

News story: Foreign Secretary article on the Balfour Declaration

It was here in this room, beneath this same gilded ceiling, that one chapter of the story began. On 2 November 1917 my predecessor Lord Balfour sat in the Foreign Secretary's office, where I am writing now, and composed a letter to Lord Rothschild.

The essence of the Balfour Declaration consists of one sentence of 67 words; those were the carefully calibrated syllables that laid the foundations of the State of Israel.

Balfour declared that "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people"; with the famous and crucial proviso that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities".

On the Centenary, I will say what I believe: the Balfour Declaration was indispensable to the creation of a great nation. In the seven decades since its birth, Israel has prevailed over what has sometimes been the bitter hostility of neighbours to become a liberal democracy and a dynamic hi-tech economy.

In a region where many have endured authoritarianism and misrule, Israel has always stood out as a free society. Like every country, Israel has faults and failings. But it strives to live by the values in which I believe.

I served a stint at a kibbutz in my youth, and (though I was mainly washing up) I saw enough to understand the miracle of Israel: the bonds of hard work, self-reliance and an audacious and relentless energy that hold together a remarkable country.

Most of all, there is the incontestable moral goal: to provide a persecuted people with a safe and secure homeland. So I am proud of Britain's part in creating Israel and Her Majesty's Government will mark the Centenary of the Balfour Declaration on Thursday in that spirit.

I see no contradiction in being a friend of Israel – and a believer in that country's destiny – while also being deeply moved by the suffering of those affected and dislodged by its birth. The vital caveat in the Balfour Declaration – intended to safeguard other communities – has not been fully realised.

I have no doubt that the only viable solution to the conflict resembles the one first set down on paper by another Briton, Lord Peel, in the report of the Royal Commission on Palestine in 1937, and that is the vision of two states for two peoples.

For Israel, the birth of a Palestinian state is the only way to secure its demographic future as a Jewish and democratic nation. For Palestinians, a

state of their own would allow them to realise their aspirations for self-determination and self-government.

Achieving this goal will require painful compromises from both sides. In the words of Amos Oz, the Israeli novelist, the tragedy of the conflict is not that it is a clash between right and wrong, but rather a “clash between right and right”.

What might the future look like? In private, Israelis and Palestinians often tell me their visions for peace – and their parameters frequently have much in common. But they are understandably reluctant to define them in public. This November also marks the 50th anniversary of another British-drafted document, United Nations Resolution 242, that enshrined the principle of land-for-peace as the route to a settlement in the Holy Land. So in this time of anniversaries – and animated by the spirit of Balfour and Peel and of another Briton, Lord Caradon, better known as Hugh Foot, who drafted Resolution 242 – I propose to set out what I suggest is a fair compromise.

There should be two independent and sovereign states: a secure Israel, the homeland for the Jewish people, standing alongside a viable and contiguous Palestinian state, the homeland for the Palestinian people, as envisaged by UN General Assembly Resolution 181.

The borders should be based on the lines as they stood on June 4, 1967 – the eve of the Six Day War – with equal land swaps to reflect the national, security, and religious interests of the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. There must be security arrangements that, for Israelis, prevent the resurgence of terrorism and deal effectively with all threats, including new and significant threats in the region; and, for Palestinians, respect their sovereignty, ensure freedom of movement, and demonstrate that occupation is over.

There needs to be a just, fair, agreed and realistic solution to the Palestinian refugee question, in line with UN Resolution 1515. In practical terms, this means that any such agreement has to be demographically compatible with two states for two peoples and a generous package of international compensation must be made available. The final determination of Jerusalem should be agreed by the parties, ensuring that the holy city is a shared capital of Israel and a Palestinian state, granting access and religious rights for all who hold it dear.

All of the above I set out with due humility, because it is Israelis and Palestinians – not those of us who live far away – who would bear the pain of compromise. And I am encouraged by President Trump’s evident commitment to finding a solution.

Britain and, I am sure, our European friends stand ready to help implement any agreement, including by supporting its security provisions, contributing to refugee compensation, and enabling flows of trade and investment between Europe, Israel, a sovereign Palestinian state, and its Arab neighbours, which could help transform the region.

I am also heartened that the new generation of Arab leaders does not see Israel in the same light as their predecessors. I trust that more will be done against the twin scourges of terrorism and anti-Semitic incitement. But, in the final analysis, it is Israelis and Palestinians who must negotiate the detail and write their own chapter in history. A century on, Britain will give whatever support we can in order to close the ring and complete the unfinished business of the Balfour Declaration.

Further information