

The First Zionist Lobbyists in the U.S.

Louis Brandeis' and Stephen Waise's Roles in the Balfour Declaration

By Kobby Barda

Summary

In the summer of 1917 the efforts of the Zionist Movement, led by Chaim Weizmann, to secure recognition of Palestine as a home for the Jewish Nation, reached their peak. For Weizmann to fulfil his goal of an official Declaration on the matter he turned to an American friend, Justice Louis Brandeis. Dozens of articles and books have been written on the Balfour Declaration, as it became known, however the dramatic actions taking place in the United States have remained in the shadows. This paper examines the role played by prominent American Jewish figures in the process, as well as the reasons which led President Wilson to change the American position about Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel. Together, they played an instrumental role in the adoption and publication of the Balfour Declaration.

Key Words

Balfour Declaration, Justice Louis Brandeis, Colonel House, Woodrow Wilson, Stephen Wise, Chaim Weizmann, Edwin Montagu, British Mandate of Palestine, American Jewish Community, US Jewry, Jewish Lobby.

– Chapter One –

The Circumstances Which Led To the Balfour Declaration

Introduction to the Balfour Declaration

There are many, diverse circumstances which led to the Balfour Declaration. In this essay, we will examine one of these unique angles – the reasons and thought process of Justice Louis Brandeis, who would, in time, be recognized as the first American-Zionist to lobby the U.S. Administration. However, one cannot approach Brandeis' role in the dramatic declaration, one of the most important events in the Modern Jewish era, without addressing the other developments that caused the British Government to deliver the Balfour Declaration.

Palestine's Strategic Importance to the Crown

In his book¹, Michael J. Cohen notes that the British saw their presence in Israel/Palestine to be of strategic importance, mainly due to its proximity to two different routes to India, arguably the most important British Colony. The first passed through Syria, Iraq and the Persian Gulf; the other through the Suez Canal and the possibility of shortening the length of the naval journey from India to Britain. Additionally, from a strategic viewpoint, the same positioning was important due to the newly discovered oil deposits in Iraq and Persia. Mark Sykes, of the War Cabinet, was one of the strongest advocates for British presence in Palestine, on the way to India. All the while, the conversation about Israel was part of a larger one – the British aspired to take over territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire as part of their colonialist goals in the Middle East. Indeed, in 1935 the British used this axis to bring oil from Iraq to Britain, building pipes from Iraq to the port of Haifa via Jordan, and then using tankers to carry it from Haifa to Britain.

Avoiding the Sykes-Picot Treaty

The Sykes-Picot treaty was supposed to dissect Palestine and divide it among the powers which had defeated the Ottomans. James Beer explains² that the British support of Zionism was, in essence, an attempt to curb the influence of its ally and rival, France, which too had aspirations for the Middle East. He asserts that the Balfour Declaration was given "to pushback [against] the inevitable French claim for international governance after the conquest of Palestine." When Britain publishes the Balfour Declaration, it cancels – de facto – its commitment to the Sykes-Picot treaty and McMahon-Hussein correspondence.

From the end of 1916, under the leadership of British Prime Minister Lloyd George, the UK ceases to abide to the Sykes-Picot treaty, which determined the majority of the Land of Israel would be under an undefined and unclear international regime and rule. Since Britain was unhappy with the treaty, it elevated the importance of the Zionists, so they, in turn, could paint the British conquest and claim of the land in a positive light. In other words, the area could be controlled by the British to assist the Zionist claim and cause for British rule of the land in order to advance a National Home for the Jewish People, rather than for imperialistic reasons. This Zionist demand legitimized British conquest of the land and influence in the Middle East. Ergo, the Balfour Declaration given by the British to the Zionist movement provided the UK leadership a respectable way to release itself from any prior legal or diplomatic commitment.

