

# The British imperial imaginary in British political elite discourse on Palestine, 1917–1923

## *Abstract*

This thesis shows how the British imperial imaginary on Palestine, a common worldview on Palestine and its inhabitants, developed within the governing elite of the British Empire and informed British imperial policies for Palestine from 1917 until 1923. The British imperial imaginary included a clear sense of British superiority over everyone else in pre-Mandate years. Around 1917, stereotypical ideas about Palestine and its (Arab) population and a specific Biblical view of Jews, originating in the British cultural archive, also featured in the imperial imaginary. In this atmosphere, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, favoring the Zionists over the Arabs living in Palestine. From 1918 onwards, British ruling elites started to diverge over the apt British attitude towards the Arabs and Zionists. One segment of the elite gradually let go of the ideas in the cultural archive, and developed more pro-Arab sentiments, demanding a change of Britain's Palestinian policies. Yet, the other, powerful elite faction preserved their pro-Zionist attitudes. Since this group contained Britain's most important politicians of that time, imperial policies in Palestine were unaltered. For all British elites however, despite their internal differences, the interests of the British Empire stood above all. In the early years of the Mandate for Palestine, the imperial imaginary retained its primary component: an unequivocal sense of British sublimity. This was the defining factor for all imperial policies made for Palestine between 1917 and 1923.

Keywords: *British imperialism, Mandate Palestine, imperial imaginary, Balfour Declaration*



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## Introduction

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian terrorist group Hamas launched an unprecedented attack from Gaza on Israel. After what had been the deadliest assault on its citizens ever, Israel has declared war on Hamas.<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, Israeli air and ground offensives in retaliation have led to the death of tens of thousands of Palestinians and there are no signs of the conflict ending anytime soon. The Israel-Hamas war is yet another recurrence of the protracted dispute over land in Palestine that has been going on and off since the foundation of Israel in 1948. The seeds of this conflict were sown however much earlier, in 1917, when a letter with what would come to be known as the ‘Balfour Declaration’ was sent by British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, leader of the Jewish community in Great Britain. The letter ensured British support for Zionism, Jewish settlements in Palestine, as they could establish a ‘national home’ there. In so doing, the British virtually ignored the 90% Arab majority that lived in the territory already for hundreds of years, as they were only referred to as ‘non-Jewish communities.’<sup>2</sup> This document was to change the course of Palestine forever.

The end of World War I ushered in a new chapter for colonial power Great Britain as it came to rule much of the Middle East, historically an area of great (strategic) interest, through Mandates.<sup>3</sup> Annexation of Palestine had become virtually inevitable, to be able to follow up on the promise in the Declaration of November 1917.<sup>4</sup> But the British also established rule over newly formed states Mesopotamia (Iraq), Trans-Jordan (Jordan) and several territories in the Gulf region. All these Mandates were geared towards eventual self-government by their indigenous peoples, except for Palestine. This was a direct consequence of the Balfour Declaration, which became official Mandate policy in 1923.<sup>5</sup> ‘Palestine,’ as Winston Churchill told a Palestinian representative in 1921, ‘belongs to all the world.’<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Hamas’s attack was the bloodiest in Israel’s history,” *The Economist*, October 12, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Cabinet Office 23/4 [hereinafter CAB], “War Cabinet Minutes,” October 31, 1917, 40.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Kattan, *From Coexistence to Conquest: International Law and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1891-1949* (Pluto Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>4</sup> The Declaration was sent out a year before Palestine was fully conquered. William Mathew, “The Balfour Declaration and the Palestine Mandate, 1917—1923: British Imperialist Imperatives,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (2013): 243.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Roberts, “Re-Remembering the mandate: Historiographical debates and Revisionist History in the study of British Palestine,” *History Compass* 9, no. 3 (2011): 216.

<sup>6</sup> Colonial Office 733 [hereinafter CO], “Report on Middle East Conference Held in Cairo and Jerusalem,” June 1921, 152.

The establishment of British Mandates in the Middle East ended a 400-year period of Ottoman, Islamic rule. In Palestine, Britain's rule was brief – lasting from 1917 to 1948 – but its impact has been colossal. The Balfour Declaration, as it was the basis upon which (Mandate) rule was established and exercised, has been scrutinized zealously in the literature. There is a debate among scholars surrounding British motives for its issuance. Some bring forward the international context of the time, as World War I entered a crucial phase in November 1917. The support of the United States was still being awaited and Russia had just seen the Russian Revolution, which could jeopardize its former war-time pledges.<sup>7</sup> In turn, it was believed that support of the Jews could be useful propaganda for American backing in the War. According to William Mathew, this was an important reason for the Declaration's issuance.<sup>8</sup> Mark Levene argued along similar lines. Any Declaration that would please the Jews could tilt the odds of the War in British favor, in this way persuading Russian Jews (of which many leaders of the Revolution)<sup>9</sup> to sustain their support in the War.<sup>10</sup> The magnified share of power the Jews were alleged of holding is essentially a form of anti-Semitism. In this instance, however, anti-Semitism worked in a Zionist way as it could be seen to be driving Balfour's policy.<sup>11</sup>

The leading school of arguments centers around British imperialist and, in any case, selfish motivations.<sup>12</sup> Mayir Vereté considers the role Zionism played inferior to Britain's own interest for acquiring Palestine, arguing that it did not want France to rule over territory so close to Egypt.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Naomi Shepherd put forward that the Declaration was also a tool to establish a 'reliable client population' in Palestine.<sup>14</sup> Given the strategic setting of the territory, it was necessary to have a British-prone people live there. Mathew agrees with Shepherd on the latter, and he posits that it was the imperial dimension, particularly Palestine's position close to Egypt and on the route to India that eventually led to the British staying in Palestine after 1917. According to him, sustained British presence was thus

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<sup>7</sup> Naomi Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand: British rule in Palestine: 1917-1948* (Rutgers University Press, 2000), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Mathew, "British Imperialist Imperatives," 232.

<sup>9</sup> Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Levene, "The Balfour Declaration: A Case of Mistaken Identity," *The English Historical Review* 107, no. 422 (1993): 76.

<sup>11</sup> Yehuda Bauer and Moshe Fox, "On the perils of "Positive" Anti-Semitism," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 12, no. 1 (2018): 3-10; Jonathan Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration: Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Bloomsbury, 2012), 396.

<sup>12</sup> James Renton, "The historiography of the Balfour declaration: Toward a multi-causal framework," *Journal of Israeli History* 19, no. 2 (1998): 109.

<sup>13</sup> Mayir Vereté, "The Balfour Declaration and Its Makers," *Middle Eastern Studies* 6, no. 1 (1970): 51, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand*, 7-8.

motivated on different grounds than the Declaration.<sup>15</sup> Other scholars consider a combination of several different motives. David Cronin, for example, maintains that British motivations were both military as well as imperial.<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, Danny Gutwein has posited both Zionist as well as annexationist motives. He views the Declaration as the fruit of an internal struggle in the British government on directions for the Ottoman empire after the First World War between a ‘radical’, expansionist and ‘reformist’ angle.<sup>17</sup> Balfour’s letter was, in this reading, a tool for the radicals to advance Britain’s imperial reach in the Middle East.

Many authors discussed above mention different motives for the Balfour Declaration by referring to ideological, whether military-strategic, imperialist, Zionist, expansionist, or (Zionist) anti-Semitic, perspectives. If motives for the continuance of rule after the Declaration are considered separately, the history becomes even more complex. In their analyses however, several authors fail to address the possible link between British policy and underlying dominant worldviews of the decision-making elite at the time. Some, like Levene, do touch upon it briefly, as he alludes to the Balfour Declaration being also the result of British rulers’ interpretation of the world.<sup>18</sup> Jason Tomes similarly attests to the importance of considering ‘customary patterns of thinking’ when discussing British policy-making elites.<sup>19</sup> This thesis will expand these insights by examining how cognitive cultural underpinnings of thought have informed British colonial elite decision-making on Palestine, focusing especially on their attitudes towards the Arab and Jewish population in Palestine.

The discussion of British elite worldviews and corresponding imperial policies in Palestine can be aided by the concepts of imperial ideologies and imaginaries, as introduced by Duncan Bell.<sup>20</sup> Following a renewed interest in empire of the last thirty years, Bell has focused on the ideas behind the British empire. According to Bell, imperial ideologies entail the clustering of ideas and beliefs that give direction to the social and political arrangements of empire. These ideologies can be used to implicitly or explicitly justify the sustenance of

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<sup>15</sup> Mathew, “British Imperialist Imperatives,” 232, 239-242.

<sup>16</sup> David Cronin, *Balfour’s Shadow: A Century of British Support for Zionism and Israel* (Pluto Press, 2017), 11; Renton, “The historiography of the Balfour declaration,” 109-128.

<sup>17</sup> Danny Gutwein, “The politics of the Balfour Declaration: Nationalism, Imperialism and the Limits of Zionist-British cooperation,” *Journal of Israeli History* 35, no. 2 (2016): 118, 145.

<sup>18</sup> Levene, “A Case of Mistaken Identity,” 76.

<sup>19</sup> He however proceeds to focus predominantly on the persona Balfour and not the broader class of the British ruling elite. Jason Tomes, *Balfour and Foreign Policy: The International Thought of a Conservative statesman* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2016), chapter 4.

imperial practices and validate their expansion.<sup>21</sup> While ideologies may differ radically from one another, they often do have a similar lens to view the social world. Bell calls this common worldview with regards to the empire an imperial imaginary, which is used to justify and govern the empire. The imperial imaginary thus constitutes the cultural and cognitive underpinnings that structure imperial ideologies from below.

In this thesis, I will examine the British imperial imaginary and its development in the first six years of British rule in Palestine, between 1917 and 1923. I will focus on what the British imperial imaginary consisted of for Palestine and its inhabitants specifically and how it evolved in this pivotal period preceding the Mandate, to determine how it informed British imperial policies in Palestine of that time. Within the plethora of literature that exists on Palestine there has been little research that has endeavored to do so. From this, the following research question has ensued: *How did the British imperial imaginary for Palestine develop within the British ruling elite, and how did the imperial imaginary and its evolution influence British imperial policies in Palestine from 1917–1923?*

This thesis will study the development of the British imperial imaginary through an analysis of the political discourse on and policies created for Palestine by British ruling elites. By ruling elites is meant here the group of men, either belonging to the (War) Cabinet, Colonial or Foreign Office, or committees on Palestine, which were pivotal in the decision-making of the British empire on Palestine in this period. I will focus on the period from 1917, just around the publication of the Balfour Declaration, until the official creation of the Mandate in 1923. This timeframe is chosen because of the critical phase it constituted for Palestine and its future ruler, and by extension for the entire Middle East. It is true that a particular worldview of the British elite, particularly on Arabs, did not suddenly cease to exist after 1923.<sup>22</sup> But observing this imperial mindset will be easiest in the initial phase of the Mandate, given that the bulk of official discussions took place in this founding period. Simultaneously, it is important to note that British elite ideas were rooted in a larger history of its relations with the East that far precedes 1917.

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<sup>21</sup> Bell, *Reordering the World*, 94.

<sup>22</sup> David Wearing has for instance argued that certain ways of seeing the Arab World reverberate British thinking even in present times: David Wearing, “The myth of the reforming monarch: Orientalism, racial capitalism and UK support for the Arab Gulf monarchies,” *Politics* 0 (2021): 1-16.

