palestine. Lord Alfred Milner, one of the drafters of the Declaration, suggested that history and tradition of "the most sacred character" made it "impossible . . . to leave it to the Arab majority . . . to decide what shall be the future of Palestine."⁷ The prime minister, David Lloyd George, was more succinct: "You mustn't give responsible government to Palestine."⁸ Nor could the indigenous population do much by way of effective complaint: Sir Ronald Storrs, successively military governor of Jerusalem and civil governor of Jerusalem and Judea between 1917 and 1926, observed that the Palestinian Arabs, in making pleas for political justice, had "about as much chance as had the Dervishes before Kitchener's machine guns at Omdurman."⁹

There was, of course, a widespread failure on the part of European colonial powers to deliver self-determination to their subordinate societies: It took a second world war to bring that about. But there was a distinct sense in British imperial policy that aspired to more flexible accommodations with colonial populations—notably in India, Ireland, and Egypt. Winston Churchill as colonial secretary had, despite his own vigorous Zionism, a clear sense of the inflammatory inconsistency involved, declaring in 1922 that the problem with the idea of a Jewish homeland was "that it conflicted with our regular policy of consulting the wishes of the people in mandate territories and giving them a representative institution as soon as they were fitted for it."¹⁰ Another friend of Zionism, Sir Mark Sykes, insisted in 1918: "If Arab nationality be recognised in Syria and Mesopotamia as a matter of justice it will be equally necessary to devise some form of control or administration for Palestine" that recognizes "the various religious and racial nationalities in the country . . . according *equal privileges to all* such nationalities."¹¹

The regression, however, was implemented, and proved to be of the greatest historical significance, with bloody consequences for the near-century ahead.¹² The clear implication was that the Jewish national home in Palestine, inserted in newly conquered British territory, could survive only through

radical moderation of its colonialist instincts and an historic compromise with the Arab majority; or, alternatively, by iron-fisted attempts to impose unmoderated Jewish political will. The second approach—the one that came to govern events—was well articulated by the “revisionist” Zionists, most notably by the Odessa-born Vladimir Jabotinsky. As Avi Shlaim indicates, Jabotinsky did not subscribe to the common, tendentious illusion that “backward” Arabs would welcome “modernizing” Jews into their midst. Conflict was bound to ensue, he maintained, and it was incumbent upon the arriving settlers to prepare psychologically and militarily for the battles to come.¹³ “Any native people,” Jabotinsky wrote in 1923, “views their country as their national home, of which they are complete masters. They will not voluntarily allow, not even a new master, but even a new partner. And so it is for the Arabs. . . . They look upon Palestine with the same instinctive love and true fervor that any Aztec looked upon his Mexico or a Sioux looked upon the prairie.”¹⁴ The analogies were not happy ones.

WAR-TIME CONTINGENCY

Regression, ipso facto, carries its own improbability. More specifically, there was in this case a conjuncture of chance and short-term circumstance that made it possible for an effective pro-Zionist policy to be pursued and to triumph. The absence of any one of these could have fatally damaged the project. There is, accordingly, no place for historicist determinism in explaining the British government’s declared sponsorship in 1917 of a national home for the Jews in Palestine and the subsequent incorporation of the policy for practical implementation in its Mandate. This section will examine three of the pertinent contingencies: first, the Ottoman Empire’s entry into the war in 1914 as an ally of imperial Germany, thereby exposing Palestine to British assault; second, Herbert Asquith’s replacement as prime minister in December 1916 by David Lloyd George, a man of imperialist temper who adopted an “eastern” perspective on the war; and third, the presence in Britain after 1904 of the individual who was to become Zionism’s most effective proponent (and later Israel’s first president), Chaim Weizmann. A fourth contingency, the failure of the anti-Zionist opposition in Britain, will be dealt with separately.

The Ottoman Entry into the War

Only when the Ottoman Empire became an enemy belligerent could Britain justifiably entertain the notion of invading and occupying Palestine—a territory which, crucially, “bordered on the Suez Canal,” as Herbert Samuel, Britain’s first high commissioner in the country, noted in his memoirs: “The moment Turkey entered the war the position was entirely changed. If Palestine was to be given a new destiny, Great Britain, with her important strategic interests in the Middle East, was directly concerned.”¹⁵ This was an untoward turn of events, given that Turkey had been diplomatically and materially

succored for most of the nineteenth century by British governments ever concerned over the security of India and the lines of access thereto. Latterly, however, the focus had been much less on Constantinople than on Turkey's khedivate in Egypt. Moreover, following years of commercial and financial penetration in the Ottoman capital and Asia Minor, Germany had been able to conclude a Treaty of Alliance with the Porte—and indeed signed it the day before it invaded Belgium, Basil Liddell Hart describing this as “the one great success of German diplomacy” in the run-up to hostilities.¹⁶ An early Turkish foray, highlighting the new strategic dangers for the British, was an unsuccessful German-directed assault on the Suez Canal in February 1915.¹⁷ As for Zionist prospects, the Ottoman Empire offered Jews little promise of special rights. Theodor Herzl's hope around the turn of the century had been that provision for Zionist settlement could be arranged with the authorities in Constantinople, but his efforts came to nothing, despite the offer of financial and military assistance and some prompting from Kaiser Wilhelm II.¹⁸ The situation became even less promising after the nationalist Young Turk revolution of 1908.¹⁹