Balfour's Declaration: the Russian and German connection

¹ Michael J. Cohen **Britain's Moment in Palestine: Retrospect and Perspectives, 1917–1948**, Routledge, 2014 pp. 67-68

² James Beer **A Line in the Sand – Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East**, Opus, pp. 72

On the Russian front, Sharman Kadish, who authored a book on the issue³, concluded the British thought that the Balfour Declaration would convince Russian Jews to not support the Bolshevik Revolution. Starting in 1917, Russia was engulfed in domestic fighting over the revolution, and Britain worried it would withdraw from the war and sign its own treaty with the Germans. This fear was founded, and indeed played out as they anticipated. The British believed the Russian Jews could affect the government, and might persuade it to remain in the war – to support the creation of that Jewish home in Palestine.

Regarding Germany, the British were aware the German government was interested in cooperating with the Zionist movement, and was planning to issue a pro-Zionist statement. In this sense, the Balfour Declaration was meant to preempt the Germans, and it succeeded in doing so.

The Christian Faith of Britain's Leadership

British Prime Minister Lloyd George and Foreign Minister Lord Balfour both held a warm place for the Jewish People and Zionist idea, stemming from their Christian belief. As such, they also held a romantic view of doing right in the world and repairing it by reinstating the Jewish People in its ancestral land.

Repaying a Favor

Britain acknowledged the help of members of the Jewish community in Palestine during the war, with two cases in particular: the activity of the underground movement NILI which provided them with information about the Ottoman forces and lay of the land, and the Jewish Brigades, which fought alongside British troops. On top of that, Britain was also thankful toward Dr. Chaim Weizmann and his personal contribution to the war effort.

Weizmann, a chemist by training, needed to help overcome the wartime shortage of acetone, which was a crucial part in the cannon's operational mechanism. He managed to create a corn-based alternative, producing some 30,000 tons of it. Prime Minister George recalls the following story in his 'War Time Memories': when he notified Weizmann that he would recommend the King award him an honorary title, the scientist refused and said he was merely looking out for his People. "This," he would later say, "was the source of the famous declaration for a Jewish Homeland in Palestine. When I was appointed Prime Minister I spoke about the entire issue with Mr. Balfour, then the Foreign Minister. We wanted the Jewish support in neutral countries. Dr. Weizmann was sent directly to the foreign minister – that was the start of a partnership, the results of which, after a long examination, was the famous Balfour Declaration... So Dr. Weizmann, with his discovery, not only helped us win the war, but also left an impression on the map of the world."⁴

Belief the Balfour Declaration Could Pressure the United States

This final argument is the essence of this paper. The British hope that the Balfour Declaration could cause the U.S. to enter the war, if the Jewish community were to see it as an opportunity worth lobbying for.

At this time, a segment of the American Jewish community has stature and wealth in the U.S., and the British believed they could affect the U.S. Administration into joining the

³ Sharman Kadish, **Bolsheviks and British Jews: The Anglo-Jewish Community, Britain and the Russian Revolution**, Routledge, 1992

⁴ Quoted in: Yehuda Reinherz & Miri Karsin, *Chaim Weizmann: Science in the Service of Politics*, ZMANIM, a history quarterly, 20, 1986

Great War and aiding the allies. At the start of 2017, Britain's military situation was risky, to say the least. Germany had declared a complete and total U-Boat war, with every ship entering or leaving the British Isles a target at risk of being sunk. From London's perspective, this had the potential of completely cutting off manpower, food, fuel and other forms of aid; in other words, it was a strategic risk of the highest magnitude. During these months, the British government did everything it could to convince the Woodrow Wilson-led United States to join the war efforts against Germany, understanding this was a crucial step in curbing the U-Boat offensive. It was under these circumstances that Weizmann convinced British statesmen that a pro-Zionist declaration could cause American Jewry to pressurize Congress and President Wilson into joining the war. Prime Minister Lloyd George and foreign minister James Balfour were convinced, merely because the British Army was on the verge of collapse.

In a special interview for the Balfour Declaration's centennial celebrations, Zohar Segev noted, "there is no doubt Weizmann succeeded in convincing some of the political elites that supporting Zionism would advance their interests in the Middle East." He then added that "it was obvious to everyone that in the political climate at the end of WWI no significant move could be done without the support of the United State."⁵ From here one can understand the importance Britain gave to this point. Or, in Segev's words: "The British thought that if they conceded to this statement, they would get the support of American Jews."

