

# 1917: The Ambivalence of Empire

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WHEN THE BALFOUR DECLARATION was first published on November 2, 1917, as Britain was jockeying for its position in the Levant, the significance of this nonbinding and highly vague document was unclear. It was somewhat clarified—though by no means fully so—in 1922 after Britain took control of Palestine and the Declaration was integrated into the language of the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, which also included a statement of Britain’s obligation to facilitate Jewish immigration. Observers in the Yishuv attached near-messianic significance to the stated British imperial commitment to the Jewish national project, despite mixed messages from the British about the extent to which the mandatory government would indeed promote immigration, given the likelihood that a Jewish influx would inflame local conflict. Many imagined that, in the aftermath of the Mandate, thousands of Jews would stream into Palestine and constitute the third massive aliyah of Jews, following in the path of those ancient Jews who returned after the Cyrus Decree (fifth century B.C.E.) and, several centuries later, in the wake of Ezra and Nehemiah within the confines of the Persian Empire.<sup>1</sup> From Cyrus to Balfour, the affirmation of empires has underpinned visions of Jewish collective return to the Land of Israel.

The Declaration, formalized and restated in the Mandate documents, seemed to approach what Herzl had sought, unsuccessfully, in the years around the First Zionist Congress of 1897: a formal charter from an imperial power that welcomed and enabled European Jewish settlement. Attentiveness to and cooperation with world powers came to define the global project of political Zionism against the settlement-oriented “practical Zionism,” which attempted to create facts on the ground (through settlement) regardless of imperial desires. The latter of these approaches

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1. Hizky Shoham, “From ‘Great History’ to ‘Small History’: The Genesis of the Zionist Periodization,” *Israel Studies* 18.1 (2013): 31–55.

came to dominate Zionist historiography, which adopted a settlement-based narrative of Zionism that marked time according to immigration waves rather than political events abroad. It emphasized the independence and self-sufficiency of the Jewish national movement in Palestine. Nonetheless, international imperial approval, coupled with concrete policies in the form of immigration support and economic investment, remained central to Zionist and, thereafter, Israeli political claims. The 1948 Israeli Declaration of Independence, in the syncopated historical narrative that composes the first half of the document, references the Balfour Declaration, the Mandate documents, and the UN partition plan to create a Jewish State in Palestine. All are marshaled as evidence that the Zionist representatives had international—which essentially meant Western—approval as they declared a new state in the midst of war.

The Balfour Declaration marked the beginnings of Zionism as a political project authorized by a major world power rather than simply a loose complex of ideologies linked both to Jewish settlement in Ottoman Empire and national imaginings of Jewishness abroad. The Declaration would also soon delineate the starting point of Zionism as a political movement in the eyes of Palestinian Arab observers, who would state their opposition to this document in popular protests, articles, speeches, and political delegations to London throughout the Mandate period. Indeed, so great was the import of the Balfour Declaration that the pre-war history of Jewish land settlement, exploitation of workers, or immigration became, in retrospect, comparatively benign, if not altogether elided. Jamal Al-Husseini, in his testimony to the 1946 Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry, said that “the Arabs had always lived in peace and friendship with the many Jews who settled in Palestine for religious reasons . . . It was only after the publication of the Balfour Declaration, as the Jews began to display political ambitions and to reveal their true and aggressive intention, which we consider nothing less than an invasion, that concern and opposition grew among the Arabs.”<sup>2</sup> Jews, needless to say, had displayed political ambitions decades before the Balfour Declaration. Moreover, Palestinian peasants and intellectuals responded with concern, opposition, and resistance even then, but the particular alliance of the Jewish settlement project with British imperial power effectively wiped the pre-World War I slate clean, fully aligning the Zionist project not only with its settlement project per se—which had

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2. “Edut Jamal al-Husseini,” *Davar*, March 13, 1946. Cited in Abigail Jacobson and Moshe Naor, *Oriental Neighbors: Middle Eastern Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine* (Waltham, Mass., 2016), 49.

laid its foundations under Ottoman rule—but with European imperial support behind that project.