Yet, despite the new alignments (and longer-standing British interests in Levantine territories), there was nothing preordained about Palestine's capture and rule by Britain. At the time of the Balfour Declaration, British and Allied troops had penetrated only Palestine's southern borderlands and had recently suffered serious rebuffs at the hands of Turkish forces under the command of the German general Friedrich Kress von Kressenstein. The first two battles of Gaza in March and April 1917 produced British and Anglo-Indian casualties in excess of 10,000. General Edmund Allenby finally succeeded in seizing Gaza City with a force of 88,000 men on 8 November 1917—six days after the Balfour letter was signed—following this up in December with the capture of Jerusalem.²⁰

Even so, there was much talk of a negotiated armistice in early 1918, with the distinct possibility that a postwar settlement would leave Palestine in Turkish hands. The course of the conflict as a whole was then running in Germany's favor, Fritz Fischer identifying mid-June 1918 as “the juncture when the extension of Germany's power in the east and her claim to power in general reached their all-time high.”²¹ Meanwhile, the authorities in Berlin made it very clear that there would be no weakening of their support for the Ottoman Empire, whose survival was viewed as an essential strategic objective. Lloyd George believed as late as May 1918 that Germany would not allow the Turks to be defeated.²²

Whatever the overall prospects, the chief of the Imperial General Staff in London, Sir William Robertson, considered any further British incursions in Palestine to be inappropriate. The “first rule in all wars,” he declared to the War Cabinet in December 1917, “is to concentrate in the main theatre [France and Belgium] all forces that can be made available.” His staff had “never been able to regard an extensive offensive campaign in Palestine as a sound military measure.”²³ In the event, and after much heated debate, Robertson's

advice was rejected and a northward thrust effected with the help of troops from India and Mesopotamia. It was, however, mid-July 1918 before the tide of war turned decisively against Germany, and late October—almost a full year after the Balfour Declaration—before all of Palestine was secured.²⁴

The Fall of Asquith and the Formation of the Lloyd George Coalition

A further requirement for the materialization of the national home idea was the removal from power at some point during the war of the Herbert Asquith administration (latterly a Liberal-Conservative coalition) in London. Asquith entertained no enthusiasm for any postwar imperial expansion, and the idea of a Jewish Palestine under British suzerainty was one that he found particularly unappealing. Subsequent British policies in the region, in his view, were based on a number of “fragile, precarious, crumbling hypotheses,” among them the “very large hypothesis” that “the Jews and the Arabs are going to live side by side in Palestine.” According to him, the likelihood was that Britain would be, gratuitously and fatally, replicating an Irish-style problem in the Middle East.²⁵ Critically for the Zionist project, Asquith was, on account of defective focus and vigor as a war leader, replaced in December 1916 by his fellow Liberal, Lloyd George, an imperial enthusiast and Zionist sympathizer who headed a largely Conservative coalition with “eastern” priorities for winning the war—according to John Gallagher, possibly the most “imperial-minded government in British history.”²⁶ The transfer of power might never have taken place, though, had Asquith been prepared to accord Lloyd George, successively his munitions and war minister, a more central role in determining general war strategy.²⁷

It was not sufficient, however, for Lloyd George simply to assume the premiership; he also had to hold on to it and this against much parliamentary and military opposition. “Western front” men like Robertson and, in the field, commander in chief Sir Douglas Haig had scant time for the “little man’s” eagerness to divert part of the war effort to eastern theatres. There was, in the judgment of Lloyd George’s recent biographer, John Grigg, a real danger of his being unseated in the spring of 1918, following Robertson’s sacking (effectively for insubordination) by a combination of soldierly Tories and resentful Asquithians, determined, ostensibly at least, to follow Haig’s lead and concentrate all military attention on the European battlefields.²⁸

Time, moreover, had to be found to give serious attention to the Zionist project during the acute pressures of war, including intensifying difficulties over existing imperial domains in Ireland and India. In the event, discussion of the issue was squeezed into only four out of a total of 261 War Cabinet meetings (usually as late agenda items) between the start of Lloyd George’s premiership

Time had to be found to attend to the Zionist project during the acute pressures of war, and discussion of the issue was squeezed into only four out of 261 War Cabinet meetings between December 1916 and the Declaration’s issuance on 2 November 1917.

in December 1916 and the Declaration on 2 November 1917.²⁹ Indeed, on the very day of the Balfour letter, other matters took decisive precedence. Stephen Roskill, biographer of the powerful head of the War Cabinet secretariat, Sir Maurice Hankey, notes how Hankey's diaries for early November make no mention of the Declaration, explaining "the seemingly casual way" in which it was approved by the fact that "all the War Cabinet were at the time deeply involved in preparing for the historic Rapallo conference."³⁰ The following day, the British delegation under Lloyd George left for Italy, where, a week before, the course of the war had taken an alarming turn for the worse with the defeat of the 2nd Italian Army at Caporetto by Austro-Hungarian forces—"a disaster of the first magnitude," in Hankey's words.³¹

Additionally, Lloyd George had to be prepared to behave duplicitously with regard to prior political undertakings accorded the Arabs—most notably those offered in the 1915 correspondence between the British high commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, and Husayn, the sharif of Mecca, in which Palestine, contrary to later official denials, had been one of the areas earmarked for Arab self-government. The pledges were in return for Arab assistance in the overthrow of the Ottoman Empire. The issue remains a contentious one in the historical literature (notably in the contrasting analyses of Elie Kedourie, on the exculpatory side, and George Antonius and A. L. Tibawi, on the accusatory),³² although the evidence for British bad faith seems clear enough. An official memorandum, circulated among members of the War Cabinet in January 1919, recalled Britain's promise "to recognise and support the independence of the Arabs" within the area proposed by Husayn, adding without qualification that "Palestine was within these territories."³³ Lord George Nathaniel Curzon, subsequently Balfour's replacement as foreign secretary, commented unambiguously in late 1918 about "the general pledge to [Husayn] in October 1915, under which Palestine was included in the areas as to which Great Britain pledged itself that they should be Arab and independent in the future."³⁴ When queried on the McMahon promises during the war by his Arab friends, T. E. Lawrence had assured them, as he put it, "that England kept her word in letter and spirit." He went on: "In this comfort they performed their fine things: but, of course, instead of being proud of what we did together, I was continually and bitterly ashamed."³⁵