To be able to discuss British elite discourse and the foreign policies that ensued in Palestine, I will examine letters between government officials, reports on or relating to Palestine and (War) Cabinet minutes and memoranda regarding Palestine, from 1917 to 1923. Also pertinent are several parliamentary debates of that time.<sup>23</sup> In addition, several newspaper articles are scrutinized, putting the discussion in a broader perspective. For both newspapers and government sources, different search terms were used to find discussions on Arabs, as they were called ‘Moslems’, ‘natives’, ‘non-Jews’, ‘Arabs’, ‘Palestinian Arabs’, or the derogatory ‘Mohammedans,’ and on Jews, by terms like ‘Jewish,’ ‘Zionists’ and ‘Jews.’ Using those terms, in conjunction with keyword ‘Palestine,’ I have collected several pertinent discussions and memorandums. Notably, British politicians often hardly mentioned the Arabs at all in discussions on Palestine. Sources that discuss the progress of the War in the region, or mere practical questions of every-day British rule in Palestine I have left out.

In my analysis of the British imperial imaginary, which is essentially a cultural undercurrent of thought, the concept of ‘cultural archive’ as coined by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, offers a useful framework.<sup>24</sup> The cultural archive is a reservoir of collected colonial narratives, carried over by years and years of colonial experience, and entails an engrained sense of perceiving the world. Said is most famous for his seminal book *Orientalism*, whereas *Culture and Imperialism* expands his arguments, while making frequent recourse to Orientalism throughout. As the concept will also be used in this thesis, a short definition is necessary. Orientalism, according to Said, is the ‘Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.’<sup>25</sup> It sees the West as belonging to a different civilization, separate from the Orient.

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century British views of its imperial subjects were in general quite negative. Palestine was no exception. Government correspondences oftentimes included explicit or implicit references to the inferiority of Palestine’s Arab population. Progressively, the Zionists in Palestine would also come to be denounced by a part of the British elite, using anti-Semitic notions. In any case, the British people were the superior. I will argue that this

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<sup>23</sup> Archives consulted included Gale, “Middle East Online: Arab-Israeli Relations, 1917-1970,”; the National Library of Qatar, *Qatar Digital Library*; Adam Matthew Digital, *Empire Online* and ProQuest, *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*. Parliamentary debates were accessed through *The Parliamentary Debates* (Hansard): *House of Lords* and *Ibidem, House of Commons* [hereinafter *House of Commons* or *House of Lords*].

<sup>24</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage Books, 1993), xxi, 51.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Pantheon Books, 1978), 3.

specific worldview including a British sublimity, commonly held by Britain's ruling class, was crucial for explaining British foreign policy in Palestine in pre-Mandate years. Although the unified lens through which the British elite viewed Palestine gradually wavered with regards to its attitude on Palestine's population, feelings of British supremacy remained ever strong. Upon uncovering this, I hope to shed new light on the intricate nature of British policy-making in the beginning years of their rule in Palestine, just before the establishment of the Mandate. This in turn offers a more complete understanding of present-day complexities.

I will build my argument as follows. To uncover what the British imperial imaginary for Palestine consisted of it is essential to first assess the context in which it originated, the Ottoman era before 1917. In Chapter 1, I will connect the long-standing historical relation between Britain and Palestine with Said's cultural archive to lay bare the foundation to British views on Palestine. The decision-making elite entertained different ideas about the merits of the Balfour Declaration in 1917. In Chapter 2, therefore, I will proceed chronologically into a discussion of the different ideological strands to support the Declaration, to examine how the imperial imaginary then manifested itself. Afterwards, in Chapter 3, the years from 1918 until 1922 will be covered. As Palestinian affairs were widely discussed and debated, I will uncover how the imperial imaginary and corresponding policies developed in this period. Lastly, Chapter 4 will offer an analysis of the year 1923, when the Mandate was imposed and the Balfour Declaration officially enshrined in Palestine's state policies.



## Chapter 1: Palestine before 1917, the ‘Holy Land’

The British were interested and involved in the Middle East and Palestine already well before they issued the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and created the Mandate. In the Middle East, strategically, as it was positioned on the route to India and the rest of the Empire in the East, and with the opening of the Suez Canal, and imperially, with the annexation of Egypt in 1882. Its relation with Palestine, however, was marked by a different connection at the outset. Palestine, when still a province under Ottoman reign, was an immensely popular travel destination for wealthy British elites.<sup>26</sup> They saw the territory of Palestine as the place where the Bible could best be studied and understood. What follows is a reconstruction of Britain’s longstanding ties with territorial Palestine, where I will show how the British worldview on Palestine and its inhabitants acquired its particular form around 1917 in this era of frequent biblical fact-finding missions.

### *A racial grammar*

Discussing the relation between Britain and Palestine before 1917, I will use the concept ‘cultural archive’ for direction, as developed by Said in *Culture and Imperialism*. In this book, he focuses on the cultural element of imperialism and lays bare ‘a general worldwide pattern of imperial culture,’ which is spread predominantly through the narratives that circulate about (previously) unknown lands.<sup>27</sup> The cultural archive is essentially a collection of ‘structures of attitude and reference,’ which is filled with years and years of colonial experiences and the stories connected to it. Gloria Wekker aptly describes it as ‘a racial grammar, a deep structure of inequality in thought and affect based on race’ which was imprinted on populations at home, forming the cultural archive, or as she calls it ‘deep reservoir.’<sup>28</sup> Finally, from the cultural archive a self-image is created that envisions a decisively superior role for Europeans. The link between culture and imperialism is established by stories: once a dominant narrative is established, it becomes an effective power that instigates a connection between the two, from which it is hard to depart afterwards. So, as culture becomes closely linked to one nation, it is only a short way to ‘us-versus-them’ thinking, characterized by xenophobia.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Maggy Harry, “The Holy Land in British eyes: sacred geography and the ‘rediscovery’ of Palestine, 1839-1917,” in Guido Abbattista ed. *Encountering Otherness: Diversities and Transcultural Experiences in Early Modern European Culture* (Trieste, 2011), 339.

<sup>27</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xii, 52.

<sup>28</sup> Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii-xxi.

The racial grammar and structures of attitude constituting the British cultural archive are also recognized by historians of empire. There is a debate going on whether or not a specific British imperial culture existed that was informed by its overseas colonial ventures.<sup>30</sup> But there is little literature that scrutinizes British discourse on Palestine's inhabitants in particular, especially in the period before the Mandate. Nadine Picaudou has considered British negative stereotyping of Palestinian Muslim (and Christian) Arabs in comparison to Jews, which has negatively influenced relations between Muslims and Jews.<sup>31</sup> On her account, Rosemary Hollis has looked at British discourse on Palestinian Arabs from 1917 to 2017. She has found continuity in the way they were depicted, while discourse appeared in its most negative form in pre-Mandate years.<sup>32</sup> These discussions merit a closer look into the effects of underlying racial perceptions within the British upper echelons of power on imperial policies. But first I turn to how these British perceptions have developed in Palestine through history.

#### *Britain and Palestine: a biblical bond*

Palestine occupied a rather special place in British history. The territory was fanatically visited by British elites in Ottoman years, especially from the 1830s onwards. It was seen as the 'Holy Land', and subsequently as important place for reminiscing about the Bible and understanding and authenticating the Scriptures. The larger public, unable to afford the voyage, were informed of these journeys through widely read tales or exhibitions.<sup>33</sup> The British descriptions of Palestine at home focused on the holy places within Jerusalem, the geographical characteristics, and its people. They saw Palestine as containing the pristine beginnings of British culture, feeding essentially into 'a cultural appropriation of Palestine.'<sup>34</sup> A special position it would retain in the future, even when the Empire was administering much of Palestine's neighboring countries.

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<sup>30</sup> For an overview see Simon Potter, "Empire, Cultures and Identities in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain," *History Compass* 5, no. 1 (2007): 51-71. For an argument *for* the existence of imperial culture, see Antoinette Burton, "Rules of thumb: British history and 'imperial culture' in nineteenth and twentieth-century Britain," *Women's History Review* 3, no. 4 (1994): 483-501, and *against*, see Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Nadine Picaudou, "The 'Arabs' as a category of Discourse in Mandate Palestine," in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present-Day* eds. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora (Princeton University Press, 2013), 329-335.

<sup>32</sup> Rosemary Hollis, "Palestine and the Palestinians in British political elite discourse: From 'The Palestine Problem' to 'the Two-State Solution,'" *International Relations* 30, no. 1 (2016): 3-28.

<sup>33</sup> Harry, "The Holy Land," 339.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 340.

As the territory of Palestine amounted to the ‘Holy Land’, this virtually negated the existence of all local inhabitants of the territory. The British saw Palestine as belonging to them, not to the residents themselves.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, the stories travelers brought home rarely discussed Palestinian people, and when they did, focused on their Biblical characteristics, while keeping a blind eye to obvious Arab and Ottoman elements. This is testimony to the fact that these narratives were often more based on Biblical fantasies than on real evidence.<sup>36</sup> Significantly, descriptions of Palestine’s native inhabitants were riddled with Orientalist tropes. They were ascribed laziness, passiveness and indolence.<sup>37</sup> Claude Conder, who conducted surveys on Palestine in the 1870s, regarded Palestinian natives as ‘ignorant and fanatic.’<sup>38</sup>

The image of Palestine, or the ‘Holy Land,’ as defined, delimited area was in this time much more present within European minds than it was in the Ottoman or native population’s mind.<sup>39</sup> Voyagers noted that the Palestinian territory had barely evolved since Biblical times, and that the land appeared nowhere near as full of life as it was portrayed in the Bible. They explained this supposed stagnation by reference to its arid land and a decline in agricultural productivity, which ought to have been caused by Ottoman misrule or by its present inhabitants.<sup>40</sup> Other reasons that could have explained the aridity, natural causes such as changes in climate, were not considered. Notably, greener and much more fertile areas had been present in the territory, but were not part of the Palestinian tour taken by European elites.<sup>41</sup> And, even though Palestine was not as developed as European states were at the time, there had been a well-functioning provincial government in place and the economy had been accelerating since the 1830s.<sup>42</sup> Again, this is evidence that shows how a one-sided image informed the British. Parts of the narratives were made up, or mystified on purpose.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, an adverse image of Palestine and its inhabitants was instigated in the archive.

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<sup>35</sup> Harry, “The Holy Land,” 343.

<sup>36</sup> Humayun Ansari, “The Muslim World in British Historical Imaginations: ‘Re-thinking “Orientalism”?”” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2011): 75.

<sup>37</sup> Harry, “The Holy Land,” 346-347.

<sup>38</sup> Claude Conder, quoted in Alexander Schölch, “Britain in Palestine, 1838-1882: The Roots of the Balfour Policy,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22, no. 1 (1992): 48.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Schölch, *Palestine in Transformation 1856-1882*, trans. William Young and Michael Gerrity (Institute for Palestine Studies, 1993), 16.

<sup>40</sup> Harry, “The Holy Land,” 345-346.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 345.

<sup>42</sup> Haim Gerber, “Zionism, Orientalism, and the Palestinians,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no. 1 (2003): 31.

