

Between Realpolitik and Utopia A Century with the Balfour-Declaration

International Conference
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The 'Balfour Declaration' was a letter sent by the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour on 2 November 1917 to one of the leaders of the British Jewish community, Walter Rothschild. Few other documents of such minimal length have had in world history such important and long-term consequences. That the Balfour Declaration had consequences is shared opinion, yet the nature and effects of them are highly contested. The international conference "Between Realpolitik and Utopia: A Century with the Balfour-Declaration" in November 2017 in Basel is devoted to the historiographical, political and intellectual debate of what the Balfour Declaration has brought about and what it might imply today.

In 1917 Palestine was a part of (what is generally conceived of as) Europe: The Balfour Declaration was part of British war efforts and belongs thus to the history of World War One. It addresses with Palestine a region that belonged still in 1917 to the imperial domains of the Ottoman Empire, an ally to Germany, Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria and thus part of the Central Powers. In the same time, Palestine was not part of Europe: The whole political class of the Entente states in Europe at that time regarded Palestine as not being part of Europe and as a region that was presumably not to stay much longer under Ottoman rule, but had rather inconclusive opinions about its future status. The indecision of the decision-makers finds its expression in the great variety of treaties and promises made to various actors at that time.

The Balfour Declaration was one major stepping stone towards the establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine promising in the same time to respect "the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine". The Balfour Declaration can be and has been read as part of a venture to establish a utopian place of equal rights and conviviality in Palestine and as major milestone in the formulation of the modern idea of the protection of minority rights. The first Israeli foreign minister, Abba Eban, called it the foundation stone of the State of Israel. Not less important, the declaration must also be seen as the breakthrough of centuries-old vital currents of Biblical belief in the material 'restoration of Israel' into international diplomacy.

Yet, dystopian interpretations of the effects the declaration has had overweigh today. All these promissory notes, contracts and treaties made during World War I fed into the new configuration of the Middle East that was finalized in 1922, with Great Britain and France entrusted by the League of Nations with two large mandates in the Middle East. Since then, these new arrangements, in which Palestine as a part of the British mandate was involved, have remained associated with rudely imperialist designs for sharing the spoils of the Ottoman Empire. The unfortunate new order of the Middle East, the "peace to end all peace" (David Fromkin), is implied to lack inherently of legitimacy and long-term stability. The 'Sykes-Picot order' conjured up so often today implies a firmly rooted imperialist heritage of the political order in the Middle East, an accusation which the 'Islamic State' has not hesitated to make it part of its political rhetoric.

The Balfour Declaration is a historical instance, but it is also far more: It is a notion of what Palestine, Europe and the Middle East might and or should – not – have been. A comprehensive debate on all the potential political and ideological implications of the declaration must thus be a natural part of this conference. The Balfour Declaration has multiplied the projective dimensions of Palestine in the European imagination and has made it part of Europe's identity of history by confounding the Zionist dream with imperial 'Realpolitik'. The conference's main rationale is to argue that the Balfour Declaration is emblematic for how convoluted the two entities are that we still conceive today as 'Europe' and the 'Middle East'.

This conference will address the Balfour declaration from several angles and perspectives:

1. It will trace the developments and the influences that made the Balfour Declaration possible in its British and European contexts.
2. It will address the situation on the ground in Palestine in 1917 and in the whole of the Ottoman Empire during World War One. It will investigate into the local and regional reactions and repercussions.
3. The declaration will have to be contextualized in the overall regional developments and the making of the post-World War I political order leading up to the British and French Mandates.
4. Long lines of interpretation have always connected the Balfour Declaration to the respective present. This section will discuss the importance and role of the declaration in today's interpretations and projections of 'Europe' and the 'Middle East'

The conference is organized by Alfred Bodenheimer and Erik Petry (Center for Jewish Studies) and Maurus Reinkowski (Seminar of Middle Eastern Studies), University of Basel, in cooperation with Hans-Lukas Kieser from The Centre for the History of Violence, University of Newcastle, Australia.

The conference is also part of the project cluster „Ottoman Cataclysm“ discussing the extremely violent period of transformation from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic: The demise of the Ottoman Empire and its complex ethnic, religious and social fabric in the 1910s is not only a defining event in the history of the Middle East and Europe and of global history. It is also a period of massive destruction, human suffering, and squandered opportunities for peace. The project cluster “Ottoman Cataclysm” is committed to contribute to an integrative narrative that aims to provide a critical and precise rendering of the traumatic events of past. As importantly, it seeks to propose a well-researched background for the politics and society of the Middle East, as it is experiencing convulsions that resonate with the events of the 1910s.

Funding of the conference is still pending. A call for papers has been published in April 2016. Deadline for submission of proposals is 30 June 2016.

In case of interest please contact <erik.petry@unibas.ch> and <maurus.reinkowski@unibas.ch>.