Chaim Weizmann's Presence in Britain

A further contingency was the presence in Britain during the war of the most cosmopolitan and energetic of the Zionist leaders, Chaim Weizmann. Born in Russia in 1874, he had pursued an academic career in chemistry that brought him to Manchester in 1904 by way of the Universities of Freiburg and Geneva. The move to England at a time when Zionist struggles were "destroying" him, he wrote, had been "a leap in the dark."³⁶ Recovering his political poise, Weizmann was to prove a hugely persistent and persuasive campaigner, unabashed in his approaches to the most influential people in the land. In January 1906, aged only thirty-one, he attracted the attention of

Balfour at an election gathering in Manchester shortly after the latter's resignation from the premiership, engaging him in an hour's conversation on the subject of Zionism.³⁷ Balfour later recorded how Weizmann on that occasion "convinced me that history could not . . . be ignored, and that if a home was to be found for the Jewish people, homeless now for nineteen hundred years, it was vain to seek it anywhere but in Palestine."³⁸

Churchill, pointing to Weizmann at a social event in the early 1920s, told the future Labour premier Clement Attlee: "He is your teacher, he is my teacher, he was Lloyd George's teacher—we will do whatever he tells us."³⁹ By his own calculation, Weizmann engaged in around two thousand exchanges with diplomats, civil servants, and ministers in the course of the war,⁴⁰ continuing, as Margaret MacMillan describes it, "his customary round of interviews with the powerful and influential" at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.⁴¹ Vital to his success was a crystal-clear conviction, contested by some in the Zionist movement, that the project could best be pursued through the sponsorship and force majeure of a "mighty and just power"—imperial Britain.⁴² It was natural that, in the context of an increasingly close relationship with Lloyd George, marked by numerous private meetings, Weizmann found common cause with the imperialist prime minister in the objective of establishing a national home in a future British Palestine—where, adjoining the strategically crucial Suez Canal, there would ideally emerge a European community indebted and obliging to its imperial protector. A Jewish entity could become, Weizmann astutely suggested, "the Asiatic Belgium," a buffer "separating the Suez Canal" from any hostile forces to the north.⁴³ His colleague Max Nordau told a London audience in 1919 that included Lloyd George and Balfour: "We shall have to be the guards of the Suez Canal. We shall have to be the sentinels of your way to India via the Near East."⁴⁴

LORD CURZON AND THE FAILURE OF OPPOSITION

Regardless of the fortuitous enabling factors discussed above, the entire Zionist scheme might have come to naught had the considerable forces of skepticism in Britain been able to confront it with coordinated and vigorous resistance. While this contingency has less relevance for the Declaration itself (since the chances of forming any effective opposition before it was issued would have been very slim for reasons noted below), the Jewish national home policy that it promised could have been modified up to the moment in July 1922 when Britain submitted the final draft of its Palestine Mandate to the League of Nations for approval. Although Britain had occupied all of Palestine from the end of the war, and had installed a civil administration in the country in July 1920, it could not legally implement its rule there without League authorization. Among the crucial tasks of the postwar government, then, was the formulation of the Mandate's terms.

The most powerful and centrally placed of the dissenters, and the person most likely to influence outcomes, was Lord Curzon, lord privy seal,

leader of the House of Lords, and a key member of Lloyd George's inner War Cabinet—the five-man body set up on Asquith's fall in December 1916, and also comprising Curzon's Conservative colleagues Andrew Bonar Law and Lord Milner. Balfour, the Tory foreign secretary, attended most meetings by invitation. In the previous coalition, dating from May 1915, Curzon had served as lord president of the council. Under Lloyd George, he occasionally took charge of War Cabinet meetings in the premier's absence, and was also employed in the running of numerous government committees.⁴⁵ He was by far the best informed minister on Middle and Far Eastern affairs as a result of his extensive world travels (including two westerly circumnavigations) between 1882 and 1893, his scholarly books on Persia and the farther East, and his vice-royalty of India from 1899 to 1905.⁴⁶ Lloyd George's confidant Lord Riddell recorded the prime minister's assessment of Curzon's worth in government: "He has travelled a lot; he knows about the countries of the world. He has read a lot; he is full of knowledge which none of us possesses. He is useful in council."⁴⁷ Later, in February 1919, Curzon became acting foreign secretary during Balfour's absence at the Paris Peace Conference, and in October that same year assumed the full office, a post he retained until January 1924. Among other things, he had direct responsibility for settling the terms of the forthcoming Palestine Mandate until February 1921, when control was transferred to the newly created Colonial Office.⁴⁸ Curzon, in short, stood at a pivotal point of policy-making on the Levant.

