



The Centenary of the Balfour Declaration

By Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoen

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Balfour Declaration, which will reach its centenary in November 2017, continues to be relevant for us today. Israeli Jews should seek to return to the premises underlying the Declaration – premises that were taken for granted at the time by the international community, but that have since been obscured.

November 2 of this year will mark the centenary of the Balfour Declaration, an event of which Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas made note during a speech at the PLO convention three months ago. "The British had no right to grant the Jews what they did, and the Jews had no right to accept," he said. "This was a crime perpetrated against our people." Even before Abbas, Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki demanded an apology from Britain on behalf of the Palestinian people.

We should pay attention to this protest, which demonstrates the continued relevance of the Balfour Declaration today.

The Declaration is identified by the Palestinian narrative as the source of their tragedy. As early as the 1920s, they grasped the full significance of the international support given to the statement at the League of Nations, and sought to foil its implementation. Yet the Palestinians' own struggle to realize their right to self-determination pertains to a large extent to the logic that shaped our region at the end of the First World War.

The idea of self-determination as an accepted international principle was introduced into the discourse of the world powers with the entrance of the US

into the First World War in 1917, when it was presented to the Allies as part of the demand for the revision of the war objectives. President Woodrow Wilson, denying the colonial legacy, led a significant change in the direction shaping the war's end: there should be no more realization of imperialistic aims, but a general movement towards "the self-determination right for the liberation of nations".

The practical exercise of self-determination encountered some difficulties, as described by South African statesman General Jan Smuts: "[P]eoples left behind by the decomposition of Russia, Austria and Turkey, are for the most part not politically mature. Many of them are not capable of self-government." In early January 1918, the British Cabinet accepted Smuts's recommendation that the principle of self-determination apply only in Europe, to countries left over from the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, but not to areas of the Middle East that had been part of the Ottoman Empire prior to the War. Wilson joined in this understanding, as well as other major powers that were engaged at the time in formulating the new international system.

From this sprang the concept of temporary ruling mandates in the Middle East by the great powers, as trusteeships of the League of Nations – the predecessor of the UN – until the peoples of the region could stand on their own feet. At the San Remo Conference (1920), the League of Nations conferred the mandate for Palestine on Britain. In 1922, it approved the inclusion of the Balfour Declaration in the mandate, a measure also adopted by the other Allied powers. Britain was thus charged with the Declaration's implementation – namely, the facilitation of the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in the land of Israel.

The Arabs claimed the Balfour Declaration contradicted the principle of self-determination – but even as that claim was made, the leaders of the Arab struggle did not demand Palestinian self-determination. What they demanded instead was the joining of the mandatory land of Israel to the short-lived Kingdom of Syria, established by the self-proclaimed King Faisal. Their recognition of Palestine as part of a "Greater Syria" remained long after Faisal was expelled from Damascus by the French in 1920.

I do not assert that justice lies with the Arabs' claim, but rather that it should be recognized that from an international point of view, the steps taken at San Remo were exceptional by any historical measure. In view of the League of Nations' design to end imperial colonialism, the recognition by the world powers – followed by the international community as a whole – of the right of the Jews to a national home in the Land of Israel stands prominent. The declared awareness of the League of Nations of the exceptional situation of the

Jews, most of whom did not reside at that time within the expanse of mandate rule as "local communities," emphasized the significance of the special right of the Jewish people in the land of Israel. It recognized their historical and cultural affinity to the land, and affirms their political significance.

The importance of the Declaration lies also in its timing, decades before the Holocaust. It recognized the right of the people of Israel to establish a national entity in the Land of Israel due to their historical ties to the land, rather than to a disaster that befell them. Israeli Jews, even more than others, should seek to return to that understanding of the grounds for Israel's establishment, which was taken for granted at the time by the international community. That understanding was reflected in the Balfour Declaration and approved later in the international agreement in San Remo and in the 1922 mandate. It is also highly significant with regard to international law that remains in force.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh is a senior research associate the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for 42 years, commanding troops in battle on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts. He was a Corps commander, and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.

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