This opening shows an array of reasons supporting the British decision to advance what would turn in to the Balfour Declaration. In this essay, I will try to understand how Weizmann successfully recruited American Jewry, and how they got President Woodrow Wilson to adopt the Declaration – thereby upholding the promise Weizmann had given the British government.

– Chapter Two –

Professor Weizmann Enlists Louis Brandeis

Professor Weizmann understood that if he wanted to fulfill his pledge to the British government and receive Presidential sanction of the Declaration, he would need Louis Brandeis on his side, dedicated to the cause. But first, we must

⁵ *The American Jew without whom there wouldn't be a Balfour Declaration*, Adi Daniel, Channel 20, 2.11.2017 [last accessed: 2.9.2017] <https://www.20il.co.il/היהודי-האמריקני-שבצעדיו-לא-הייתה-הצהר/>

understand who Louis Brandeis was, and what role he played during that period of time.

Louis Brandeis

Louis Dembitz Brandeis (1856-1941) was a lawyer and advocate for social issues, and one of the greatest spiritual leaders of the Jewish people during the last century. Born to an immigrant family with few resources, Brandeis' talent and sharp mind helped turn him into one of the most influential Americans both in business and in the legal field. Large parts of the ideas, policies and platforms set forth by President Wilson rested on ideas presented by Brandeis.

In 1916 Brandeis became the first Jew appointed to the United States' Supreme Court, in what is still considered a milestone achievement for the American Jewish community. The confirmation was not simple, and came on the heels of a difficult Senate hearing. Upon taking seat, he was forced to resign from his post of chairman of the temporary federation of American Zionists. Brandeis coined the concept "cultural pluralism" and compared American society to a "symphony" composed of different racial, ethnic and religious groups.⁶ On this basis, Brandeis developed an approach settling the tension between Zionism and Americanism. Known as the 'Brandeis synthesis', his approach was best articulated in his famous saying: "To be good Americans we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews we must become Zionists."⁷

Weizmann's Letter to Brandeis

On September 19, 1917, Weizmann sent a special letter to Brandeis, and it is worth looking at and reflecting upon.⁸ In the letter, Weizmann details the British stance on the issue of a pro-Zionist declaration, as well as the obstacles from within the Jewish community.⁹

"The British government is carefully weighing the language of the declaration, thanks to the Zionist movement. For the past three months our Jewish adversaries have battled the Zionist Movement. They published a series of pamphlets featuring speeches supporting integration [...] It appears they gathered into a rather strong group [...]"

"We Zionists feel a need for our negotiations with Britain, which has lasted over three years, will come to an end by securing a Declaration by the British government. Such a document will be of immense value at this time, and will enable us to make the needed preparations in case the British army were to make an advancement into the Land of Israel soon. We must be able to lean on something defined, so that we can turn to members of the Jewish People and tell them we have not only great hopes, but a binding declaration from a Power capable and willing to fight for our cause."

⁶ Marc Reider, *A New Jewish Time: Jewish Culture in a Secular Time – an encyclopedic view* (Editor: Yermiyahu Yovel), LLMDA, third edition, 2008

⁷ Brandeis on Zionism: A Collection of Addresses and Statements, Louis D. Brandeis [last accessed: 15.08.2020] <https://www.wzo.org.il/index.php?dir=site&page=articles&op=item&cs=3276>

⁸ NOTE: The original letter is unavailable, and has been translated back from Hebrew

⁹ Based on B. Litvinov, **Selection of Weizmann's Letters: Summer 1885-January 1950**, Am Oved, 1988, pp. 155-157.

The above letter is an interesting document. It also begs the question: who are those "Jews opposing" the move, and how important was it to use the Balfour Declaration to defeat them?

The Pressure on Britain, or Why Move the Ball to the U.S.