Thus, the Balfour Declaration set in motion a paradox that would lie at the heart of Zionism ever after: Western imperial support justified the Zionist project to insiders as an authorized, even enlightened national enterprise and helped Zionists gain further support within both Jewish and Western communities. But this very same support transformed Zionism into a highly malevolent colonial force in the eyes of most Arab, and some Jewish, observers. Yusuf Harun Zilkha, a socialist Iraqi Jew, critiqued this Zionist-British relationship as ultimately detrimental to the interests of Jews when he accused the Zionist movement of “lurking and seizing opportunities to make its services available to colonial powers.” Under the British, he correctly stated, Jewish capitalist enterprises grew, and Jewish businessmen gained lucrative concessions from the British. As individual Jewish businessmen benefited, Zilkha claimed, Jews would become suspect in the eyes of their non-Jewish countrymen, particularly in the Arab world, who would turn against Jews instead of working hand in hand with them in local struggles for rights.<sup>5</sup>

The year 1917, marked by the Balfour Declaration and the beginning of the end of World War I, spelled the beginning of the end of empire in the Middle East and the recognition that imperial spaces would give way to national ones. The very structure of the mandates granted to Britain and France in the Levant formalized the idea that the imperial powers themselves should enable a transition to a region of nation-states, including a Jewish national one. Yet in hitching the incipient Zionist project to the British imperial star, the Declaration in fact undermined claims that Jews were operating outside the purview of European empires or that, as most Zionists claimed, they were parting ways from the European states and empires that had failed them and returning to an organic national identity that predated all the modern empires and states from which they were diverging. Zionist settlement in Palestine sped up along with the establishment of a British infrastructure in Palestine. The British granted municipal status to Tel Aviv and then to Petah Tikva and made Hebrew an official language of the land for the first time in modern history. They granted lucrative concessions to Zionist entrepreneurs to bring electrification to Palestine and extract potash from the Dead Sea. These concessions not only enriched individual businessmen but also

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5. Yusuf Harun Zilkha, “Zionism against Jews and Arabs,” in *Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought: Writings on Identity, Politics, and Culture, 1895–1958*, ed. M. Behar and Z. Ben-Dor Benite (Waltham, Mass., 2013), 143–61.

built, authorized, solidified, and physically shaped the Yishuv as a national community. Though Zionists would ultimately rebel against the British, whom they accused of betraying their initial promises, the Yishuv as a whole had been built and strengthened in large part through its imperial connections.

Zionism emerged in the space of ambivalence in which modern European states and empires dwelt: such states, in the views of various Zionist ideologues, seemed to have made both Jewish integration and Jewish cultural revival impossible and compelled Jews to seek their modern self-definition in Palestine. At the same time, however, these states, whether national or imperial, were political and cultural models. They could help justify the Jewish ethnic-national project by giving their imprimatur to an interpretation of Jewish collective identity that Jews themselves did not agree on but which became widespread, especially during and after World War II and the Holocaust. The approval of the majority of Western states at the UN, just over thirty years after the issuance of the Balfour Declaration, offered final validation for the creation of a Jewish state. But even beyond the League of Nations and United Nations mandate plans and charters, the Zionist movement and then the State of Israel continued to seek more affective, informal approval of Zionism's legitimacy from world powers. Such efforts to gain approval continue today, whether in the realm of agriculture, science, technology, or statecraft. Indeed, the state regularly cites and references Western approval in attempts to criticize and delegitimize internal and external opponents.

Today, goodwill toward Israel at the United Nations, EU, and several individual Western states and organizations is faltering. Those who defend the major policies that now motivate that growing opposition—most centrally the continuation of the fifty-year-old occupation—have played down the importance of such international approval, turning instead to other types of justification: religious heritage, age-old Jewish longing, and the persistence of anti-Semitism. These are variants of the same discourses that helped motivate Jewish support of Palestine settlement before and beyond the Balfour Declaration. But both approaches, the highly pro-Western strategy central to Zionist center-left *hasbara* (public relations or propaganda), and the more defiant, damned-if-they-care rhetoric more typical on the political right, are fraught with problems. The more Israel seeks—and gains—Western approval on the basis of typically Western accomplishments in the realm of science, technology, or liberal governance, the more it emphasizes the ways it has historically allied itself with Western empires and states that, despite and alongside their scientific and technological prowess, have histories of violent

engagement with the Arab world and Middle East. But, as Zionist leaders knew in 1897, 1917, and 1947, and as Israeli leaders still know intuitively today, the Jewish national project in Palestine/Israel falters in the absence of such affirmation. Jewish collective memory, religious claims to territory, and histories of oppression propel many Jews' commitment both to the idea of a Jewish state and to the contemporary State of Israel as such. But they do not in practice overshadow similarly stated and equally felt Palestinian claims unless accompanied by the imprimatur of world powers. Even then, that imprimatur is a double-edged sword for the Zionist movement and Israel. The one hundredth anniversary of the Balfour Declaration might offer us an opportunity to reflect on the ambivalence of Western imperial support in the history of the Zionist movement and Israel.