<sup>43</sup> Ansari, “The Muslim World,” 75.

Islam also played a considerable part in constructing the image of the region, as the religion was feared in European circles and seen as source of all that was underdeveloped, juxtaposed with lack of progress and anti-democratic forces.<sup>44</sup> This was magnified by the memory of the Ottoman Islamic empire's might and their threat to Europe in the past.

### *Palestine's restoration*

British relations with Palestine were at first limited to the travels and the stories that accompanied those, but this started to change in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The turning point was the year 1882, when the British formally occupied Egypt, marking the start of British imperialism in the Middle East region. This was followed in the same year by the first large wave of Jewish immigration into Palestine.<sup>45</sup> As the British became more closely involved, they realized that the Holy Land could be restored to its original rich state, if and when it happened under proper European guidance. A mentorship which could be fulfilled perfectly by the Jews, because the British perceived them as Palestine's original inhabitants. But also, because they had lived in civilized Europe, coming in close proximity to European norms and values, which were absent in the Arabs.<sup>46</sup>

Playing in on the sentiment of a ruined Palestine in comparison to its outlook described in the Bible, the Zionists positioned themselves as the land's saviors. The Jews were more than eager to remedy the dire economic and agricultural state with 'their intelligence [and] financial acumen,' wrote Theodor Herzl for example.<sup>47</sup> In the beginning, Jewish superior agricultural capacities were however an unreality. The lands cultivated by Jewish colonists starting from 1882 were not producing enough food and had to be financially supported by the Rothschild family until 1900.<sup>48</sup> Contrastingly, the Arabs generally had enough food produced on their acres. But this was not reported. This is an example that goes to show that in the British narratives on Palestine, there was a blindness to positive Arab characteristics, especially when compared with Jewish (and British) alternatives.

In their support of the Jews the British operated not from a religious perspective, but from the perspective of Palestine's restoration. The idea of reforming Palestine became mainstream in the literature on Palestine in Britain, and increasingly reflected the opinion of

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<sup>44</sup> Jasmine Gani, "From discourse to practice: Orientalism, western policy and the Arab uprisings," *International Affairs* 98, no. 1 (2022): 53-54.

<sup>45</sup> Schölch, *Palestine in Transformation*, 3-4.

<sup>46</sup> Scott Atran, "The Surrogate Colonization of Palestine," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 723.

<sup>47</sup> Theodor Herzl, quoted in Harry, "The Holy Land," 349.

<sup>48</sup> Gerber, "Zionism, Orientalism," 31-33.

large shares of the British population.<sup>49</sup> British depictions of and thoughts about Palestine developed during the Ottoman period could be seen to already possess key elements of the future Zionist movement.

*The British imperial imaginary and cultural archive*

The British Empire was the largest imperial power in the world, and reached its peak in 1920. Throughout these centuries of imperial rule, a unique self-image that envisions the British as morally, culturally and intellectually superior to other non-European races has developed within their governing elite and, to a lesser extent, within the population at large. This sense of British superiority over virtually everyone else constituted the British imperial imaginary of that time. For Palestine in particular, a specific, adverse image of the territory and its residents was added to this worldview in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This conception was founded in the British cultural archive, which had been able to develop during the numerous British elite travels to Palestine in the years of Ottoman rule. Voyagers in this era described Palestine as an important and ‘Holy’ place, intimately connected to British culture and history. But the vital territory was also neglected by its ‘barbaric’ inhabitants and Ottoman misrule, and ought to return to its original Biblical form. This reformation could be executed by its ‘rightful’ inhabitants, the Jews, under close supervision of the superior British empire. These experiences have all been collected and together formed the Orientalist image of Palestine and its residents that nestled within British cultural archive. By 1917, these ideas informed the British imperial imaginary for Palestine and as such impacted the policies made, and it formed the basis upon which British imperialism in the region was legitimated.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, when Palestine was annexed by the British, it was inevitable that the Arabs in Palestine would be marginalized and not taken seriously as a party.

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<sup>49</sup> Schölch, “Britain in Palestine,” 48.

<sup>50</sup> Harry, “The Holy Land,” 340.

## Chapter 2: The Balfour Declaration, 1917

Already during World War 1, the British Empire had begun planning to (re-)structure the post-War order in the strategically vital Middle Eastern region. Together with the French, it was vying to increase its influence on Ottoman terrain. What followed was a string of conflicting agreements issued by the imperial powers.<sup>51</sup> One such pact occurred between 1915 and 1916, as the British were engaged in a deadlocked fight against the Ottomans and needed support from the Arabs. In a series of letters, termed the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, the British promised independence to the Shariff of Mecca in some Ottoman territories in exchange for Arab military support against the Turks. After that, in 1916, the Sykes-Picot agreement was signed (in secrecy) with the French. Counting on the Ottoman empire's imminent demise, the deal would divide its former territory into a French and British sphere, where Palestine was to be administered by an international coalition. Finally, and contradicting all previous pledges, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 promised Palestine to the Jews, under British tutelage. So, it is evident that the Declaration was issued in an intricate picture of geopolitical circumstances and interests, amid World War 1.

In this foreign policy era characterized by complexity, British elites concerned with foreign matters were far from unified, especially on a territory so important as Palestine. Each British statesman involved had its own strong conviction on the exact outlook of the Declaration, making it impossible to determine who were the driving factors behind it individually.<sup>52</sup> It should be pointed out that around 1917 the British empire neared its peak, so the universal feeling in Britain was one still very favorable to imperialism.<sup>53</sup> As a result, the dissenting views were not necessarily anti-imperial but rather contained different ideas over the form British imperialism would take on. As mentioned, Bell has identified several imperial ideologies used to justify imperial rule and its expansion. In this chapter, I will highlight the different ideological standpoints used by British elites to justify the British endeavor in Palestine in and around the Balfour Declaration of 1917. In doing so, I will show how all these different ideological perspectives were informed by one common worldview, the British imperial imaginary, at that time still grounded in the British cultural archive.

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<sup>51</sup> Kattan, *From Coexistence to Conquest*, 39-42.

<sup>52</sup> Renton, "The historiography of the Balfour Declaration," 113.

<sup>53</sup> Avi Shlaim, "The Balfour Declaration and its consequences," in Roger Louis ed. *Yet more adventures with Britannica: Personalities, Politics and culture in Britain* (I.B. Tauris, 2005), 261.

A relatively small group of elite statesmen determined British foreign policy in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They largely came from similar backgrounds, the higher classes of England, and were as such exposed to similar worldviews. This happened either through elite schools where a sense of British superiority was imprinted on them, or through their specifically Christian Scriptural upbringings, as was for example the case with the of origin ignoble Lloyd George.<sup>54</sup> An image of Palestine as holy place and, importantly, as a country, that did not even exist at that time, was instilled within the governing elite.<sup>55</sup> This imagined reality of Palestine, based on a narrative created by the British cultural archive – the collected experiences about the Middle East – was omnipresent around 1917.

### *Imperial ideologies and the Balfour Declaration*

In the age of the Great War, with conflict in every corner of the world, Britain wanted to secure its imperial frontiers but also saw opportunities to enlarge its realm. In this relation, Palestine was of great value, and its annexation seen as the ‘first constructive effort in the new settlement of the world after the War.’<sup>56</sup> First and foremost, because it was strategically positioned between India and Egypt. But also, because control of Palestine served as a tool to expand British control over the Middle East, and limit French influence in the Levant by putting a halt to *la Syrie Intégrale*, which would include Palestine.<sup>57</sup> Sending out the Balfour Declaration, Britain could maneuver its way out of the Sykes-Picot agreement. This view of British imperialism, mindful of the geopolitical context of the War, was popular with imperial enthusiasts like prime minister David Lloyd George. He maintained that ‘the French will have to accept our Protectorate: we shall be in Palestine by conquest and shall remain.’<sup>58</sup> This is a clear example of the *realist-geopolitical* ideology, as ‘geopolitical advantage’ was sought over France, and essentially everyone else in the scramble for formerly Ottoman lands.<sup>59</sup> To those belonging to this view, the most important thing was to achieve a British Palestine, to annul the Sykes-Picot agreement. Support of Zionism was secondary to that. Lloyd George

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<sup>54</sup> John W. Cell, “Colonial Rule,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire Volume 4: the Twentieth Century*, ed. Judith Brown (Oxford University Press, 1999), 233; Janko Šćepanović, “David Lloyd George and the Balfour Declaration: Assessing the Role of Individuals in Historic Policy Making,” *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 11, no. 1 (2018): 396-397.

<sup>55</sup> James Renton, “Changing Languages of Empire and the Orient: Britain and the Invention of the Middle East,” *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 3 (2007): 694.

<sup>56</sup> “The Future of Palestine,” *Manchester Guardian*, December 10, 1917.

<sup>57</sup> Levene, “A Case of Mistaken Identity,” 55.

<sup>58</sup> David Lloyd George, quoted in Šćepanović, “Lloyd George,” 403; Renton, “Historiography of Balfour Declaration,” 116.

<sup>59</sup> Bell, “Ideologies of Empire,” 101.

himself did sympathize with the Zionist claim on Palestine, owing to his Christian upbringing that followed the Scriptures closely.<sup>60</sup> With it also came the typically Orientalist ideas about Palestine and Arabs. Besides that, he was friends with Chaim Weizmann, the influential leader of the Zionists in Britain.<sup>61</sup> In general, the *realist-geopolitical* ideology corresponded to the British imperial imaginary, as the British saw their empire as a superior realm that needed to extend to as many places as possible.

The visits to the Middle East by British elites in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had instilled on the British mainland a vivid picture of the prominence of the Holy Land and created a sense of urgency of having the Jews restore Palestine to its original state. The advancement of Zionism as reason for support of Balfour's policy can belong to both a *realist-geopolitical* and *liberal-civilizing* ideology. Support of the Jews was seen as necessary to tip the scales of the War in British favor, as Balfour argued in Cabinet that it would be useful propaganda for the United States and Russia.<sup>62</sup> This makes his reasoning a *realist-geopolitical* one. However, the conquest of Palestine and its colonization by the Jews included a large civilizational aspect too. Already in 1915, future High Commissioner to Palestine, and a Jew himself, Herbert Samuel advocated for annexation of Palestine, as the British could once again become 'civiliser of the backward countries.'<sup>63</sup> The large civilizing role envisioned for the Jewish is part of the *liberal-civilizing* ideology of imperialism. This ideological strand justifies imperial rule on the basis of liberal states' obligation to bring civilization to all parts of the world.<sup>64</sup>

For Balfour, the absence of own territory for the Jews was the one lacuna that needed to be filled for them to have his full respect.<sup>65</sup> Here was an obligation for civilization to set the record straight. He was in fact was not so prone on achieving a British Palestine, as many of his colleagues were, as he was on achieving a Jewish Palestine.<sup>66</sup> However, the Jewish were at that time also not deemed worthy for complete sovereignty yet. Therefore, the British would stay in Palestine as long as was necessary for a civilized society to develop, and would leave once the state could become independent. Along this way an obvious role was envisioned for the British and for the Jewish. The Arabs, on the contrary, were subjects, and only featured in

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<sup>60</sup> Vereté, "Balfour and Its makers," 60.

<sup>61</sup> John Mctague Jr, "The British Military Administration in Palestine 1917-1920," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7, no. 3 (1978): 61.