According to Baratz, Weizmann's abovementioned letter from September 1917 referred to the Jewish and anti-Zionist Cabinet Minister Edwin Montagu (who would later be appointed Secretary of State for India).¹⁰ Montagu was born to a Jewish family; however he strongly opposed the Jewish national movement. In a letter from September 3, 1917, shortly before deliberations in the War Cabinet on the issue, he wrote: "Zionism has always seemed to me to be a mischievous political creed, untenable by any patriotic citizen of the United Kingdom. If a Jewish Englishman sets his eyes on The Mount of Olives and longs for the day when he will shake British soil from his shoes and go back to agricultural pursuits in Palestine, he has always seemed to me to have acknowledged aims inconsistent with British citizenship and to have admitted that he is unfit for a share in public life in Great Britain, or to be treated as an Englishman."

At the end of the letter Montagu concluded: "I feel that the Government are asked to be the instrument for carrying out the wishes of a Zionist organization largely run, as my information goes, at any rate in the past, by men of enemy descent or birth, and by this means have dealt a severe blow to the liberties, position and opportunities of service of their Jewish fellow-countrymen. I would say to Lord Rothschild that the Government will be prepared to do everything in their power to obtain for Jews in Palestine complete liberty of settlement and life on an equality with the inhabitants of that country who profess other religious beliefs. I would ask that the Government should go no further."

This letter, as well as the pressure exhorted by Montagu on his peers in the Cabinet, led to his being invited to present at the Cabinet – despite not being a member. It was his opportunity to present his stubborn opposition to the Declaration, and he took it with two hands. Using his persuasive talents, Montagu succeeded in tilting the Cabinet's original position. His Jewish heritage and identity played an important factor.

As a result, the Cabinet decided to move the ball to the American side of the court, and to freeze the process until an entirely new question was answered: would the President of the United States support a pro-Zionist declaration?

The American Opponents to the Balfour Declaration

Following the British question, the American President did not fully support the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. Wilson was, as mentioned, asked by the British prime minister about the possibility of a declaration which would act in the interest of the Zionist

¹⁰ *Edwin Montagu: the Jewish Minister who nearly defeated the Zionist Movement*, Ran Baratz, MIDA, 16.11.2017 [last accessed: 2.9.2020] <https://mida.org.il-שכמעט-היהודי-השר-היהודי-שכמעט-2017/11/16/>
[הביטא](#)

organizations in Palestine. To this he answered that he was not ready to decide on the issue¹¹.

However, it was not merely Wilson who was not ready; the people around him actively worked to thwart the American adoption of such a declaration. In a memo by Secretary of State Robert Lansing, dated December 13, 1917 – after the proclamation was issued – he outlines three reasons for the U.S. to oppose the Balfour Declaration:

- 1) The U.S. was not in a state of war with the Ottoman Empire. Siding with the Balfour Declaration meant supporting the transfer of territory from the Turks to British hands.
- 2) Even among Jews, the Zionist movement is not a consensus. Supporting the Zionist paradigm would put the U.S. in a position in which it preferred one Jewish stream over others.
- 3) Handing the rule over the Holy Land to Jewish hands could cause discomfort among the Christian community, which feels the Jews took an active part in Jesus' crucifixion.¹²

However there were not only governmental objections to the Jewish solution in Palestine. Also in the President's immediate circle of friends and donors people voiced their concerns and hesitations.

For instance, Charles Crane, a close friend of President Wilson, was a Protestant preacher and wealthy businessman who financed the presidential campaign. Crane was involved as an advisor on international affairs, and was awarded the position of Presidential Emissary for diplomatic missions in Russia (1917), the Paris Peace Summit (1919) and U.S. Ambassador to China. Additionally, crane was an outspoken anti-Semite, and a harsh criticizer of settling Jews in Palestine, who made his opinion known to the president.¹³

A Helpless Balfour

During Minister Balfour's 1917 visit to Washington, he met Justice Brandeis for lunch, during which they discussed the possibility of settling the Jewish People. At the end of the meal, Balfour stated he was "a Zionist",¹⁴ and called Justice Brandeis "the man most worthy of mentioning". In essence, he created the backchannel for discussions about the November 1917 declaration.