His views on the national home issue were clearly spelled out in a memorandum on Zionism to the War Cabinet on 26 October 1917, in which he stressed "practical questions" relating to any "successful realisation" of the Zionist project. The territory of Palestine, which he had visited in the 1880s, was "incapacitated by physical and other conditions for ever being in any real sense the national home of the Jewish people" because of poor resources, the "abject debasement" resulting from Turkish rule, and the "devastation wrought by war." He also worried that Zionist ambitions were much greater than those conveyed to the government by Weizmann and his friends, the likely objective being "an autonomous Jewish state" in which the Zionists "would possess the soil of the greater part of the country." As for the resident Arab population, whose "forefathers have occupied the country for the best part of 1,500 years. . . . 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."⁴⁹

Curzon's intervention came very late, his memorandum briefly discussed by the War Cabinet only two days before the Declaration was issued. In effect, the speed with which the Zionists attained their goal took most other parties by surprise. The issue of Zionism, as noted above, seemed comparatively marginal in the wider context of war, with the battlefield crises, problems with India and Ireland, and industrial unrest at home. Curzon himself, with a marked proclivity for overwork, had been heavily occupied in chairing various War Cabinet committees and had suffered a near-breakdown in the

early summer of 1917.⁵⁰ But even had he been alert to what was happening earlier, it is unlikely that it would have made much difference. The Zionist policy, with attendant Declaration, was (some precise wording apart) settled in strict privacy in the summer of 1917 as the war turned for a time in the Allies' favor,⁵¹ the principal colluders being Lloyd George and Weizmann. There were also critical contributions from Balfour and Lord Rothschild, as well as Sir Mark Sykes and Leo Amery, both from the War Cabinet secretariat. Curzon himself would later observe, in March 1919, that he had "never been consulted as to the Mandate at an earlier stage, nor do I know from what negotiations it springs or on what undertakings it is based. . . . I have no idea how far the case has been given away to the Zionists."⁵² The other leading anti-Zionist at the time, the secretary of state for India, Edwin Montagu, was similarly in the dark, despite his greater access, as a Jew, to rumblings within his own community. In the first of his two tightly argued papers on the dangers of a Jewish national home submitted to the War Cabinet in August and October 1917, he expressed the "fear that my protest comes too late, and it may well be that the Government were practically committed when Lord Rothschild wrote . . . for there has obviously been some correspondence or conversation before this letter."⁵³

But a full four-and-a-half years lay between the Balfour Declaration and the final approval of the Mandate, and it is not at all fanciful to suppose that an anti-Zionist British foreign secretary, working alongside an anti-Zionist India secretary (and aware of what was, as we shall see, a wide range of informed opposition within Parliament, officialdom, and beyond), could have contrived at the very least to moderate Britain's mandated obligations to the Zionists. In June 1920 Curzon, now firmly ensconced as foreign secretary, minuted that he was "quite willing to water down the Palestine mandate which I cordially distrust." He refused to recognize that "the connection of the Jews with Palestine, which terminated 1200 years ago, gives them any claim whatsoever. On this principle we have a stronger claim to parts of France."⁵⁴ He called a meeting with, among others, Balfour and Churchill, on 1 June 1921 at which it was agreed, with great potential moment, that if Britain "could not secure the Mandates [including Mesopotamia] at once, we had better make it clear that we must decline any further responsibility and withdraw altogether from these territories." The proposed commitments, after all, would be a source of "*nothing but trouble and expense for a generation or more.*"⁵⁵

The bulk of the pre-Mandate opinion in Parliament was decidedly negative on the issue of the Balfour commitments, the only vociferous defenders of the Zionist cause in the House of Commons being the member of Parliament for Tottenham South, Major P. B. Malone, and the member for Newcastle-under-Lyme, Colonel Josiah Wedgwood.⁵⁶ Exchanges in the upper house, activated by reports of intensifying Arab discontent,⁵⁷ were led by three prominent anti-Zionist proconsuls, Lords Lamington, Sydenham, and Islington, men of considerable imperial experience as former governors in India, Australia, and

New Zealand. For Lamington, the Balfour Declaration meant that “we have violated the pledges given to the Arabs, and we have violated technically the laws and usages of war.”⁵⁸ Sydenham declared it essential that Britain provide “justice to the immense non-Jewish majority of the population of Palestine.”⁵⁹ Lloyd George himself admitted in the Commons in December 1920 that the sense that “somebody has broken faith with them” was “disturbing the Arabs throughout the whole of this great area. . . . The Arab race, its pride, its sense of justice and fair play, has been outraged by the feeling that somehow or other things have not quite been done in the way they had expected.”⁶⁰

A number of officials in Whitehall, among them the historian Arnold Toynbee, then serving in the Foreign Office, also articulated serious misgivings.⁶¹ A remarkable memorandum circulated by Churchill’s Colonial Office in June 1921 argued that Britain was “following a policy which is unpopular with the people of the country” and that in consequence it was “almost universally recognised that the mandate cannot be maintained in its present form.” The current Mandate drafts incorporating the Balfour promises, it declared, should not be seen as in any way final but rather as “*merely instruments to enable the British and French Governments to obtain a representative expression of opinion from the communities concerned.*” The memorandum went on to state, by simple principle, that “in the event of the communities objecting either to the mandatory precept, or to the allocating of these mandates, their wishes will be acceded to.”⁶²

Additionally, almost the entire British civilian and military leadership in Egypt and Palestine was unreservedly critical. General Sir Arthur Money, chief administrator in the immediate postwar government in Palestine, declared in 1919 that “even a moderate Zionist programme can only be carried through by force in opposition to the will of the majority of the population.”⁶³ Gertrude Bell, the vastly informed and widely connected English Arabist, and at the time oriental secretary to the British governor of Baghdad, wrote to her parents in November 1917: “I hate Mr Balfour’s pronouncement. It’s my belief that it can’t be carried out . . . with a solid two thirds of the population who look on the Jews with contempt. To my mind it’s a wholly artificial scheme divorced from all relation to facts and I wish it the ill success that it deserves—and will get.” It was, she subsequently observed, part of “a horrible muddle” in the Middle East. “It’s like a nightmare in which you foresee all the horrible things which are going to happen and can’t stretch out your hand to prevent them.”⁶⁴

