



The "Ottoman Balfour Declaration" "A Jewish National Home," 100 Years On



On August 12, 1918, Grand Vizier Talaat Pasha issued an official Ottoman declaration expressing sympathy "for the establishment of a religious and national Jewish center in Palestine by well-organized immigration and colonization."

In October 1917, as British forces knocked at Jerusalem's gates, the Ottoman authorities declared a string of draconian steps aimed at destroying the Jewish community in Palestine (the *Yishuv*). Should the Turks be driven from Palestine, threatened Djemal Pasha, governor of the Levant and one of the triumvirs who ran the Ottoman Empire during World War I, no Jews would live to welcome the British forces.¹

Less than a year later, on August 12, 1918, Grand Vizier Talaat Pasha, Djemal's co-triumvir, issued an official declaration in the name of the Ottoman government abolishing these restrictions and expressing sympathy "for the establishment of a religious and national Jewish center in Palestine by well-organized immigration and colonization."²

Though issued far too late to have any concrete effect—nearly half a year after the British conquest of Palestine and some eighty days before the Ottoman surrender—the significance of the declaration cannot be overstated. Here was the world's foremost Muslim power mirroring the British government's recognition (in the November 1917 Balfour

Declaration) of the Jewish right to national revival in Palestine, something that many Muslim states refuse to acknowledge to date.

The Ottoman Declaration

In a meeting in Istanbul on August 12, 1918, Grand Vizier Talaat Pasha gave Leopold Perlmutter, a German Jewish businessman and a personal acquaintance, an official statement on behalf of the Ottoman government. Formulated during a month-long negotiation with a 16-member Jewish delegation, headed by Perlmutter and comprising Zionists and non-Zionists from Germany, Austria and the Ottoman Empire,³ the statement acknowledged the Jewish right to national and religious revival in Palestine. "I am happy to be able to tell you that my negotiations with delegates of several Jewish organizations some time ago have led to a real result," Talaat wrote. The statement continued:

The Council of Ministers has 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 relevant authorities to ensure 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 already did to the Jewish delegation, my sympathies for the establishment of a religious and national Jewish center in Palestine by well-organized immigration and settlement, 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 that are compatible with the sovereign rights of the Ottoman Empire and 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.⁴

In a letter to the German ambassador in Istanbul, Johann-Heinrich von Bernstorff, Perlmutter claimed that the wording of the statement (which he attached for the ambassador's perusal) was roughly identical to the original communiqué proposed by the Jewish delegation with only minor modifications.⁵ He also revealed that Talaat asked that the statement be published in the Western press, and indeed, on September 6, the London newspaper, *The Jewish Chronicle*, ran a short version of the declaration:

Addressing a conference, at Constantinople, of representatives of Jewish organizations in Central Europe, Talaat Pasha (Grand Vizier) said:

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 coloniza-

*tion. 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.*⁶

While this short version was substantially toned-down from Talaat's original declaration, speaking about "the creation of a Jewish religious centre in Palestine" rather than "a Jewish religious and national center," the newspaper doubted whether the grand vizier would make good his pledge to have the statement adopted as a parliamentary bill,⁷ given the widespread opposition to this move.⁸ As it was, this discussion proved purely academic, for the Ottoman Empire surrendered to the Allies on October 30, 1918, before the bill could be dealt with. The Turkish leaders fled to Berlin, where in March 1921, an Armenian nationalist murdered Talaat in revenge for his role in the 1915 Armenian genocide.

Why the Declaration?

Its non-implementation notwithstanding, Talaat's original statement was extraordinary in two key respects: the religious and the national. On the former level, the pledge to treat Palestine's Jewish community on the basis of "complete equality with the other elements of the population" ran counter to the sociopolitical order of things underpinning the House of Islam, whereby political power was vested with the Muslim majority whereas non-Muslim minorities were tolerated subjects (or *dhimmis*), who enjoyed protection and autonomy in the practice of their religious affairs yet were legally, institutionally, and socially inferior to their Muslim rulers.

Likewise, the sympathetic allusion to "the Jewish nation," let alone to the creation of a "Jewish national center in Palestine," was antithetical to the millenarian perception of Jews as a religious community rather than a national group. Moreover, having been squeezed out of their European colonies in the nineteenth century by the rising force of nationalism (resulting in the independent states of Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania), the Ottomans were resolved to prevent the recurrence of this phenomenon in their Afro-Asiatic provinces. Hence their brutal repression of the Armenian national awakening in the 1890s—in which some 200,000 people perished and thousands more fled to Europe and America—was a taste of the genocidal horrors that awaited the Armenians during World War I.⁹ These atrocities also foreshadowed the repression of the Yishuv throughout the war, which was demonstrated most starkly by mass expulsions of Jews from Palestine and the sustained attempt in the spring through autumn 1917 to uproot the Tel-Aviv-Jaffa community.

The declaration provided Istanbul with a potentially valuable card for the postwar peace talks.

Given this backdrop, it is possible that Talaat knew full well that he would never have to implement the declaration, especially as Palestine had been under British occupation for eight months. Yet in view of Russia's March 1918 departure from the war on highly favorable terms to the Triple Alliance (German-Austrian-Ottoman), and the spring 1918 German offensive along the front in western Europe, the outcome of the war remained undecided for some time.

Accordingly, Talaat's declaration was politically relevant rather than purely hypothetical. Apart from ensuring the safety of Jewish communities in those parts of the empire still in Ottoman hands, it provided Istanbul with a potentially valuable card for the postwar peace talks.



The Ottomans worked to repress the Yishuv and initiated mass expulsions of Jews from Palestine during World War I.