The fact that this meeting took place demonstrates the importance given to the American diplomatic front in general, and specifically in relation to the Zionist cause. At the same time, and in light of the answer given by President Wilson to the British government, Balfour had to look at an alternative course of action.

¹¹ RN Lebow, **Woodrow Wilson and the Balfour Declaration**, the Journal of Modern History, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1968), p 501.

¹² Michael T. Benson, Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel, Praeger, 1997, Page 19.

¹³ Frank W. Brecher, Woodrow Wilson and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, AJA 39 (April 1987), page 36.

¹⁴ Peter Grose, Louis Brandies, Arthur Balfour and the declaration that made history, Moment 8, no. 10 (November 1983), page 38.

On September 24, 1917, following a pro-Zionist assessment by his office, Balfour wrote in his diary: "Yes. However since the Cabinet decided, in my absence, against the Zionists, I cannot do anything until this decision is overturned."¹⁵ For Balfour to actively advance the declaration, there was now a need to recruit Wilson and secure his full-fledged support for the move. To do so, it was necessary to find key players close to the president. With little options, Balfour turned to Lord Rothschild and asked him to approach the Americans, suggesting he use Justice Brandeis. And so, Rothschild turns to Weizmann, asking him to approach his friend Brandeis; he does so, sending a detailed telegram and asking for his help.

Who Are You Colonel House?

Edward Mandell House was an American politician and statesman, and a close advisor to President Wilson. Though he held no official military rank, he was known as 'Colonel House'. The friendship between House and the President dated back to Wilson's days as governor of New Jersey, and House was one of those who helped him in his 1912 presidential campaign.

Once Wilson was elected, House became one of the men closest to the president, and someone who had direct access to his ear. In fact, up until Wilson's marriage, House even spent time living in the White House.¹⁶ President Wilson appointed House his personal emissary for sensitive diplomatic missions, including a series of attempted peace talks between 1914 and 1916, and later to the 1919 Paris summit.

However, for this paper, the most important aspect of House were his close relations with Brandeis. As with good friends, the story started with House strongly opposing Brandeis' appointment as the "first symbolic Jewish judge", however with time the two grew close and shared thoughts and experiences about current affairs with one another.¹⁷

– Chapter Three –

The Change in President Wilson

Brandeis' Role in American Agreement

On November 13, 1931, a reception was held in honor of Nachum Sokolov's 75th birthday. At this gala, the director of the Jewish Agency spoke, and was quoted as saying: "After a most necessary revision, President Wilson, acting through Colonel House, who was in full sympathy with the Zionist aims, authorized cabling to the British

¹⁵ Jehuda Reinharz, *The Balfour Declaration and Its Maker: A Reassessment*, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (Sep., 1992), pp. 455-499.

¹⁶ Charles E. Neu, *Colonel House: A Biography of Woodrow Wilson's Silent Partner*, Oxford University Press, 2015, page 87.

¹⁷ Godfrey Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson's Right Hand: The Life of Colonel Edward M. House*, Yale University Press, 2006, page 73.

Government the version that was published, and to which all the Allied Governments in turn gave their approval." ¹⁸

As mentioned, there was a strong friendship between Justice Brandeis and Colonel House. The cable Brandeis received from Weizmann led to a meeting on September 23th 1917, between House, Brandeis, and Rabbi Stephen Wise.¹⁹ This helped secure President Wilson's agreement to the entire plan. At the end of the meeting, Brandeis cabled Weizmann his answer to the initial message: "From talks I have had with the President and from expressions of opinion given to closest advisers I feel that I can answer that he is in entire sympathy with declaration quoted in yours of 19th."²⁰

In his book, Urofsky describes how the pair convinced Colonel House and got him to support the Zionist cause – and to convince the president.²¹ At the end of the meeting the colonel wrote a memo to the president summarizing the arguments in favor of American support to the British War Cabinet's proposal. To this the President answered:

"I find in my pocket the memorandum you gave me about the Zionist Movement. I am afraid I did not say that concurred in the formula suggested from the other side. I do, and would be obliged if you will let them know."