Some advantage might also have been taken of widespread anti-Zionism among British Jews themselves. Montagu asserted in his War Cabinet memorandum of October 1917 that almost all the influential members of the Jewish community in Britain were assimilationists, and as such opposed to pro-Zionist policies—listing forty-six individuals “prominent in public life” who had allowed their names to be cited.⁶⁵ Stuart A. Cohen has documented the tensions and uncertainties characterizing British Zionism, writing of the summer of 1917 that although “Zionist progress and Zionist problems had

undoubtedly moved to the centre of the stage . . . the Zionists themselves still constituted only a chorus—capable of making a good deal of noise but not of dominating the plot.” As late as 1920, “the overwhelming majority of the [Jewish] community remained persistently . . . non-partisan.”⁶⁶

Strong opposition to official policy continued to be expressed even as the final decision on the Mandate neared. In a debate in the House of Lords in June 1922, responding to a motion in the name of Lord Islington declaring the Palestine Mandate to be “in its present form . . . unacceptable to this House,” the government (represented by the recently ennobled Balfour himself) was decisively defeated by a vote of 60 to 29.⁶⁷ Two weeks later, however, on 4 July, the judgment was overturned by a large majority in the Commons, a result not of a sudden opinion shift but of Churchill’s skillful opportunism in turning at the last minute a general debate on funding for the colonies worldwide into a vote of confidence on the government’s Palestine policy, emphasizing in his concluding remarks not a Zionist argument but imperial and strategic considerations.⁶⁸ With the required parliamentary approval thus obtained, the government (of which Curzon was still a part) was able to submit its draft Mandate for Palestine to the Council of the League of Nations—approval following on 24 July, with full implementation enacted on 26 September 1923.

Curzon’s failure to alter the course of events despite his key position has already been examined in the pages of this journal by his most recent biographer, David Gilmour. In asserting that Curzon was an “unregarded prophet” and that his political isolation as an opponent of British Palestine policy was “complete,”⁶⁹ however, Gilmour seems to overstate his case. As shown above, Curzon’s opposition to Zionism was shared by diverse currents and squared with a great deal of parliamentary, official, and (beyond our remit) press opinion. On the basis of the evidence adduced, it seems clear that the determining issue regarding his weak opposition was not his marginality but his failure, as the critically placed minister, to provide any leadership for these other forces or to form alliances that would have helped counter or moderate the policy. Working with Montagu, for example, would have seemed an obvious move, but the possibility of that alliance was hobbled by intense mutual disrespect as well as sharp differences of opinion on the specific dangers of Zionism.⁷⁰

Of the broad reasons for Curzon’s ineffectiveness, none belongs to any sweep of history, each being a matter either of war-time circumstance or of personal character. His ability to persuade was much hampered by a patrician haughtiness and arrogance of manner as well as by an apparent difficulty, in the words of his diplomat associate at the Foreign Office, Harold Nicolson, to “co-operate with ministerial colleagues whose irresponsibility shocked him and whose ignorance filled him with dismay.”⁷¹ He also displayed a marked inability to follow through on his more passionate political

The House of Commons’ endorsement of the Mandate resulted not from a sudden opinion shift but from Churchill’s skillful opportunism in turning a general debate on funding for the colonies worldwide into a vote of confidence on the government’s Palestine policy.

convictions, Churchill citing as a characteristic weakness “that he thought too much about stating his case, and too little about getting things done.”⁷² His frequent threats to quit the government when thwarted never resulted in an actual departure, leading Lloyd George—always the final arbiter of foreign policy—to comment disparagingly, “Curzon was always sending me letters of resignation. He would send them by a messenger afflicted with a club-foot. A second and more nimble messenger would therefore be despatched with a second letter.”⁷³ He was, remarked Nicolson, “a martyr who refused, invariably, to go to the stake.”⁷⁴

Having chosen to remain in office, Curzon saw that he had little choice but to accept the principle of collective cabinet responsibility, observing in Parliament in June 1920 that, entirely against his private judgment, the matter was now closed. “It is well nigh impossible for any Government to extricate itself without a substantial sacrifice of consistency and self-respect, if not of honour. Those of us who have disliked the policy are not prepared to make that sacrifice.”⁷⁵ He was unable, accordingly, to give any leadership in Parliament when criticism was mounting in the early 1920s. He was, moreover, a poor standard-bearer for any Arab cause, given an implacably imperialist and orientalist mentality⁷⁶—remarking to Lord Milner in 1920 that “these Eastern peoples with whom we have to ride pillion have different seats from Europeans, and it does not seem to me to matter much whether we put them on the saddle in front of us or whether they cling on behind and hold us round the waist. The great thing is that the firm seat in the saddle shall be ours.”⁷⁷ Curzon was further weakened by the loss of direct responsibility for the Mandate when Palestine was transferred to Churchill at the Colonial Office in 1921.⁷⁷ And in Palestine itself, a Zionist Commission, led initially by Chaim Weizmann, had been busy since 1918 investigating prospects for the Jewish national home, and reacting with some fury to those who would seek to query and modify its presumed rights.