<sup>62</sup> "War Cabinet Minutes," 40.

<sup>63</sup> Herbert Samuel, quoted in Šcepanovic, "Lloyd George," 402.

<sup>64</sup> Bell, "Ideologies of Empire," 102.

<sup>65</sup> Christopher Sykes, *Crossroads to Israel: Palestine from Balfour to Bevin* (Collins, 1965), 18.

<sup>66</sup> Balfour even considered American control of Palestine acceptable for a while. D. Z. Gillon, "The Antecedents of the Balfour Declaration," *Middle Eastern Studies* 5, no. 2 (1969): 139.



a passive role.<sup>67</sup> So, however benevolent the support of Zionism and its liberal-civilizing aspects may appear, what is underneath is still a distinct sense of superior Britishness. For one, because self-government by the Arabs was not part of it.<sup>68</sup> As the redeemer of all what was backward, the British empire allowed the ‘lower races’ to develop and thrive under their supervision. This is again an appearance of the intellectual and moral eminence the British endowed to themselves, as part of the British imperial imaginary, informed by the archive.

Essentially, the British wanted what was best for the British empire only. Vereté went as far as to say that another vehicle like the Zionists would have been ‘invented’ by the British if they had not been there, to justify its imperial venture.<sup>69</sup> ‘Selfish’ British motives for issuing the Balfour Declaration are indicative of the *republican* ideology, which sees imperial affairs justified by reference to the benefits that will accrue to the mother state. In this way, it has considerable overlap with *realist-geopolitical* considerations. Bell states that people that adhere to this ideology seek to ‘foster individual and collective virtue in their compatriots, while upholding national honor and glory.’<sup>70</sup> All other goods imperialism may bring, like economic growth and civilizational gain, are unimportant. Trumping the French, overtaking the once-mighty Ottomans, the whole endeavor into Palestine can essentially be seen as a show of force of the British empire. Imperialist Prime Minister Lloyd George liked the international status Britain would attain with Palestine’s conquest, which puts him, next to the *realist-geopolitical*, in the *republican* ideological corner.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, the British project in Palestine was used as propaganda during World War 1 to generate favorable worldwide sentiments about the British.<sup>72</sup> The propaganda was aimed at persuading Russia and the United States, but the British people also needed the victory at that time. So, to be able to generate as much attention as possible, the British arrival in Jerusalem by Lord Allenby and his troops was made into a widely disseminated symbolic and theatrical event, laced with metaphors.<sup>73</sup> All with the aim of showing that the British empire was really the savior of all backward Eastern countries, and was the best at it.

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<sup>67</sup> Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand*, 15.

<sup>68</sup> Renton, “Changing Languages of the Orient,” 655.

<sup>69</sup> Vereté, “Balfour and Its Makers,” 48-63.

<sup>70</sup> Bell, “Ideologies of Empire,” 105.

<sup>71</sup> Vereté, “Balfour and Its Makers,” 60.

<sup>72</sup> Renton, “Changing Languages of the Orient,” 646-653.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, 664.

To see how British elite views disseminated among the British public, I will turn to some newspaper articles. Newspapers considered here are *the Times* and the *Manchester Guardian*, two reasonably read newspapers at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *The Times* was read mostly by Britain's ruling class, and it was at that time a pro-Zionist newspaper.<sup>74</sup> The *Manchester Guardian*'s chief editor, C.P. Scott, too, was decisively on Balfour's side, and was in fact according to some partly responsible for Zionism's eventual success through his personal influence on Lloyd George.<sup>75</sup> Newspaper coverages surrounding the Balfour Declaration were not manifold, since its issuance was not directly endowed enormous importance. *The Times* published the Declaration in full, without analysis, only on November 9, 1917 – a week after it was issued.<sup>76</sup> At the time, the great War was still unfolding and multiple crises faced the British people, all covering up space in the paper. Moreover, a myriad of different War agreements occurred in that era.<sup>77</sup> The articles that were published on the matter of the Declaration and Palestine's colonization by Jews presented an amalgamation of the prevalent imperial ideologies. The government's line of reasoning was followed rather uncritically, and the Declaration, 'signpost of a destiny,' praised.<sup>78</sup> For example, *liberal-civilizational* aims of the British, 'to secure to all peoples the right to govern themselves,' were connected to the British acknowledgement of Zionism, as it was 'the greatest step we had taken in this direction.'<sup>79</sup> Common in almost all articles are the many references to the admirable nature of the Empire, concurrent with a *republican* ideology. In the *Manchester Guardian*, a month after the Declaration's publication, in relation to Palestine 'a nation like England,' is lauded as it 'has given to the world the supreme political creation of empire and liberty.'<sup>80</sup>

Striking is the general contempt for Palestinian Arabs that seeps through the sentences. The Arab population, when mentioned at all, 'is small and at a low stage of civilisation.'<sup>81</sup> In another instance, foreseeing Palestine as the cradle of (Zionist) intellectual development, Sykes was quoted in his joy over 'Arab civilisation [being] restored once more.'<sup>82</sup> An Orientalist undertone is thus prevalent also in the news outlets. This shows the

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<sup>74</sup> Schneer, *Origins*, 359.

<sup>75</sup> Šcepanovic, "Lloyd George," 395.

<sup>76</sup> "Palestine for the Jews – Official Sympathy," *The Times*, November 9, 1917.

<sup>77</sup> Elise Knutsen, "Now Notorious Declaration had Muted Response in 1917," *Arab News*, November 1, 2017.

<sup>78</sup> "Palestine and the Jews," *Manchester Guardian*, November 9, 1917. However, some different ideological views existed in news outlets as well. See Schneer, *Origins*, 359-364.

<sup>79</sup> "A Jewish Palestine – Zionist Demonstration in London: Lord R. Cecil on A National Rebirth," *The Times*, December 3, 1917.

<sup>80</sup> "The Future of Palestine," *Manchester Guardian*, December 10, 1917.

<sup>81</sup> "Palestine and the Jews," *Manchester Guardian*, November 9, 1917.

<sup>82</sup> "A Jewish Palestine," *The Times*, December 3, 1917.

ubiquity of the British cultural archive, not just with elite statesmen, but also in utterances to the general public in 1917. Newspapers do seem to contend that, although incapable of seeing any progress, the Arab people has 'its rights', which ought to be respected.<sup>83</sup> Also, Sykes was quoted in his warning for the danger of hostility between the Arab and Jewish race, who he envisioned as holding the future of the territory together.<sup>84</sup> These are comments that show at least a recognition of the Arabs' position.

Not every British statesman was wholeheartedly in support of Balfour's policy in 1917. Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, and prominent member of Lloyd George's War Cabinet, Lord George Curzon, were examples of two notable anti-Zionists, who protested against the Declaration. Montagu, a Jew himself, warned for the anti-Semitism the Declaration would amount to. As soon as Palestine would become a national home for the Jewish, the necessity for equal rights for Jews elsewhere in the world would wane, and 'Palestine will become the world's ghetto.'<sup>85</sup> In another memorandum he proceeds to name many Jews with prominence in British state affairs who share in his anti-Zionism, who would prefer to remain British citizens over emigrating to Palestine.<sup>86</sup> Significantly, this group of Jews was most outspoken in its defense of the local Arab population. However, in the final week of decision-making, Montagu, spokesperson for this group, was in India, unable to pursue these arguments further.<sup>87</sup>

Curzon, additionally, was also critical towards the Declaration in the same way as he had been with regards to previous Hussein-McMahon and Sykes-Picot deals. He went on to write a memorandum, 'Future of Palestine,' where he expressed his doubts. Its contents show that he was the only member (Montagu was not in the Cabinet) of the British Cabinet at that time acknowledging the Arabs' presence in Palestine and considering that Jewish immigration into Palestine would harm them, as 'they will not be content [...] to be expropriated for Jewish immigrants...'.<sup>88</sup> By the rest of Cabinet the Arabs were simply not seen as being of importance. Having seen a lot of the world and the Middle East, Curzon was much more knowledgeable over the region than most of his colleagues. For example, Foreign Secretary

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<sup>83</sup> "Palestine and the Jews," *Manchester Guardian*, November 9, 1917.

<sup>84</sup> "The Jews and Palestine – Meeting of thanks in Manchester," *Manchester Guardian*, December 10, 1917.

<sup>85</sup> CAB 21/58, "The Anti-Semitism of the Present Government," Memorandum by Edwin Montagu, August 23, 1917.

<sup>86</sup> Tahseen Basheer, *Edwin Montagu and the Balfour Declaration* (Arab League Office, 1967), 16-17.

<sup>87</sup> William Mathew, "War-Time Contingency and the Balfour Declaration of 1917: An Improbable Regression," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 2 (2011): 41.

<sup>88</sup> CAB 24/06, "Future of Palestine," Memorandum by Lord Curzon, October 26, 1917, 2-3.

Arthur Balfour would visit Palestine only once in 1925, several years into the Mandate.<sup>89</sup> Curzon, by contrast, had been to Palestine multiple times. He had encountered the Arabs, seen the state of the land, and had concluded that a large-scale Zionist incursion would not be feasible. His objections were arguably the reason a sentence was added to the Declaration that mentioned the civil and religious rights of the ‘non-Jewish communities.’<sup>90</sup> With this addition, he supported the Declaration. He saw the benefits for the British Empire from Palestine being the ‘strategic buffer’ of Egypt and as base for the defense of the Canal, conforming to the *realist-geopolitical* ideology.<sup>91</sup> But, he never supported the Declaration with the same passion as other members of the Cabinet, and continued to express his dissatisfaction in the years leading up to the Mandate.

Lord Curzon’s consideration of the Arabs did not, however, signal a pro-Arab stance per se. Curzon’s travels to the Middle East in Ottoman years between 1881 and 1888 coincided with the heyday of British elite Biblical fact-finding missions. Consequently, his view on the Middle East and Palestine was formed in this period. Referring in Cabinet to Palestine, he called it ‘the old scriptural Palestine’.<sup>92</sup> Curzon was thus not of a radically different imperial breed than his colleagues. The British cultural archive often shines through in Curzon’s discourse. For instance, when he warned that ‘Arabs and Turks are after all [...] Moslems, and capable of one day sinking their differences to the detriment of their respective backers,’ this was much more derogatory in tone than his memorandum.<sup>93</sup> This difference can be explained by his wish to persuade Cabinet to alter the contents of the Declaration, leading him to formulate his argument strategically. In reality, he did not sympathize that much with the Arabs or with the country. So, even though he is rightfully considered as one of the few openly against the Declaration, this merely represents a difference in ideology, rather than the imaginary. Montagu, in his regard, was less specific in his attitude toward Arabs but did put the British empire above all, and claimed that Palestine ‘belongs to our enemies.’<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Roy Macleod, “Balfour’s Mission to Palestine: Science, Strategy, And The Inauguration Of The Hebrew University In Jerusalem,” *Minerva* 46, no. 1 (2008): 53.

<sup>90</sup> David Gilmour, “The Unregarded Prophet: Lord Curzon and the Palestine Question,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 3 (1996): 64.

<sup>91</sup> CAB 27, “Minutes of the Eastern Committee,” December 5, 1918, 19; Michael Cohen, “Was the Balfour Declaration at Risk in 1923? Zionism and British imperialism,” *The Journal of Israeli History* 29, no. 1 (2010): 79-98.

