



Obama, Arab-Israeli Relations, and the Legacy of Western Involvement in the Middle East

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Now in his second term, President Obama intends to visit Israel, where he hopes to restart stalled peace talks with the Palestinians. To prepare, I hope he will go beyond perusing the usual briefing books supplied to traveling U.S. presidents. He should immerse himself in history, too – and not only in books about the 62 years of sporadic violence between Arabs and Israelis with which most of us are familiar. That would be a good start, but for a deeper appreciation of what moves the principal actors in the Middle East, Obama – like the rest of us – must go back well before the birth of the modern state of Israel in 1948. Much earlier, Jews and Muslims had indelible experiences with Western powers maneuvering in their pivotal region.

Their wariness about Western promises dates especially to the First World War when Britain issued the Balfour Declaration pledging to support the establishment of a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine. Today, we consider that promise to be the foundation stone of modern Israel. But originally it was only one aspect of a larger strategy whose reverberations are still felt in Middle Easterners' distrust of Western commitments.

The Back Story to Balfour

In November 1917, the First World War was raging and which side would win remained very much in doubt. The British government decided to issue the Balfour Declaration as part of a complicated set of maneuvers to build support for its war efforts.

British leaders at that time had stereotypical views about Jews and their purported influence in the West and Russia. American Jews were thought to control U.S. high finance in ways that could help bring America into the war on Britain's side; Russian Jews were thought to have sufficient influence with pacifists to be able to keep their country from dropping out of the war. Britons also supposed, mistakenly, that the vast majority of Jews everywhere were Zionists who desired to return to their ancient homeland. Given these mistaken suppositions, British leaders thought that the backing of "international Jewry" would give them a better chance of beating Germany. So they offered a great bribe to Jews in the form of the famous Balfour Declaration.

At the same time, British leaders worked to bribe the Arabs. They feared that the Ottoman Sultan, who was also the Caliph of Islam, could declare *jihad* against them, prompting Muslims in South Asia, Egypt and Sudan to rise up against their Imperial masters. The British knew, however, that if the second-ranking figure in Islam, Grand Sharif Hussein of Mecca, supported Britain against the Ottomans, any call to holy war would be weakened. Consequently, in a series of famous letters, the British Consul General in Cairo, Sir Henry McMahon, promised to support the establishment of an independent Arab kingdom in Syria, Lebanon, Arabia, and Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). It remains unclear whether McMahon promised that the kingdom would include Palestine. But it is indisputable that he expressed himself so vaguely in the letters that Grand Sharif Hussein finally concluded that he had made this commitment.

Bribes and Double Dealing

Meanwhile, back in London, even though they were not yet victorious, Britain and France were secretly redrawing the Ottoman map. France, they projected, would obtain direct and indirect control over Syria and Lebanon, while Britain would hold sway over Mesopotamia. Because Palestine contained Jerusalem, Holy City to three great religions, it would be governed by an international "condominium" of the western allied powers.

When Arabs and British Zionists learned about this, they responded with outrage. The Zionists concluded they must obtain a written promise about Palestine because spoken pledges were "weak as water." Eventually, they got the formally issued Balfour Declaration. Analogously, when the Arab leader Hussein recalled his

correspondence with McMahon, he told his son: "I have in my pocket a letter which promises all I wish." With this letter, Hussein trusted Britain to keep McMahon's pledges and rein in the French.

But that was before Hussein learned about the Balfour Declaration. When he did learn of it, he thought he had been betrayed.

Neither Zionists nor the Arabs ever knew, however, that – in what amounts to a triple-cross maneuver – British Prime Minister David Lloyd George also had opened a back channel to the Ottomans! After all, a separate peace with Turkey would do more to win the war than anything involving either Jews or Arabs, or even both of these groups. So Lloyd George offered the Ottomans bribes, too. If they signed a separate peace treaty, then, in addition to receiving a huge sum of money, they could continue flying their flag across the Middle East, Palestine included. Lloyd George's emissary to the Turks repeated this offer in January of 1918 – two months after the Balfour Declaration had been made public.

Even this does not cap this remarkable story of intrigue and deceit. When Lloyd George made the offer to the Turks, not only did he keep it secret from the British Zionists and the Arabs, he also kept it secret from his own Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour. Lloyd George withheld the news just as Balfour signed the famous declaration that bears his name.

Overcoming a Heritage of Mistrust

With so many secretive steps and contradictory promises, British policies in the Middle East during the First World War engendered recrimination, suspicion and resentment. Such sentiments have been compounded over the years by subsequent Western dealings. We must not be surprised if today Arabs and Israelis do not take Western leaders at face value, or if they look first to their own interests, as they understand them. History has taught them that no one else will. Why should they expect better from American presidents bearing peace plans?

To make headway in this pivotal region, in short, President Obama must overcome pervasive mistrust nearly a century in the making. He would do well to understand its origins.

Read more in Jonathan Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Random House, 2010).