Curzon’s inability either to persuade his colleagues of the folly of Zionist policy or to leave the government that adopted it did not stop him from reiterating his views. Six months after the Mandate had been granted he insisted that the Balfour Declaration represented “the worst” of Britain’s Middle Eastern commitments and “a striking contradiction of our publicly declared principles.”⁷⁹ To Balfour himself, he offered the forecast in August 1919 that “Palestine will be a rankling thorn in the flesh of whoever is charged with its Mandate.”⁸⁰ But it was too late, and in March 1925 death removed Curzon from the scene altogether.

CONCLUSION

Our concern here has been with short-term enabling circumstance rather than energizing cause. War-time contingency, in a variety of national and international forms, in play with the twists and turns of British politics and politicians—themselves pressured by swift and unpredictable flows of

events—provided the critical context for Britain’s fateful endorsement of Zionist ambitions. Few speculating on the future in 1914 would have considered it remotely likely that Britain would, before the decade was out, commit itself to the establishment of a Euro-Jewish colonial settlement in Palestine.⁸¹ The decision in 1917 to support Zionism, as already suggested, ranks as one of the most portentous historical surprises of the twentieth century. Norman Rose, in his biography of Weizmann, has used the first of our four contingencies—that concerning the uncertain outcome of the war and its bearing on Palestine—as evidence that the Balfour Declaration was “one of the most improbable acts in the history of British foreign policy.”⁸² Isaiah Berlin cites our third: the fact of Weizmann’s presence in Britain as “an irresistible political seducer” being “a characteristic case of the influence of accident in history.”⁸³ “Zionists,” insists Walter Laqueur, arguing from the perspective of contemporary Jewish debate rather than of contingent events, “had their historical opportunity only after the First World War. . . . A few years later the decision would, in all probability, have gone against” them, the national home project representing, in the view of its “most plausible” critics, a “utopian and reactionary attempt to arrest the movement of history.”⁸⁴

Reactionary politics, however, did not trouble the nominal author of the Declaration, Arthur Balfour. Describing himself with philosophic detachment as “a thick and thin supporter of nothing, not even of myself,”⁸⁵ he blandly observed that the whole idea of “planting a minority of outsiders upon a majority population, without consulting it, was not calculated to horrify men who worked with Cecil Rhodes or promoted European settlement in Kenya.”⁸⁶ The British government had been idealistically and opportunistically involved in a bold “adventure” and with “a delightful poetic idea.”⁸⁷ Lord Bertie, British ambassador in Paris during the war, reported a conversation between his French counterpart in London, Paul Cambon, and Balfour shortly after the Declaration was issued in which Balfour had “expressed his own feeling that it would be an interesting experiment to reconstruct a Jewish kingdom.” When Cambon reminded him of the prophecy that a king of the Jews would mean the end of the world, Balfour replied “that such a *dénouement* would be even more interesting.”⁸⁸

ENDNOTES

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2. Christopher Dawson, *Dynamics of World History*, ed. John J. Mulloy (London: Sheed and Ward, 1957), pp. 237-39, 252-53.

3. Gabriel Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism: Myths, Politics and*

Scholarship in Israel (London and New York: Verso, 2008), pp. 94, 98. For comment on what he terms “mythistory,” see Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), chaps. 2, 3.

4. For major caveats regarding accommodating attitudes to Asian and African dependent societies, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International*

Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. ix-xiv, 3-34, 215-51.

5. Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs, 1914-1921* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 349.

6. Jason Tomes, *Balfour and Foreign Policy: The International Thought of a Conservative Statesman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 212.

7. Vladimir Halpérin, *Lord Milner and the Empire: The Evolution of British Imperialism* (London: Odhams Press, 1950), p. 78.

8. Frank Hardie and Irwin Herrman, *Britain and Zion: The Fateful Entanglement* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1980), p. 94.

9. Sir Ronald Storrs, *Lawrence of Arabia, Zionism and Palestine* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1940), p. 76.

10. Quoted by Lord Lamington, 21 June 1922, in Great Britain, *The Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Lords* (London: H.M.S.O., 1944); also Winston Churchill, 9 March 1922, in Great Britain, *The Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons* (London: H.M.S.O., 1944). For a longer-term perspective, see Sahar Huncidi, *A Broken Trust: Sir Herbert Samuel, Zionism and the Palestinians* (London and New York: Tauris, 2001).

11. Sir Mark Sykes, Note on Palestine and Zionism, November/December 1918, British Library, India Office Select Materials, Curzon Papers, F112/267; emphasis added.

12. As Arno Mayer suggests, judgment on this point should not be affected by what he terms the “Judeocide” in Hitlerian Europe and the “teleological temptation” to appraise the motives for Zionist settlement in Palestine in terms of subsequent unforeseen history. Arno Mayer, *Ploughshares into Swords: From Zionism to Israel* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), p. 1.

13. Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 11-16, 198-99.

14. John Marlowe, *Rebellion in Palestine* (London: Cresset Press, 1946), pp. 4-5.

15. Viscount Samuel, *Memoirs* (London: Cresset Press, 1945), p. 139.

16. B. H. Liddell Hart, *History of the First World War* (London: Cassell, 1970), p. 180.

17. “The Battle of the Canal,” *The Times*, 13 February 1915.

18. Goldberg, *To the Promised Land*, pp. 57-71; see also Walid Khalidi, “The Jewish-Ottoman Land Company: Herzl’s Blueprint for the Colonization of Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1993), pp. 30-43.

19. See Rashid Khalidi, Lisa Anderson, Muhammad Muslih, and Reeva S. Simon, eds., *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University, 1991), chaps. 2, 3; Geoffrey Lewis, *Balfour & Weizmann: The Zionist, the Zealot and the Emergence of Israel* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 72-73; Amy Dockser Marcus, *Jerusalem 1913: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Penguin, 2008), pp. 71-72, 83-85, 93-98, 138-43.