<sup>92</sup> “Future of Palestine, Lord Curzon,” 2.

<sup>93</sup> Lord Curzon, quoted in Richard Davis, “Britain’s Middle Eastern Policy, 1900-1931: Dual Attractions of Empire and Europe,” *Histoire@Politique* 2, no. 11 (2010): 15.

<sup>94</sup> Edwin Montagu, quoted in Jehuda Reinharz, “The Balfour Declaration and Its Maker: A Reassessment,” *The Journal of Modern History* 64, no. 3 (1992): 480.

### *One unified imperial imaginary*

In the above discussion it is virtually impossible to find one conclusive ideology used to support the Balfour Declaration. British foreign policy elites all had their separate reasons, and could also take various stands within the same ideology. For example, within the *geopolitical* ideology, Lord Curzon saw the strategic benefits of Balfour's policy, as did his colleague Mark Sykes, but the former was a staunch anti-Zionist, while the latter adhered to Zionism.<sup>95</sup> By contrast, Lloyd George wanted Palestine within the British realm by force, adopting a clear *realist-geopolitical* and *republican* view, while his Foreign Secretary Balfour espoused a more liberal perspective through support of the Zionists.<sup>96</sup>

What did appear to unite British elites was their belief in the sublimity of the British empire, on the one side, and their disregard of the Arabs on the other, in correspondence with the narratives enshrined in the British cultural archive. Together they formed the British imperial imaginary of that time. Refrain from entering in 'any political pledge with Arabs, and particularly none in regard to Palestine,' Lloyd George for example advised Sykes in 1917.<sup>97</sup> Balfour would use similar terms in his famous expression of sympathy for Zionism, which was, 'of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs' that lived in Palestine.<sup>98</sup> Even Sykes, who advocated for Arabs and Jews to live peacefully next to each other in Palestine, could not escape the racially superior thoughts of his era.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Curzon and Montagu, opposed to the Declaration, cannot be conceived to side with the Arabs or Zionists. They too had the interest of the British Empire, and the Empire only, in mind.

While British derogatory comments mostly pertained to the Arabs, and the Jews were praised in relation to them, the British breed was still the superior. A comment by General Sir Walter Congreve in a letter to Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson seems to encapsulate this sentiment in its entirety: 'I dislike them all equally, Arabs, Jews, Christians in [...] Palestine, they are all alike, a beastly people, [...] not worth one Englishman.'<sup>100</sup> By 1917, prominent elites had different ideological reasons to support the Balfour Declaration, but shared a

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<sup>95</sup> Although Sykes was not a Zionist at heart, he was persuaded and converted to the idea. Schneer, *Origins*, 74.

<sup>96</sup> Reinharz, "The Balfour Declaration, A Reassessment," 464.

<sup>97</sup> Arthur Balfour, quoted in Vereté, "Balfour and Its Makers," 74.

<sup>98</sup> Foreign Office [hereinafter FO] 340/1, "Memorandum by Mr. Balfour (Paris) respecting Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia," August 11, 1919. Although not of 1917, this comment does display his sentiment of that time with regards to why the Declaration was made from his (Orientalist) point of view.

<sup>99</sup> Schneer, *Origins*, 74; "Jews and Palestine: Meeting of Thanks in Manchester, Sir Mark Sykes's warning," *Manchester Guardian*, December 10, 1917.

<sup>100</sup> Jeffery Keith, *The Military Correspondence of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, 1918-1922* (Bodley Head, 1985), 157.

common imperial imaginary, infused by ideas of the British cultural archive. In cases where unity on Palestinian affairs seemed far away – the anti-Zionist versus pro-Zionist tendencies for instance – the British imperial imaginary, including a clear sense of British superiority, was their common ground.

Official discussion about the Declaration in Cabinet was few, and the group of men endowed with deciding over it rather small, around 1917.<sup>101</sup> Yet, this would change in the years after the Declaration. As the War ended, their rule was extended and the British became fully embedded in Palestine, discussion about the reasons for British continued presence in the region flared up. This is what I will turn to now.

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<sup>101</sup> It featured in the official discussion only four times in the year 1917. Mathew, “War-time Contingency,” 30; Reinharz, “The Balfour Declaration, A Reassessment,” 498.

### Chapter 3: The preceding phase to the Mandate, 1918-1922

In the first phase of Britain's active involvement in Palestine around the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the small group of British political elites involved appeared to be uniformly under the spell of the anti-Arab and pro-Zionist notions part of the British cultural archive. Officials did differ with regards to their ideological viewpoints, ranging from adding Palestine to the British realm for strategic, political, or liberal-civilizing reasons, but adopted similar standpoints in terms of their worldview. By that time, this worldview included, next to the negative views on its subject peoples, a British superiority above all. However, the years prior to the Mandate, from 1918 to 1922, were marked by extensive internal discussion on how elites viewed Palestine and its inhabitants and how corresponding British policies should look.

#### *The post-War British administration for Palestine*

After the War, it gradually became visible that the task of reforming Palestine, a formerly Ottoman province, into a 'Jewish national home' under British tutelage was bafflingly complex and would take many years to complete. Having only the vaguely worded Balfour Declaration as guidance, the way to proceed to actual governance was unclear. Crucially, the Declaration did not define or delineate its most significant promise, the establishment of a 'Jewish national home,' in any way.<sup>102</sup> Besides that, there was no precedent in international law for such an undertaking.<sup>103</sup> As it were, the Zionist project would be launched into a territory that was populated by an overwhelming majority of more than 90 percent of Muslim Arabs, along with a tiny group of Jews, which would continue to be a minority for decades to come.<sup>104</sup> Therefore, 'it was going to be an extremely difficult task,' summarized *the Times* in 1921, 'and it would undoubtedly require a very careful, tactful, impartial administration to see that no difficulties occurred between Jews and Arabs.'<sup>105</sup> It was the latter recognition that was to determine the interim period between Declaration and Mandate, where British elites disagreed on the level of impartiality necessary. Palestine's administration was in this time divided between the British homeland and Palestine. This took the form of a military administration in Jerusalem, hastily set up under

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<sup>102</sup> James Renton, "Flawed Foundations: The Balfour Declaration and the Palestine Mandate," in Rory Miller ed. *Britain, Palestine and Empire: The Mandate Years* (Ashgate, 2009), 16-17.

<sup>103</sup> A.J. Sherman, *Mandate Days: British Lives in Palestine, 1918-1948* (Thames and Hudson, 1998), 13.

<sup>104</sup> The number of Jews in Palestine had risen to 400,000 in 1936. D.K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 176.

<sup>105</sup> "Debate on the Mandates," *The Times*, March 26, 1921.

general Allenby in 1917, and the Foreign (until 1921) and Colonial Office, in London.<sup>106</sup> The military administration in Palestine was overwhelmingly antipathic to the Jewish cause, since, coming in close contact with the Arabs, they had come to believe their ancient claim to the land.<sup>107</sup> To ensure pro-Zionist policies could be continued, the British replaced the military administration by a civil one in 1920. The administration in London was itself again advised by a Zionist commission that was arguably quite influential, adding to the complexity of Palestine's rule.<sup>108</sup>

Interestingly, sentiments in London were often the reverse of those felt by British administrators on the ground in Palestine. This resulted in a difference in the handling of political problems. While officials in Jerusalem would often try to seek a solution that included the Arabs, it was impatience and disbelief over the possibility of reaching agreement with the Arabs that set the tone from London.<sup>109</sup> The discrepancy can be explained by the differences that existed in terms of the interpretation of the situation on the ground in Palestine. In Britain key office-holders still believed that the reformation of Palestine, a formerly Muslim province, to a Jewish home could be swift and peaceful.<sup>110</sup> This idea was rooted in the imagined reality of Palestine where it was held that from the scattered, disunified Arabs the British had little to fear. As such, British officials in London did not see their inclusion in Palestinian politics as necessary. The belief in the imagined reality of Palestine however became untenable in post-Declaration years, as the Arabs were all but divided or compliant. From the moment the news of the Declaration's issuance reached the Arabs, they opposed it and after a while instigated several riots against the Zionists in 1920 and 1921.<sup>111</sup>

#### *A gradual depart from the cultural archive*

The riots in the early 1920s proved an impetus for a part of the British ruling elite to change their image of Palestine and its population, as they gradually departed from the British cultural archive. This process had started earlier already, as in the post-War era British

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<sup>106</sup> Mctague Jr., "Military Administration in Palestine," 61.

<sup>107</sup> David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (Henry Holt, 1989), 516.

<sup>108</sup> Patrick Terry, "Britain in Palestine (1917-1948) - Occupation, the Palestine Mandate, and International Law," *University of Bologna Law Review* 2, no. 2 (2017): 209. In a debate in 1922, Lord Islington laments their influence on the administration in Palestine. *House of Lords*, "Palestine Mandate," June 21, 1922, column 999.

<sup>109</sup> Evyatar Friesel, "British Officials on the Situation in Palestine, 1923," *Middle Eastern Studies* 23, no. 2 (1987): 198.

<sup>110</sup> Sykes, *Crossroads to Israel*, 26.

<sup>111</sup> Fromkin, *A Peace*, 447, 515-516.



politicians traveled to Palestine themselves and got to experience the land and its people, making the narratives created during Ottoman times increasingly superfluous. Significantly, British foreign policy elites who had before expressed sympathy for the Jewish cause, came back from the country with severe doubts about the livelihood of the idea, as the political situation in Palestine was ‘extraordinarily intricate.’<sup>112</sup> Now, upon seeing the anti-Zionist riots and the general conflict between Arabs and Jews, many pro-Zionist British elites definitively changed their views.<sup>113</sup> The Cabinet in London also convened right after the riots. There, remarkably, leaving Palestine altogether was on the table, as was setting up an Arab government.<sup>114</sup> They did not decide to radically alter policies however, and the argument against, ‘that the Arabs had no prescriptive right to a country which they had failed to develop to the best advantage,’ apparently held enough sway over the Cabinet members present.

The changed stance of some colleagues did not mean that every British elite had second thoughts, however. There were enough high-powered elites who continued to believe in the innate debility of the Arabs, a thought that originated in the cultural archive, and firmly stood by the Cabinet’s policies. One such example is William Ormsby-Gore, assistant secretary to the War Cabinet of 1917, who served as under-Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1922 onwards. Writing a letter from Palestine in 1918, he believed that ‘if this splendid country is ever to be properly developed and [...] ever to be British it is only the Zionists who can accomplish these two gains.’ Further on in the letter, the reason for his support of the Zionists became apparent as he uttered that the ‘Arabs are a poor show in this country,’ and ‘each out for themselves and their family,’ as they ‘have no real rational or communal sense.’<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, the main architects of the Declaration continued in the years after to support the policies of their War Cabinet. Lloyd George and Balfour not only reiterated the religious and political-strategic motives for issuing the Declaration, but also went as far as to admit on one occasion that a Jewish state was meant to ensue from it.<sup>116</sup> No doubts were

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<sup>112</sup> *House of Lords*, “Palestine,” June 29, 1920, column 1014.

<sup>113</sup> This was also coupled with a desire to reduce costs of British endeavors overseas. John Mctague Jr., *British Policy in Palestine, 1917-1922* (Lanham, 1983), 74, 22.

