

# The Balfour Declaration

The Balfour Declaration was a letter written by the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, on November 2, 1917. The letter was written to Lionel Walter Rothschild and it expressed British support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

The content of the Balfour Declaration would have serious consequences in the politics of the Middle-East, whose effects are still felt today.

This article will give more details about the Balfour Declaration within the context of the IAS Exam.

## Background of the Balfour Declaration

Zionism was a movement in the late 1800s which focused on the establishment of a Jewish homeland in the territory defined as the historic Land of Israel. It was based upon the writings of Theodor Herzl, who was instrumental in transforming it into a political ideology known today.

Although relatively unnoticed, the Zionism movement received a much-needed boost when Britain acknowledged and supported it. This support came amid growing concerns on World War I was panning out for the Allied faction.

By 1917, Britain and France were locked in a stalemate along the Western Front with Germany, while an allied campaign carried out in Gallipoli to knock Ottoman Turkey out of the war had resulted in a colossal failure.

Meanwhile, the result of the Russian Revolution had rendered the involvement of Russia in World War I uncertain.

Even though the United States had entered the war on the side of the Allies, it would not be until much later would a sizeable contingent of its army arrive to make a difference in the war.

It was against this backdrop that the British government of David Lloyd George made the decision to publicly support Zionism. The movement in Britain would be held by Chaim Weizmann, a Russian Jew settled in England.

The motives behind such a decision were as follows:

1. Lloyd George and other influential leaders believed that the Zionist movement was a righteous cause as it advocated for an establishment of a homeland long denied due to various political and historical factors.

2. The support for Zionism would help gain Jewish support for Allies in neutral countries, which would be crucial in turning the tide of World War I
3. Although an agreement was made with France to divide the former holdings of the Ottoman Empire upon its eventual defeat, Lloyd George envisioned a total British dominance in the Palestine region as it would prove to be a crucial bridge between two valuable British colonies - Egypt and India

The establishment of a Jewish state - under the protection of the British - would establish the above-stated goals.

## Opposition against the Zionist movement

The move to support Zionism was met with a vigorous protest that held up the progress of the planned declaration in the British parliament.

Critics of the move were of the opinion that any British support for Zionism would threaten the status of Jews who had settled in Europe and America. Above all, they feared a wave of anti-Semitism in countries fighting against the United Kingdom, such as the Ottoman Empire

The opposition was overruled and after garnering varying degrees of support from the United States and France, the British government went ahead with its plan.

## Letter to Lionel Rothschild

On November 2, 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour sent a letter to Lionel Walter Rothschild - a scion of the wealthy Rothschild family - which expressed total support of the "endeavour to facilitate the creation and establishment of a national home for the Jewish people through the best efforts of the British Government".

Lionel Rothschild, a friend of Chaim Weizmann, was a prominent and influential member of the Zionist movement. He was also a well-known leader of the Jewish diaspora and his support was crucial in rallying the Jewish diaspora behind the allied nations. It was needed as Russia had withdrawn from World War I, following the Russian Revolution, by declaring an armistice with Germany and no persuasion could convince the Bolshevik government to reverse its decision.

## Results of the Balfour Declaration

The results of the Balfour Declaration became immediately apparent following the end of World War I. As per the "mandate system" created by the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, Britain was expected to work on behalf of both the Jewish and Arab inhabitants when it was entrusted with the administration of Palestine.

When the details of the Balfour Declaration became public, however, Arabs in Palestine and elsewhere realised that this was not to be the case.

They were outraged by the fact that they had been denied the right to nationhood and self-government that had been promised in return for their participation against the Ottoman Empire. The migration of the Jewish population towards Palestine would only increase violence among Jews and Arabs.

The ensuing instability delayed Britain from making a concrete decision about Palestine. However, the end of World War II and the Holocaust that was perpetrated on the Jewish population at the time led to international support for Zionism. The nation of Israel was declared as a result, in 14th May 1948. But that would not be the end. Rather it would be the beginning of a long and protracted conflict between the Arab states and Israel that continues to this day