20. Lawrence James, *Imperial Warrior, The Life and Times of Field-Marshal Viscount Allenby, 1861-1936* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993), pp. 129-45; John D. Grainger, *The Battle for Palestine 1917* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), chaps. 6, 7, 10.

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22. John Grigg, *Lloyd George: War Leader, 1916-1918* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 526.

23. Memorandum for War Cabinet by Sir William Robertson, C.I.G.S., Operations in Palestine, 26 December 1917, National Archives, CAB, GT3112; Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson, *Soldier and Statesman 1914-1918*, vol. 2 (London: Cassell, 1926), pp. 179-80.

24. Grainger, *The Battle for Palestine*, chap. 13; Raymond Savage, *Allenby of Armageddon: A Record of the Career and Campaigns of Field-Marshal Viscount Allenby* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1926), pp. 290-318.

25. *The Parliamentary Debates: House of Commons*, 14 July 1921; J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith*, vol. 2 (London: Hutchinson, 1932), p. 353. See also Lewis, *Balfour & Weizmann*, pp. 83-85.

26. John Gallagher, *The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire: The Ford Lectures and Other Essays*, ed. Anil Seal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 86–87.
27. See John Grigg, *Lloyd George: From Peace to War 1912–1916* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 435–74; Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (London: Collins, 1964), pp. 421–43; David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, vol. 1 (London: Odhams Press, 1938), pp. 585–604.
28. Grigg, *Lloyd George: War Leader*, pp. 411–23, 511–12.
29. War Cabinet Minutes, 3 September 1917 (agenda item 2); 4 October 1917 (agenda item 12); 25 October 1917 (agenda item 12); 31 October 1917 (agenda item 12). National Archives, CAB 23.
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31. Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command, 1914–1918*, vol. 2 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), p. 716; see pp. 717–23 for general comments on the government's Italian anxieties at the time.
32. Elie Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon-Husayn Correspondence and Its Interpretations, 1914–1939* (London: Frank Cass, 2000 [orig. 1976]); George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (Safety Harbour: Simon Publications, 2001 [orig. 1939]); A. L. Tibawi, *Anglo-Arab Relations and the Question of Palestine, 1914–1921* (London: Luzac, 1978), pp. 84–91.
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35. T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (London and Toronto: Jonathan Cape, 1935 [orig. 1926]), pp. 275–76.
36. Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error: The Autobiography of Chaim Weizmann* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), pp. 76, 123–24; see also Lewis, *Balfour & Weizmann*, pp. 35, 57–64, 115–19 for a discussion of Weizmann's early years in Britain, and the importance of his war-time scientific work with the Ministry of Munitions and the Admiralty as a means of gaining easy access to people in government.
37. Weizmann, *Trial and Error*, pp. 143–45.
38. Arthur Balfour, "Introduction," in Nahum Sokolov, *History of Zionism 1600–1918* (London: Longmans Green, 1919), pp. xxix–xxx.
39. Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate* (New York: Owl Books, 2000), p. 397.
40. Weizmann, *Trial and Error*, pp. 223–62. See Sir Charles Webster's interesting appraisal cited in Vera Weizmann, *The Impossible Takes Longer* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967), pp. 270–71.
41. Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War* (London: John Murray, 2003), pp. 424, 429.
42. Hardie and Herrman, *Britain and Zion*, p. 62. For general comments on the issue of "great power" support, see Shlaim, *Iron Wall*, pp. 5–7.
43. Leonard Stein, *The Balfour Declaration* (Jerusalem and London: Magnes Press, 1961), p. 127.
44. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Original Sins: Reflections on the History of Zionism and Israel* (New York: Olive Branch, 1993), p. 16.
45. Sundry War Cabinet Minutes, National Archives, CAB 23; David Gilmour, *Curzon: Imperial Statesman* (London and Basingstoke: Papermac, 1994), p. 473.
46. Gilmour, *Curzon*, pp. 35–38, 51–52, 65–74, 77–81, 89–91.
47. 1 October 1916. Lord Riddell, *Lord Riddell's War Diary 1914–1918* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1933), p. 213.
48. Martin Gilbert, *Churchill & The Jews* (London: Pocket Books, 2007), pp. 44–45; Michael Makovsky, *Churchill's Promised Land: Zionism and Statecraft* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 98–107.
49. Lord Curzon, The Future of Palestine, 26 October 1917, National Archives, War Cabinet GT2406.
50. Gilmour, *Curzon*, p. 476.
51. See, among others, Lewis, *Balfour & Weizmann*, pp. 145–47.
52. Ingrams, *Palestine Papers*, p. 96 (minutes of 20 March 1919); see

also John Fisher, *Curzon and British Imperialism in the Middle East 1916-19* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), pp. 102-3, 116-17, 135-36, 238, 296.

53. Edwin S. Montagu, The Anti-Semitism of the British Government, 23 August 1917, National Archives, War Cabinet GT1868; Edwin S. Montagu, Zionism, 9 October 1917, National Archives, War Cabinet GT2263. The reference to Rothschild probably concerns a draft of the Declaration suggested by Lord Rothschild to Arthur Balfour in July 1917—the final Declaration itself, of course, being a letter in reverse direction, from the latter to the former.

54. Ingrams, *Palestine Papers*, pp. 97-98.

55. "A" and "B" Mandates, 1 June 1921, Curzon Papers, F112/287; emphasis added.