<sup>114</sup> John Quigley, “Britain’s Secret Re-Assessment of the Balfour Declaration: the Perfidy of Albion,” *Journal of the History of International Law* 13, no. 2 (2011): 267.

<sup>115</sup> CAB 21/58, “Letter William Ormsby-Gore to Maurice Hankey,” April 19, 1918.

<sup>116</sup> Jeffrey Auerbach, “Before the Mandate: British Rule in Palestine, 1920-1922,” *Israel Studies* 26, no. 3 (2021): 19; Susan Pederson, “Writing the Balfour Declaration into the Mandate for Palestine,” *The International History Review* 45, no. 2 (2023): 284.

expressed by Balfour as late as 1922, declaring that ‘the policy that we have initiated is likely to prove a successful policy.’<sup>117</sup>

### *Mounting criticism in Parliament*

In 1922, a pivotal parliamentary debate took place in the *House of Commons*, where fierce opposition to Balfour’s policy and the Mandate was voiced by different members, by the lead of William Joynson-Hicks. He identified the broad interpretation of the Declaration as the main bone of contention for the Arabs, since the whole government of Palestine seemed to be controlled by the Zionists. This was the issue, because ‘if the declaration really means that the Jews may in consonance with the rights of the inhabitants go back to Palestine,’ he did not believe the Arabs would object to it.<sup>118</sup> He was supported by several others, who were equally critical with regard to the predominantly Zionist – as opposed to the desired British – nature of the administration. The critical segment of the elite thus departed from the idea that the Zionists were key to reforming Palestine, and would rather see a fully British reign. Ormsby-Gore was however quick to jump to the defense of the Declaration. Referring to the Biblical connection between Britain and Zionism, which ‘goes back even further than [the start of the Zionist movement],’ his opinion sprang directly from the British cultural archive.<sup>119</sup> Colonial Secretary Churchill, in his turn, rebuffed the criticism by pointing out that every member of parliament now speaking up against it had previously fully supported Balfour’s policy and even actively praised the Zionist cause, quoting Joynson-Hicks to say in 1917: ‘I will do all in my power to forward the views of the Zionists, [in] order to enable the Jews once more to take possession of their own land.’<sup>120</sup> He repeated this for every critical politician, and went on to express the importance of honoring the pledges Britain has made to the Jews, from which it cannot divert. This sentiment was shared by Ormsby-Gore, who felt that going back on the Declaration ‘would be absolutely dishonourable to this country.’<sup>121</sup>

This was one of the first times members of Parliament actually made themselves heard in opposition to the (broad) interpretation of the Declaration that would be harmful to the native Arab population. It is observable how one part of the elite still defended the British course by referring to the biblical narrative of the archive, while the other focused more on

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<sup>117</sup> *House of Lords*, “Palestine Mandate,” June 21, 1922, column 1017.

<sup>118</sup> *House of Commons*, “Colonial Office,” July 4, 1922, column 295.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibidem*, column 266.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, columns 295-297.

<sup>121</sup> *House of Commons*, “Colonial Office,” July 4, 1922, column 264.

Arab wellbeing and opposed Zionist domination, contrary to the ideas in the archive. A significant shift, as elites in that time partially discarded the racial grammar on Arabs within the British imperial imaginary. The parliamentary debate fitted into a wider discussion in Britain and Palestine on the interpretation of the Declaration, which, in light of the riots in Palestine in the 1920s, was increasingly identified as main source of the problem, both by the Colonial Office as the press.<sup>122</sup> Enthusiasm for the Zionists as the saviors of Palestine started to wane. British newspapers, unified in their almost unanimous support of the Balfour Declaration in the year of its foundation, also started to change their tone in the years after 1917. By the beginning of the 1920s, newspapers were increasingly skeptical towards British policies in Palestine.<sup>123</sup> Notably, the chief editor of *the Times*, Lord Northcliffe, a fervent supporter of Zionism during the War, completely turned around after visiting Palestine in 1922, and started to voice anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic stances in his paper.<sup>124</sup> This is another example of changing perspectives on Palestine and its inhabitants when confronted with the circumstances on the ground. And indeed, by 1922, the paper went as far as to pronounce that the British empire ‘cannot honourably support a policy hostile to Arab rights and favourable to Zionist political domination over an Arab majority.’<sup>125</sup>

There were few other debates in Parliament across 1920 and 1922 that treated the interpretation of the Declaration. In a 1920 debate, critics could still be reassured by Curzon, who promised them that Palestine would not be merely a Zionist country in terms of politics and population.<sup>126</sup> Such was not the case anymore in 1922, when a (nonbinding) motion to declare the Mandate unacceptable passed in the House of Lords, but stranded in the House of Commons debate afterwards.<sup>127</sup> In both Houses, Balfour and Churchill respectively, trying their best to explain the merits of their pro-Zionist scheme, could not easily assuage the critics. These were adamant in their disapproval of ‘importing an alien race into the midst of a native local race,’ turning Palestine into a ‘Judaic country.’<sup>128</sup> In their defense, both Churchill and Balfour mentioned the late timing of the complaints by the politicians. According to Balfour, they had waited ‘until 1922 to attack a policy [...] initiated in 1917,’ while Churchill

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<sup>122</sup> Mctague Jr., *British Policy in Palestine*, 21; “Some truths about Palestine,” *The Times*, April 11, 1922.

<sup>123</sup> Huneidi, “Was Balfour Reversible,” 23.

<sup>124</sup> Cohen, “Balfour at Risk in 1923,” 81.

<sup>125</sup> “Some truths about Palestine,” *The Times*, April 11, 1922.

<sup>126</sup> *House of Lords*, “Palestine,” June 29, 1920, columns 1026-1038.

<sup>127</sup> Fromkin, *A Peace*, 525.

<sup>128</sup> *House of Lords*, “Palestine Mandate,” June 22, 1922, column 1007; *House of Commons*, “Colonial Office,” July 4, 1922, column 299.

put forward that ‘there has never been any serious challenge to that policy in Parliament.’<sup>129</sup> The motion to dismiss the Mandate was defeated, because Churchill managed to prove that he had cut colonial costs severely.<sup>130</sup> Yet, the fervent criticisms uttered seem to confirm the gradual shift in perspective within the British imperial imaginary. Increasingly, elites recognized the severity of the Arab situation and lamented the dominance of the Zionists in Palestine’s administration, in this way discarding the structures of attitude in the cultural archive. But the late timing of the critics is also testimony to the dearth of official discussion in parliament in London that had taken place before on this important issue.

Not only in the newspapers and in Parliament grew the recognition of the Arab fate, but also, gradually, in the Middle East Department of the Colonial Office. Its head, John Shuckburgh, initially espoused very degenerative notes on the Arab population, who needed to acquiesce to British policies if necessary by force, as ‘being Orientals they will understand an order.’<sup>131</sup> To some, he owed his pro-Zionism to his close allegiance to Weizmann.<sup>132</sup> A couple of years later, he admitted that he was taken aback by the necessity to ‘force on the Arab population of Palestine a mass of alien immigrants, mostly Russian and Polish.’<sup>133</sup> By 1923, having been able to closely observe the Arab-Jewish tensions for several years, Shuckburgh admitted that Palestine had become a political quagmire for the British,

Furthermore, in his outcry, referring to ‘alien immigrants,’ Shuckburgh resorts to an anti-Jewish repertoire, as part of an anti-Semitism widespread with British (anti-)Zionists at the time.<sup>134</sup> Although this may seem counterintuitive, having issued a decisively pro-Jewish Declaration, British anti-Zionists and Zionists alike adhered to many anti-Semitic accusations that existed against the Jews.<sup>135</sup> They expressed this through numerous widely held stereotypes, myths and conspiracies. Sykes at one occasion pointed out what the fear for Jews, omnipresent with anti-Zionist elites, consisted of: ‘this race, despised and weak, is universal, is all-powerful and cannot be put down...’<sup>136</sup> The power the Jews were alleged of holding in their home countries of the United States and Russia, was one of the reasons for issuing the Declaration. It was commonly believed that the Jews were a mighty race and, moreover, that

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<sup>129</sup> *House of Lords*, “Palestine Mandate,” column 1010; *House of Commons*, “Colonial Office,” column 329.

<sup>130</sup> Sahar Huneidi, “Was Balfour Policy Reversible? The Colonial Office and Palestine, 1921-1923,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 27, no. 2 (1998): 31.

<sup>131</sup> Michael Cohen, *Britain’s Moment in Palestine: Retrospect and Perspectives* (Routledge, 2014), 109.

<sup>132</sup> Huneidi, “Was Balfour Reversible,” 25.

<sup>133</sup> Friesel, “British Officials,” 199-200.

<sup>134</sup> Cohen, *Britain’s Moment*, 68.

<sup>135</sup> Sykes, *Crossroads to Israel*, 18.

<sup>136</sup> Cohen, *Britain’s Moment*, 6-9.

all of them would adhere to Zionism.<sup>137</sup> Increasingly, in post-Declaration years, such views came to be expressed in relation to the Jews in Palestine, who, as ‘they are the richest nation in the world [...] should pay for their own national home if they want it.’<sup>138</sup> Progressively, an adverse, anti-Semitic image of the Jews formed part of the arguments formulated by critics against the Zionist project in Palestine.

### *Palestine as adventure*

In the years directly after the Declaration it became apparent that the British endeavor in Palestine had also been a gamble. ‘Are we not to have any adventures?’ Balfour asked in 1922, when defending his now-famous letter.<sup>139</sup> As it was an experiment, and he was quite frank about that, ‘it may fail.’ Such remarked town planner for Palestine C. R. Ashbee too, it was ‘chance, some idea we are not yet able to comprehend,’ that had set the British out to work in Palestine.<sup>140</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* in 1920 called the British presence in Palestine ‘one of the greatest experiments ever been tried.’<sup>141</sup>

Adventure, experiment, whatever the similar word used, it goes to show that the British acted in Palestine – at least partially – on a whim. In fact, it appeared in later years that the main decision to enter Palestine was made ‘under the stress of war.’<sup>142</sup> As a consequence, the British ruling elite did not give the Zionist project much thought, and it was altogether unclear what exact fruits it would later bear.<sup>143</sup> In the post-War era marked by this adventurous, new mission in Palestine, British policies on the future of the country were all but final, and subject to interpretation – about which disagreement was rife.

In the Declaration year of 1917, during the war, the small group of elites had presented a united front in terms of their worldview, that was firmly entrenched in the British cultural archive. By 1922, various politicians in the upper echelons of power in Britain had changed their pro-Zionist and anti-Arab tones into more nuanced standpoints with an eye for local intricacies. Upon closer examination of the situation of the ground, the harsh Arab-Zionist reality in Palestine had shocked them. As a result, they abandoned the stereotypical worldview on Palestine laid down in the British cultural archive, especially the minimization

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<sup>137</sup> Renton, “Flawed Foundations,” 17.

<sup>138</sup> Cohen, *Britain’s Moment*, 69.

<sup>139</sup> *House of Lords*, “Palestine Mandate,” June 21, 1922, columns 1018-1019.

<sup>140</sup> Sherman, *Mandate Days*, 12.

<sup>141</sup> “Mr. Balfour on Arabs and Jews,” *Manchester Guardian*, July 13, 1920.

