



Talat's Ottoman Balfour Declaration

The other Declaration you won't have come across

It is almost always forgotten that last Imperial Muslim government issued its own version of the Balfour Declaration in 1918—dubbed Talat's Ottoman Balfour Declaration.

Discovered in the Archive of Berlin's Foreign Office, this Ottoman Balfour Declaration was given in Istanbul by Grand Vizier (Prime Minister of the Ottoman Sultan) Mehmed Talat to Leopold Perlmutter, member of a delegation with 15 Jews, both Zionists and non-Zionists, locals and Europeans, often from Berlin, Vienna and Frankfurt.



The Jewish Chronicle

The long version of Talat's Ottoman Declaration went well beyond Balfour's version, offering more than a national center in Palestine.

After six months of talks, Talat—one of the so called Three Pashas triumvirate with ministers of war Ismael Enver and navy minister Ahmed Cemal—gave this Ottoman Balfour Declaration on behalf of the Council of Ministers on August 12, 1918.

The Jewish Chronicle printed its short version of the declaration on September 6:

"I am very glad that my negotiations with the delegates of the various Jewish organizations have already yielded a definitive result. We have resolved to do away with all restrictive measures, and definitely to abolish the restrictive regulations regarding the immigration and settlement of Jews in Palestine. I assure you of my sympathy for the creation of a Jewish religious centre in Palestine by means of well-organized immigration and colonization. It is my desire to place this work under the protection of the Turkish government. I cherish the firm hope that the labors of the Special Commission which has been sent out to work out a detailed plan will shortly be terminated."

This was published three months before World War One ended and the Central Powers were defeated. The timing was critical, because with their defeat so the text of Istanbul's sympathy for a Jewish home in Palestine disappeared.

Talat had decided to reach a deal after the British had captured Palestine in late 1917, as Berlin pushed him to change course. As a major Ottoman ally, the Kaiser was

complicit in the Armenian genocide and wanted to avoid bloodshed against Jews, for which he would be held responsible.

Via the pages of the Jewish Chronicle, the Ottomans offered a Jewish "religious center" rather than a national home, in a land that they had just lost. They offered to cancel restrictive measures, allow for immigration and colonization under their protection, and to set up a commission for a detailed plan.

What was Istanbul's motive? Besides a race between Berlin and London for Jewish support in their 1918 spring war efforts in an undecided battle yet, they were also preparing for negotiations over the future of Palestine, seeing the possibility that they might get it—and the financial benefits—backed by diplomacy in exchange for a Jewish home.

The Pasha and Perlmutter, the Jewish representative, reached agreement on Monday August 12. Perlmutter, who worked for the mining company Beer & Co. in Istanbul, was known for a fine study of the Jewish thinker Moses Mendelssohn. He had good ties to Talat, who blocked Jewish advances until America joined the war.

After their last meeting, Perlmutter wrote to the new German Ambassador Johann-Heinrich von Bernstorff a letter on his fare well visit with Talat enclosing the long version of the Ottoman Balfour Declaration.

“As His Excellency can see,” he stressed, the wording of Talat’s declaration “roughly contains the original communiqué of the Jewish delegation” which it had earlier proposed. Thus, his text as quoted in the report was based on a Jewish proposal given to him in an “only slightly modified” form. Talat asked Perlmutter to publish a report on their talk (likely, the Jewish Chronicle's short version).

Hoping for the 1918 Spring Offensive



In Berlin Talat was murdered by an Armenian for his role in the Armenian genocide.

Perlmutter added that he had sent the report to the German envoy with the request from Talat to forward it to Berlin's largest news agency. Here is the full report with the quote of the "Ottoman Balfour Declaration" long version as given by Talat on August 12:

"I am happy to be able to tell you that my negotiations with delegates of several Jewish organizations some time ago already lead to a real result.

The Council of Ministers had just decided, following my statements to the Jewish delegation, to lift all restrictive measures on Jewish immigration and settlement in Palestine. Strict orders have been given to the related authorities to secure a benevolent treatment of the Jewish nation in Palestine based on complete equality with the other elements of the population.

Regarding my invitation to several Jewish organizations, I declare once again, as I did already to the Jewish delegation, my sympathies for the establishment of a Jewish, religious and national center in Palestine by well-organized immigration and colonization, for I am convinced of the importance and benefits of the settlement of Jews in Palestine for the Ottoman Empire.

I am willing to put this work under the high protection of the Ottoman Empire, and to promote it by all means which are compatible with the sovereign rights of the Ottoman Empire that do not affect the rights of the non-Jewish population. It is my solid conviction that the special commission, which will be appointed to lay out a detailed project for this work, shall shortly complete its work. I will be happy to see the delegation here again thereafter to continue the conversations."

Perlmutter's report to the German Ambassador Johann-Heinrich von Bernstorff in Istanbul ended thus:

"Mr. Perlmutter replied that the delegation will lively welcome the resolution of the Turkish Council of Ministers to finally lift all the restrictive measures and the trouble made for the Jewish population of Palestine and that the loyal execution of the given orders shall surely meet a warmhearted reception by the Jewry of the whole world.

With special satisfaction shall the delegation learn that the commission receives the order to draft a detailed project in the shortest time possible that is suitable to accommodate the Jewish wishes under the Turkish state's sovereignty and in the frame of the Ottoman Empire, and is completely compatible with the interest of the Ottoman state and the rights of the Arab population which can well be realised."

This long version went beyond the Balfour Declaration, offering a national center in Palestine, a Jewish nation based on equality, Talat's hope for Jewish benefits in the Empire, and to continue with the talks.

On September 20, the Jewish Chronicle shed more light on Talat's proposals. The report of the special commission would be embodied in a bill before Istanbul's Parliament.

In the commission were men of the government, the Jewish Chronicle told the readers, of the Young Turk's Committee and Jews.

They mentioned an autonomy within the Turkish law to Jewish religious circles and the creation of a Jewish representative body in Palestine.

Ottoman Parliament, Aquarelle by Ismail Hakki-Bey, 1916, PArchWGS



The Jewish Chronicle worried that Talat might use parliamentary procedures to shelve the bill, since Jews could "not be given more privileges than the other Ottoman subjects." And as the Turkish version of the Ottoman Balfour Declaration was circulated, many opposed it in 1918.

But before the bill could be dealt with, the Ottoman Empire surrendered to the Allies on October 30, 1918. Key Ottoman leaders fled to Berlin where in 1921 Talat was murdered by an Armenian for his part in the Armenian genocide, an atrocity which loomed in the war over the Jews of Palestine who fought against an attempted genocide, in 1915 and 1917, and helped the British. They were supported by Berlin's pro-Jewish and pro-Zionist actions, a late Ottoman turn, and above all London's swift victory on the ground.

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Iqdam's Frontpage, The Three Pashas fled Turkey 11/04/1918



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Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, *Ottoman Balfour Declaration*, Special Commemorative Magazine *Balfour 100*, The Jewish Chronicle, London, 176(11/02/2017), p. 38-39. Updated with slight changes as "Talat's OBD," links, pictures were added. My 2014 German book *Islam in Europe, Revolts in the Middle East*, has a chapter "The Kaiser's Ottoman Balfour Declaration," (OBD, p. 107-11) with the facsimile of the 1918 OBD's long version (p. 118). See also my article *The "Ottoman Balfour Declaration,"* Middle East Quarterly, 25(Winter 2018)1, see furthermore Efraim Karsh, *Turks and Arabs Welcomed the Balfour Declaration*, *Ibid.*, 25(Winter 2018)1.