56. *The Parliamentary Debates: House of Commons*, 21 February 1920, 14 July 1921, and 9 March 1922. On the issue of negative press opinion, see Bernard Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine: The Mandatory Government and the Arab-Jewish Conflict, 1917-1929* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978), 116n7.

57. There were two official reports of the period. The Palin Report concerned rioting in Jerusalem in April 1920; submitted to the government in August 1920 but never published for fear of Jewish objection, it alleged provocative Zionist "impatience . . . and indiscretion." The Haycraft Report on the Jaffa riots of May 1921, published in October 1921, concluded, inter alia, that "had there been no Jewish question, the Government would have had no political difficulty of any importance to deal with so far as its domestic affairs were concerned." See useful brief commentaries in Huneidi, *A Broken Trust*, pp. 35-38, 133-37.

58. *The Parliamentary Debates: House of Lords*, 29 June 1920.

59. *The Parliamentary Debates: House of Lords*, 29 June 1920; see also 14 March 1921.

60. *The Parliamentary Debates: House of Commons*, 15 December 1920.

61. Kedourie, *Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*, pp. 209-14.

62. Palestine and Mesopotamian Mandates (Circulated by the Secretary of State for the Colonies), 1 June 1921,

Curzon Papers, F112/287; emphasis added.

63. Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine*, pp. 40, 51; see also Stein, *The Balfour Declaration*, pp. 645-46.

64. Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen: The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell; Adventurer, Adviser to Kings, Ally of Lawrence of Arabia* (London: Phoenix, 1997), pp. 202-3; MacMillan, *Peacemakers*, p. 411.

65. Montagu, Zionism, 9 October 1917.

66. Stuart A. Cohen, *English Zionists and British Jews: The Communal Politics of Anglo-Jewry, 1895-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 283, 317.

67. *The Parliamentary Debates: House of Lords*, 21 June 1922.

68. Churchill's argument was that "Palestine is all the more important to us . . . in view of the ever-growing significance of the Suez Canal; and I do not think £1,000,000 a year . . . would be too much for Great Britain to pay for the control and guardianship of this great historic land, and for keeping the word that she has given before all the nations of the world." *The Parliamentary Debates: House of Commons*, 4 July 1922.

69. David Gilmour, "The Unregarded Prophet: Lord Curzon and the Palestine Question," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 3 (Spring 1996), pp. 60-68.

70. S. D. Waley, *Edwin Montagu: A Memoir and an Account of His Visits to India* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1964), pp. 163-81, 271-84; Edwin Montagu to Lord Robert Cecil, 14 September 1917, War Cabinet GT2191. (Montagu was not in the War Cabinet and was on his way to India when the Declaration was issued. Curzon rejected his concerns about possible stimulus to anti-Semitism in Europe and the United States and disaffection among Britain's Muslim population in India.)

71. Harold Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase, 1919-1925. A Study in Post-War Diplomacy* (London: Constable, 1934), pp. 7, 8, 31. In the view of the cabinet secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey, he was "an intolerable person to do business with—pompous, dictatorial and outrageously conceited." Roskill, *Hankey*, p. 272.

72. Winston Churchill, *Great Contemporaries* (London: Reprint Society, 1941), p. 243.

73. Nicolson, *Curzon*, p. 214, also pp. 22, 24; see also Robert Rhodes James, *The British Revolution: British Politics, 1880-1939* (London: Methuen, 1978), pp. 411-12; MacMillan, *Peacemakers*, p. 452.

74. Nicolson, *Curzon*, p. 22; see also Fisher, *Curzon and British Imperialism*, p. 202.

75. *The Parliamentary Debates: House of Lords*, 29 June 1920; also 14 March 1921. (On matters of British Middle East policies, it might not be glib to suggest possible similarities between Curzon's performance and that of subsequent cabinet ministers who opposed, but did not resign over, the Suez assault in 1956 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003.)

76. Fisher calls him "the high priest of war imperialism." Fisher, *Curzon and British Imperialism*, p. 295, also pp. 164-45, 268-69, 276-82.

77. Nicolson, *Curzon*, p. 298; Fisher, *Curzon and British Imperialism*, p. 299. Curzon went so far as to declare in the House of Lords, by way of belated concessionary rationale, that since Palestinians were "incapable" of any regenerative work in their country, it might be appropriate "that an opportunity was afforded to the Jews to undertake this task in their old home," there being "a terrible lot of back way to be made up." *The Parliamentary Debates: House of Lords*, 29 June 1920.

78. Ingrams, *Palestine Papers*, pp. 114-15 (letter to Herbert Samuel, 7 January 1921).

79. Gilmour, "Unregarded Prophet," p. 67.

80. Fisher, *Curzon and British Imperialism*, p. 220.

81. As late as 2 November 1917 even Weizmann himself—sitting outside the room where the War Cabinet was coming to its final decision—was, in his wife's words, "apprehensive," "downcast," and "crestfallen." Weizmann, *The Impossible Takes Longer*, p. 77.

82. Norman Rose, *Chaim Weizmann: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986), p. 184.

83. Isaiah Berlin, *Chaim Weizmann* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1958), pp. 41, 43.

84. Walter Laqueur, *The History of Zionism* (London and New York: Taurisparke Paperbacks, 2003), pp. 385, 593.

85. Tomes, *Balfour and Foreign Policy*, p. 14. Balfour was a published philosopher.

86. Beit-Hallahmi, *Original Sins*, p. 78.

87. *The Parliamentary Debates: House of Lords*, 29 June 1922.

88. Lady Algernon Gordon Lennox, ed., *The Diary of Lord Bertie of Thame, 1914-1918*, vol. 2 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1924), p. 233.