<sup>142</sup> *House of Lords*, “Palestine,” June 29, 1920, column 1026.

<sup>143</sup> Renton, “Flawed Foundations,” 27.

of Arabs. In its stead, they started to criticize the Zionist Jews, by reference to anti-Semitic notions, while vowing for an administration that was more British in outlook. In the period from 1918 to 1922 this segment of the British elites thus departed from their previous support for Zionism in their views on Palestine, and were self-critical towards their former adhesion to the cultural archive.<sup>144</sup> This was not the case for all elites, however. For some vital office-holders, such as Balfour, Lloyd George and Ormsby-Gore, the imperial imaginary still had the British cultural archive as basis, including a clear disdain for the Arabs and support of Zionist Jews. Given their prominence in British politics, policies made for Palestine in this era remained in tune with their perspective. Importantly, it is noticeable that a distinct superiority of the British race remains an important feature of the British imperial imaginary within all sides of the British government in pre-Mandate years. For example, neither Balfour's critics nor its proponents made any suggestions to totally remove the British from the territory. In fact, a greater role for the British in lieu of the Zionists was often desired. So, while shifts in terms of adhesion to the cultural archive occurred, the idea of British superiority enshrined in the imperial imaginary remained untouched.

As I will show in the next chapter, disagreement in the upper echelons of government did not recede but intensified one final time, before the Mandate would be officially enforced.

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<sup>144</sup> William Joynson-Hicks for example reflects on his own 1917 thoughts in the 1922 debate: 'I am bound to say that I was not then cognisant of the pledges which had been given to the Arabs, and I was taking what seemed to be the right interpretation of events then.' *House of Commons*, "Colonial Office," July 4, 1922, column 296.

## Chapter 4: Official installation of the Mandate, 1923

The Mandate for Palestine, as a vote to withdraw it altogether was overcome in the preceding *House of Commons* debate, was approved on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, 1922 – leaving no further objection for the League of Nations to accept it.<sup>145</sup> In the articles of the Mandate, the contents of the Balfour Declaration were taken over in their full extent. This meant that international allies supported the objective laid down in Balfour's letter and that it was enshrined in international law.<sup>146</sup> Importantly, when the Mandate was enforced in September 1923, the British were thence under an international obligation to guarantee the establishment of the Jewish home. To some British elites, it was now not only dishonorable to abandon the Zionist project, it was also unlawful. They could not 'be turned from our fixed purpose of carrying out our international obligations.'<sup>147</sup>

Yet until this was the case, the battle of the opposition against the Balfour Declaration continued. In the period between the Mandate's approval in July 1922 and its enforcement in September 1923, its opponents, in fact, renewed their case with fresh energy. The taking over in this period of the decisively pro-Zionist Lloyd George government by the Bonar Law and – shortly thereafter – the Stanley Baldwin administration, spurred the opposition. These two administrations were namely less adamant in their support of Zionism.<sup>148</sup> Both critics of Zionism in Britain and Arabs in Palestine alike recognized that the transformation of the decision-making elite provided a window of opportunity to negate or at least alter the contents of the Balfour Declaration, irrespective of its recent approval by the League of Nations. Notably, Balfour, Lloyd George and Churchill, vehement pro-Zionists, were not part of the new coalition.<sup>149</sup> So, since the Mandate had not come into force yet, the better part of 1923 was the last moment for critics to be able to change British policies on Palestine.

The Lords Sydenham, Islington, and Lamington led the group of critics. Upon reading parts of the concealed records of the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, made public by the Daily Mail,<sup>150</sup> they demanded full publication of this correspondence, which conflicted with the 'disastrous declaration' of 1917.<sup>151</sup> Additionally, in July, a petition was signed by more

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<sup>145</sup> Auerbach, "Before the Mandate," 18.

<sup>146</sup> Huneidi, "Was Balfour Reversible," 38; Pederson, "Writing the Balfour Declaration," 279.

<sup>147</sup> The Duke of Devonshire, quoted in Y. Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929* (Frank Cass, 1974), 178.

<sup>148</sup> Quigley, "Britain's Secret Re-Assessment," 275; Cohen, "Balfour at Risk in 1923," 83.

<sup>149</sup> Porath, *The Emergence*, 166-167.

<sup>150</sup> Huneidi, "Was Balfour Reversible," 34.

<sup>151</sup> *House of Lords*, "Pledges to the Arab Peoples," March 1, 1923, columns 228-232.

than 100 members of Parliament, requesting a new form of government in Palestine that would include the Arabs, and which would meet their administrative demands. As the critics, the current way of governing ‘an unwilling people’ was contrary to the natural rights laid down in the treaty of the League of Nations.<sup>152</sup>

### *The subcommittee on Palestine*

In fact, the criticism was such that the Duke of Devonshire, having taken over from Churchill as Colonial Secretary in 1922, saw himself forced to respond in a memorandum to Cabinet. Here, he alluded to the unpopularity of the Mandate and Britain’s ‘unenviable’ position, but at the same time warned that should Britain give the Mandate up, ‘we shall stand for all time as the Christian Power which having rescued the Holy Land from the Turk, lacked the strength or the courage to guard what it had won.’<sup>153</sup> Prime Minister Baldwin, in response to Devonshire and the internal friction in general, put together a secret subcommittee in the summer of 1923 to examine the future of Palestinian policies.<sup>154</sup> When the committee’s assembly leaked to Weizmann and his associates, they immediately feared revocation of pro-Zionist policies.<sup>155</sup> Apparently, also prominent Zionists, and not just critics of Balfour’s policy, deemed a total reversal of the government’s course possible during this period.

Foreign Secretary Curzon and Leo Amery, both of which had been present during the Declaration’s birth, were members of the committee, while the Duke of Devonshire was appointed as its head. A most important role in the committee was also fulfilled by High Commissioner Sir Herbert Samuel, as he was the only witness from within Palestine allowed to supply the committee with evidence of the Declaration’s workings there. He was, according to Wasserstein quite convincingly, able to defend the current British line of action in Palestine.<sup>156</sup>

The subcommittee’s conclusion after a month was that there was not going to be an alteration of the Declaration or the pledge Britain made to the Zionists. It was contended that since it has been the governments’ primary policy for six years already, accepted by international partners, and lastly the prerequisite for the Jewish funds directed to Palestine, ‘it

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<sup>152</sup> Huneidi, “Was Balfour Reversible,” 36.

<sup>153</sup> The Duke of Devonshire, quoted in Quigley, “Britain’s Secret Re-Assessment,” 270.

<sup>154</sup> Huneidi, “Was Balfour Reversible,” 32, 36; Cohen, “Balfour at Risk in 1923,” 92.

<sup>155</sup> Bernard Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine: the Mandatory Government and the Arab-Jewish Conflict 1917-1929* (Royal Historical Society, 1978), 126; Huneidi, “Was Balfour Reversible,” 37.

<sup>156</sup> Wasserstein, *British in Palestine*, 126.



is well-nigh impossible (...) to extricate itself without a substantial sacrifice of (...) self-respect, if not of honour.’<sup>157</sup> The committee did offer to the Arabs the creation of an Arab Agency, similar to the already-existing Jewish Agency, which would increase their say into Palestinian affairs. This proposed Agency however still allotted a passive role to the Arabs, which needed to be nominated by the High Commissioner to join. Indeed, the Arabs refused the offer.<sup>158</sup> Conclusions were accepted by Cabinet four days after publication of the report, which was the final hurdle to take before the Mandate’s official enforcement two months later.<sup>159</sup>

### *Retained British presence in Palestine*

Several reasons for why the British remained in Palestine can be deduced from the British government’s output in 1923. In the conclusions of the committee, for instance, its members emphasized the national honor of the British empire involved with the Zionist project. This argument was prevalent with critics and proponents alike. For example, in one debate, although the Marquess of Salisbury agreed that the policies of their predecessors were increasingly difficult to carry out, he concluded that a ‘zigzag administration,’ one where successive administrations carry out opposite policies, was undesirable, because it involves ‘the honour and consistency of this country.’<sup>160</sup> On the other side, critics lamented that failing to do right by the Arab pledge was the factor that had defiled British honor. To redeem it, justice should be done to the Arabs.<sup>161</sup>

Most important however was the imperial significance of Palestine. Leaving Palestine, it was believed, would be detrimental to British interests in the Middle East. Palestine could be taken up by another colonial power, or worse, fall back into the hands of the Turks.<sup>162</sup> Lord Curzon, being at the pinnacle of Middle Eastern policy from the beginning years of the Declaration, is likely to have made a strong case in the committee’s deliberations for the strategic retention of Palestine. The Jews were seen as vital to Palestine’s reconstruction, ‘because they have the necessary money, enthusiasm and manpower.’<sup>163</sup> As such, it was decided that sustaining the British pledge to Zionists was the only way to keep Palestine in the

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<sup>157</sup> CAB 24/161, “Future of Palestine, Report by Subcommittee on Palestine,” July 27, 1923, 3.

<sup>158</sup> It did not satisfy their demands for independence. Wasserstein, *British in Palestine*, 127-129.

<sup>159</sup> Huneidi, “Was Balfour Reversible,” 38.

<sup>160</sup> *House of Lords*, “Palestine Constitution,” March 27, 1923, column 667.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibidem*, column 654.

<sup>162</sup> Mathew, “British Imperialist Imperatives,” 231-250; Cohen, *Britain’s Moment*, 159; Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand*, 63.

<sup>163</sup> Friesel, “British Officials,” 204; Cohen, *Britain’s Moment*, 153-154, 156.

British sphere. However, British tutelage was still required, because ‘apart altogether from our pledges to the Zionists (...), there are Imperial considerations that favour the retention of Palestine for Great Britain,’ as Devonshire wrote in his memorandum.<sup>164</sup> Egypt became independent in 1922, making British protection of the Suez Canal from Palestine crucial.<sup>165</sup> Interestingly, the critics of Balfour’s policy were not inconsiderate of the imperial element. They, by contrast, proposed to satisfy British imperial demands by installing an equal, impartial, British administration, with more rights endowed to Arabs, that saw one British overseeing ruler ‘whose one desire would be to do the best possible for the largest number of the inhabitants of that country.’<sup>166</sup> If the administration biased in Zionist favor would continue, namely, it would not be long before the Arab population would forcefully rise in opposition, jeopardizing British imperial interests in Palestine.<sup>167</sup>

### *The imperial imaginary fragments*

By the end of 1923, different segments of the British government offered an alternative reading of the value attached in the imaginary to the cultural archive, with its Orientalist notions, and as such of the attitude apposite towards the local peoples in Palestine. The critical segment vowed for Arab rights to be acknowledged and equality of government in Palestine. They denounced the biblical connection that tied the Jews historically to Palestine within the archive in quite literal terms. Instead, they pondered over the question whether there were not also Arab traditions, ‘which cover a far greater period of time than the traditions of the Jewish race,’ which commanded equal attention.<sup>168</sup> Simultaneously, they expressed anti-Jewish notions, rooted in anti-Semitism. The immigrant European Jews, instead of being lauded as ‘bringers of civilization,’ were of the ‘most undesirable character’ making them ‘unfit to colonise’ Palestine. Additionally, some of them were even Bolsheviks.<sup>169</sup> That being the case, it was objectionable that British policies in Palestine came singularly to the benefit of these Zionists. Do the economic benefits accrue ‘To an Englishman? To an Arab?’, Charles Foxcroft asked in Parliament, before answering himself: ‘No, to a Russian Revolutionary Jew.’<sup>170</sup> The line of argument taken by this sector of the

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<sup>164</sup> The Duke of Devonshire, quoted in Quigley, “Britain’s Secret Re-Assessment,” 270.