Sent to England, the telegram becomes the center of a breakfast conversation held between Weizmann and Prime Minister George, along with Mr. C. P. Scott, editor in chief of the Manchester Guardian newspaper. The decision is to bring the issue forward for another discussion, in light of President Wilson's support.

During Cabinet session no. 245, held on October 4, 1917, Balfour shows the letter from Wilson, and states: "President Wilson looks favorably upon the [Zionist] movement."²² However, once again Montagu intervenes and attempts to cancel the Statement or at least change its wording so that it is meaningless. The decision was to reword the document, and then send the more ambiguous and limited version to President Wilson for his approval.

The Third War Cabinet Session and Deciding on the Wording

The latest version of the Declaration was sent to Wilson to hear his opinion. It was personally transmitted by Foreign Secretary Balfour, through the American Ambassador in London, to Colonel House.

On October 9, 1917, Weizmann once again contacted Brandeis. This time, he urged him to work for a *public* move in support of the Declaration, with the backing of the President Wilson. Upon receiving the letter through House, Wilson asked Brandeis, Rabbi Wise

¹⁸ Judge Brandeis Reaches 75th. Birthday: Tributes from Mr. Nahum Sokolov President of Jewish Agency, JTA, November 13, 1931, [last accessed: Aug. 15.2020]: <https://www.jta.org/1931/11/13/archive/judge-brandeis-reaches-75th-birthday-tributes-from-mr-nahum-sokolov-president-of-jewish-agency-mr>

¹⁹ Melvin L. Urofsky, **Letters of Louis D. Brandeis: Volume IV, 1916-1921: Mr. Justice Brandeis**, SUNY Press, New-York, 1975.

²⁰ R.H.S. Crossman, **Gentile Zionism & the Balfour Declaration**, Commentary 33 (June 1962), [last accessed: Aug. 15.2020] <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/gentile-zionism-the-balfour-declaration/>

²¹ Melvin I. Urofsky, **American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust**, U of Nebraska Press, 1995, page 212.

²² Baratz, Idlb

and Jacob de Haas, a journalist and Zionist activist, for their input.²³ After passing on their strong support for the Declaration and its importance to the American Zionist movement and U.S. Jewry, Wilson asked House to inform the three that he would pass his approval of the wording to the British.²⁴

On October 13 Wilson informs House that he accepts the British declaration in favor of the Zionist movement, however he stresses he will not go public with his support just yet. The following day Brandeis let Weizmann know where things stood, and on October 16 the official agreement of President Wilson was transferred to the British War Cabinet. At the end of the month, on October 31, the third and final War Cabinet session dealing with the Declaration takes place. At the end of the session, Secretary Sykes leaves the room and tells Weizmann, who was waiting outside: "Dr. Weizmann, it's a boy!" The Cabinet had authorized Balfour to make the following, approved Declaration:

"His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors 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."

In Summary

There are not enough words to describe the importance of the Balfour Declaration to the establishment of the State of Israel and its significance to the Jewish People more than 100 years since it was made. While the academic literature is filled with dozens of items dealing with the British aspects of the Declaration, there are few places looking at the American angle, and these too are scattered in fragmented sentences and ideas.

Despite attempts to trace the transcript or memoir of the dramatic meeting between Colonel House, Justice Brandeis and Rabbi Wise from September 23, 1917, nothing was found. However, the findings of the paper show the importance given by the British to the support of an American President was very real. As such, it seems there is a real need to fully study the activity done during those two dramatic months of 1917 on the American side.

²³ Urofsky, Idlb.

²⁴ DRAMATIS PERSONAE, Wilson Approves Text of Balfour Declaration, Today in World War I, OCTOBER 16, 2017, [last accessed: Aug. 15.2020]: <https://today-in-wwwi.tumblr.com/post/166489215093/wilson-approves-text-of-balfour-declaration>