**[‘Jewish state’](https://www.dawn.com/news/1423963/jewish-state)**

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IN the mass of documents and data on the Palestinian question, the one piece of paper that stands out for its laconic yet duplicitous comprehensiveness is the Balfour Declaration. With the Knesset declaring Israel a Jewish state, it is time we remembered the diplomatic thespian behind the declaration. A confirmed anti-Semite, Arthur James Balfour sent to “Dear Lord Rothschild” a letter in which every word was open to the widest possible interpretation, and thus a multipurpose shoehorn. Ignoring the first few lines of courtesy customary to a letter, the substance of the document is squeezed into a 67-word sentence.

“His Majesty’s government,” it says, “view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

Written on Nov 2, 1917, when Jerusalem was still in Ottoman hands, the letter speaks of the “existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”, implying that the Jews were already a majority in the holy land and that the Arabs — Muslim and Christian — were a minority that had to be looked after by an overwhelming but magnanimous majority. The truth was that when the British foreign secretary drafted the letter, the Arabs constituted nearly 90 per cent of Palestine’s population. Surely, the 90pc didn’t need the mercy of the 10pc to safeguard their rights in their own land. More meaningfully, Balfour speaks of the non-Jewish communities’ “civil and religious rights”, avoiding the word ‘political’. But when it comes to the other side, Balfour makes sure the word ‘political’ is there, for the declaration makes clear nothing is done which may prejudice “the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

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Let’s also note the words “in Palestine” and how serviceable these turned out to be when more than a decade later the Arab leadership woke up to the danger stemming from the unceasing migration of European Jews to Palestine. Initially, the British government had no reason to listen to the Arab leadership, given the wretched socioeconomic condition of the Palestinian people and the power which Britain commanded as a victor of the First World War. However, as the Jewish migration assumed frightening proportions and Palestinian and Arab anger seemed to threaten the Zionist project, the British government found it expedient to issue a white paper — also called the Churchill white paper — to assuage Arab fears.

Issued in June 1922, the white paper denied that the aim of the 1917 declaration was to create a “wholly Jewish Palestine” and regretted “unauthorised statements” that Palestine was to become “as Jewish as England is English”. The declaration, it said, never contemplated that “Palestine as a whole should be converted into a Jewish National Home, but that such a home should be founded in Palestine [emphasis added]”. The implications were that if the Zionists were given a few villages to rule, the aims of the declaration would be achieved.

A 67-word sentence requiring a clarification of 1,847 words was a pathetic attempt at obfuscation. Nevertheless, as the clarification lengthened, its drafter discovered the obvious need for reassuring the Zionists that Britain wasn’t after all giving up the national home idea and that there was a dire need for the Jewish community in Palestine to “be able to increase its numbers by immigration”. The clarification gave itself away when it said the Jewish people should know that it is “in Pales­tine as of right and not on the sufferance”.

The recent Knesset decision is the culmination of the process that began with the letter to “Dear Lord Rothschild”, for a century after what Balfour wrote, a Jewish homeland has been established over entire Palestine and beyond, for Israel has annexed Golan Heights, and not all the UN resolutions in the world can make the Zionist state give up that bit of Syrian territory. As for Gaza, it is what Edward Said called “an open air prison”, and on the West Bank the population in Jewish settlements has swelled to nearly 800,000.

The two-state solution has been officially ditched by the Trump administration, and if Israel wants it can annex the West Bank in its entirety, except that such a move will alter Israel’s Jewish character. Never­theless, it is already exploring ways of incorporating what it calls Judea and Samaria into Greater Israel. Recently, the ruling Likud Party passed a resolution seeking the extension of Israeli sovereignty to the settlements, while “the Middle East’s Berlin wall” (Yasser Arafat’s words) has been so built that it has further nibbled at West Bank territory. Balfour can now rest in peace.

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