<sup>165</sup> Quigley, “Britain’s Secret Re-Assessment,” 271.

<sup>166</sup> *House of Commons*, “Immigration Bill,” July 25, 1923, column 578.

<sup>167</sup> It would also raise the costs of the British taxpayer for the administration in Palestine. *House of Lords*, “Palestine,” June 27, 1923, columns 658-662.

<sup>168</sup> *House of Lords*, “Palestine Constitution,” March 27, 1923, column 642.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibidem*, column 651; *House of Commons*, “Immigration Bill,” July 25, 1923, column 577.

<sup>170</sup> *House of Commons*, “Immigration Bill,” July 25, 1923, column 576.

British political elite shows how the constructed narrative of Palestine and its inferior Arab inhabitants within the archive, previously so ubiquitous with British elites, was let go. But they replaced it with an inferiority of the Jewish, Zionist side of the population, by reference to anti-Semitic prejudice.

Within the other faction of the elite, represented by the high-powered committee on Palestine, however, the focus on anti-Arab elements and support for the Zionist claim to Palestine was still identifiable. In words reminiscent of previous British government statements by the Lloyd George coalition, the committee's report explained what the British Mandate in the Holy Land entailed, being: 'the trustees, so to speak of civilization.'<sup>171</sup> This idea of course carried with it an Orientalist discourse of 'development' and 'civilizational progress' that the British would bring to Palestine via the European Zionists, springing from the cultural archive. The reformation of the country could not be carried out by the native Arab inhabitants, since 'the Arabs in present circumstances can scarcely be regarded as capable either of forming a Government or constituting a State.' Therefore, it was not an option to work towards self-determination there (such as had been the case in Iraq).<sup>172</sup> Thus, for an important segment of the British elite, Palestine, in the words of Viscount Milner, could 'never be regarded as a country on the same footing as the other Arab countries.'<sup>173</sup> Palestine continued to hold a special place in the British mind, rooted in the British cultural archive.

Be that as it may, continuation of British presence in Palestine was for the most part a pragmatic, strategic decision. A much more realistic vision of Palestine became mainstream with British elites. Officials on both sides had become aware that completion of the British project in Palestine whilst recognizing both Jewish and Arab political rights essentially boiled down to an attempt 'to reconcile the irreconcilable.'<sup>174</sup> Even proponents of continuation with Balfour's policy admitted to not having any 'fervent belief in the fulfilment of prophecy by the return of Jews to the Holy Land.'<sup>175</sup> In the committee's report much emphasis was placed on the unfavorable worldwide reaction to an eventual British relinquishment of its promise to the Jews, instead of motivating their presence.<sup>176</sup> Evidence which shows how also on this side

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<sup>171</sup> "Future of Palestine, Report," 6.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibidem*, 6.

<sup>173</sup> *House of Lords*, "Palestine," June 27, 1923, column 669.

<sup>174</sup> "Future of Palestine, Report," 1.

<sup>175</sup> Friesel, "British Officials," 204; Cohen, *Britain's Moment*, 156.

<sup>176</sup> Quigley, "Britain's Secret Re-Assessment," 282-283.

of the aisle the idealized version of a virtually ‘empty Palestine’ that could be newly populated with the righteous Jewish people without much trouble, belonged to the past.

All taken together, the only thing continuing to unite British elites at that stage was their steadfast belief in the superiority of the British breed. In all their differences, this part of the imaginary remained wholly intact. There was a civilizational hierarchy with the British clearly at the top. Considerations of strategy and of honor were decisive to retain Palestine in 1923, motivated by a belief in Britain’s extraordinary imperial capacities. The negative image of the Arab population, rooted in the British cultural archive, was shared by fewer British elites than ever. Arab-Jewish complexities in Palestine were widely recognized, with some already suggesting at the time that ‘the issues that are arising from Zionism in Palestine extend far beyond the geographical limits of the territory of Palestine.’<sup>177</sup> But, alternatives to Britain’s rule in Palestine were considered to be worse still for the British Empire. The Empire’s interests always remained the single-most important consideration for British elites at that time. So, the British adventure in Palestine would continue its rocky course, with all its consequences.

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<sup>177</sup> *House of Lords*, ‘Palestine Constitution,’ March 27, 1923, column 646.

## Conclusion

‘when the history of 1917 comes to be written, and comes to be read ages hence, these events in [...] Palestine will hold a much more conspicuous place in the minds and in the memories of the people than many an event which looms much larger for the moment in our sight’<sup>178</sup>  
(Lloyd George, December 20, 1917)

The British Empire was the largest imperial power in the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Palestine arguably its most complex possession. In November 1917, at the height of World War 1, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, a document that promised the establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine. This pledge in support of Zionism was the prelude to the creation of the Mandate for Palestine in 1923, after which Britain ruled in Palestine until 1948. In the first six years of their rule, which have been the focus of this thesis, the future of Palestine, and in fact the entire Middle East was determined. The British Zionist project in Palestine helped setting the stage for the conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Jews that is going on until this day, exemplified by the current Israel-Hamas war.

In this thesis, I have sought to uncover what the British imperial imaginary consisted of, and how it has evolved within the British decision-making elite on Palestine in the early days of the Mandate for Palestine between 1917 and 1923. I was intrigued by the policies made by the British at the beginning of their rule in Palestine – privileging the Zionists over the local majority Arab population – and wanted to examine how these policies were informed by underlying, shared perceptions of the world, of Palestine, by British foreign policy-makers. To answer this question, I have scrutinized British imperial elite discourse on Palestine in the first six years of their imperial venture.

In the year of the Balfour Declaration’s foundation, the British imperial imaginary consisted of a clear sense of the superiority of the British race and empire that had matured through centuries of British imperial rule. Besides that, around 1917 the imaginary included adverse images of Palestine and its inhabitants, fueled by the British cultural archive. The ideas in the cultural archive originated during the Ottoman reign. In this period, British elites traveled *en masse* to Palestine, as the territory was seen as the ‘Holy Land,’ closely connected to British culture and history. It was discovered that Palestine was neglected by its ‘savage’ local inhabitants, but that this could be resolved by a reformation of the country to its original

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<sup>178</sup> David Lloyd George, quoted in Eitan Bar-Yosef, “The Last Crusade? British Propaganda and the Palestine Campaign, 1917–18,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 36, no. 1 (2001): 107.

state, by the Jews. These were seen by the British as the true owners of the land. The experiences of British voyagers contributed to an adverse image of Palestine and its lamentable population that was collected in the British cultural archive. Even though elites supported the Balfour Declaration by reference to different ideological grounds, foreign policymakers were united in their belief the country needed to be reformed by European Zionist Jews, as the local Arab population was incapable of doing so, under close supervision of the supreme British empire. An analysis of the decision-making process around the Balfour Declaration of 1917 therefore reveals that stereotypical ideas on Palestine and its population coupled with a British sense of sublimity, captured in the imperial imaginary, influenced the British decision to issue it.

The consensus that had characterized the small group of elites in 1917 started to waver, albeit gradually, in the prelude to the Mandate-years, from 1918 until 1922. As more elites became involved and visited Palestine, they developed a more nuanced view about Palestine and its inhabitants, abandoning the British cultural archive. They observed that the Balfour Declaration was being interpreted too widely, leading to an administration that was overtly Zionist in nature, to the detriment of local Arabs. The critics argued for a more equal, British administration to be formed, rather than Palestine becoming a Zionist headquarters. Throughout the years, criticism of Balfour's policy in British government circles grew further, culminating in a vote to dismiss the Mandate passing the House of Commons in 1922 (but which was defeated in the House of Lords). The amount of internal opposition was surprising to me, as it was not reflected in the official British policies of that time, which were still biased in Zionist favor. The absence of change in British imperial policies in this period can be explained by the fact that key British politicians such as Prime Minister Lloyd George and others remained firmly in favor of the anti-Arab, pro-Zionist imperial mindset, fueled by the British archive. For this thesis I have chosen to exclude personal diaries or private letters of these decision-makers. Another focus that does include those could have accentuated their private feelings about the Zionist project in Palestine, but falls outside the scope of this thesis.

By 1923, there were two camps within the government. One segment of the British governing elite wished for the inclusion of the majority Arab population in the administration in Palestine, which should be more British than Zionist, rejecting the biblical narrative for Jewish ownership of Palestine in the archive. They progressively viewed immigrant European Jews as unfit to govern Palestine, reflecting prevalent anti-Semitic prejudice. This part of

British elite society thus replaced the negative image of the Arabs entrenched in the archive with that of European Jews. On the other side, a powerful faction of the government still aimed to fulfill the pledge made to the Jews, believing they were key to 'rebuild' Palestine, bringing civilization to the region, relegating the Arabs to a submissive role. In 1923, in response to the criticism a subcommittee was created to review British presence in Palestine. Crucially, in this committee it was concluded that the Zionist project should continue, reaffirming the official government line that civilizational progress for Palestine could only be achieved via the European Zionists, under British tutelage, adhering to the cultural archive. This decision led to the Mandate being enforced in September 1923, binding the British by international law to fulfill Balfour's pledge.

The two sides existing in Parliament with regards to their differing attitude towards Palestine and its inhabitants did not signal a fragmentation of the imperial imaginary, however. Crucially, a distinct superiority of the British race remained ever part of the way British imperial decision-makers viewed Palestine. It must be remembered that this was a high tide for British world-wide imperialism. In their imperial realm, the British perceived the Arabs, but also the Jews, as belonging to a lower strand of civilization than themselves. Therefore, among supporters and critics of Balfour's policy alike, there was little desire to leave Palestine altogether. Palestine retained its important place for the British Empire, and it was undesirable that other entities would take over. Nonetheless, by 1923 it was evident that completion of the British project in Palestine whilst recognizing both Jewish and Arab political rights was virtually impossible. The Zionist project was loathed by Palestinian Arabs and increasingly criticized by parts of the British ruling elite. It would be interesting to examine how the imperial imaginary would evolve amid ever-increasing Arab-Jewish tensions in subsequent years, for which further research is needed.

All in all, while the imaginary saw some internal fragmentation regarding Britain's attitude towards Arabs and Jews and over the exact course of the administration in Palestine, the idea of a civilizational hierarchy in the British imperial imaginary was resilient. British elites were guided by the imperial imaginary in all decision-making processes on Palestine. Although it saw some internal change in terms of the belief in the ideas of the British cultural archive in the first six years of their rule in Palestine it remained centered on the supremacy of the British race and their Empire. The shift within parts of British elite thinking in the beginning of their rule epitomizes the complexity that was characteristic for the entire period

of British rule in Palestine. Despite its unsteady foundations, the British Mandate would continue for another 25 years. British rule finally ended in 1948, but its ramifications are palpable today more than ever. Lloyd George's prediction was truthful, in 2024 the history of 1917 resonates in all our minds.



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