More than that, Talaat's readiness to break with Islamic and Ottoman taboos, if only declaratively, by putting the Jews on a par with their Muslim counterparts and viewing them as a nation deserving of self-determination, indicated his likely expectation of a substantial quid pro quo.

It was no coincidence that, prior to the U.S. entry to the war in April 1917, Talaat had rebuffed all Zionist overtures. His position began to change after the U.S. entry as he envisaged the potential gains of rallying the real or imagined "international power of world Jewry"¹⁰ (believed to be particularly omnipotent in the United States) behind the Ottoman cause.

These ranged from preventing Washington, which did not declare war on Turkey upon joining the war, from doing so; to encouraging the new Bolshevik regime in Russia to leave the war; to obtaining a better deal in the postwar negotiations, perhaps even regaining control of Palestine in return for the proposed concessions to the Jews.

In the words of then German ambassador to Istanbul Johann-Heinrich von Bernstorff: "If we cannot get back Palestine by weapons, we will attain this goal diplomatically."¹¹

Yet it is doubtful whether Talaat would have been able to make this conceptual leap without the incessant prodding by Istanbul's senior war ally—Berlin.

The German Connection

Kaiser Wilhelm II was well disposed to Zionism, which he considered "a question of huge importance." He favored its main goal—the revival of the Holy Land by the "capital mighty and industrious Israel"—and tried to impart his enthusiasm to Sultan Abdulhamid II during his visit to Istanbul in 1898, to no avail.¹² After the outbreak of hostilities, the kaiser had to strike a balance between this general sympathy and the need to avoid antagonizing the Ottoman leadership, which treated its national minorities with outright repression.



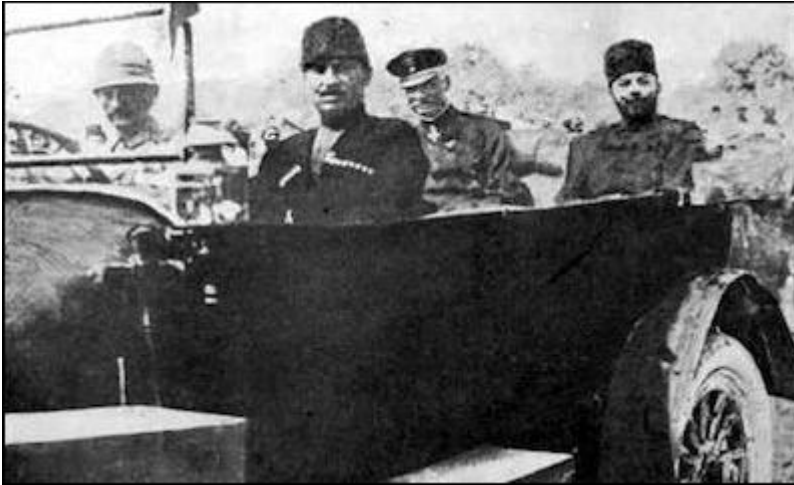
In April 1917, Djemal Pasha ordered the expulsion of the Jewish community of Jaffa and Tel Aviv for "military reasons" and also sought to remove the Jerusalem Jews.

He also needed to avoid rocking the German-Austrian-Ottoman Triple Alliance. Thus, for example, his order to the German consuls throughout the empire to protect the Yishuv, including the new Jewish immigrants arriving from enemy states (notably Russia), was presented as being in Istanbul's best interest: It was likely to boost the Triple Alliance's standing in Washington where Jews were believed to wield disproportionate influence while repression of Ottoman Jewry was certain to attract sharp criticism.¹³

Whenever this reasoning failed to impress the Ottoman authorities, as it often did, the Germans stepped into the ring. One such notable intervention took place in December 1914 when the Jaffa governor ordered the deportation of all Jews who had not become Ottoman subjects (many of whom were German citizens).

At the initiative of the prominent German Zionist leader Richard Lichtheim, then residing in Istanbul, Ambassador Hans von Wangenheim approached Talaat with the request that the deportations be halted as did the U.S. ambassador to Istanbul, Henry I. Morgenthau. The Ottoman leadership complied: The expulsions were suspended, and foreign nationals were granted permission to stay in Palestine and encouraged to be Ottomized.¹⁴

A no less crucial intervention took place in April 1917 when Djemal Pasha ordered the expulsion of the 9,000-strong Jewish community of Jaffa and Tel Aviv for "military reasons," informing the foreign consuls of his intention to vacate the Jerusalem Jews on similar grounds. At the urging of his chief of staff, Friedrich Kress von Kressenstein, Djemal abandoned the Jerusalem plan, yet refused to return the Jaffa deportees, who continued to languish in the Galilee.¹⁵



In October 1917, Djemal (right) tried again to destroy the Yishuv. But former German chief-of-the-general-staff Erich von Falkenhayn (beside Djemal) arrived in Jerusalem to take command of the Ottoman Yilderim Force, preventing Djemal from carrying out his genocidal plans.

When Djemal unleashed his ire yet again on the Yishuv in October 1917, following the exposure of a pro-British Zionist spy ring, a much higher-level intervention was required to restrain him. This time it was the former German chief-of-the-general-staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, who arrived in Jerusalem to take command of the newly established Ottoman Yilderim Force, thus ending Djemal's military command of the Levant and preventing him from carrying out his genocidal plans.¹⁶

Keenly aware of the precariousness of their national enterprise, the Zionist leaders intensified their efforts to obtain great-power declarations of support for their cause. In July 1917, they presented British foreign secretary Arthur J. Balfour with a proposal for the official statement. Nearly four months later, on October 31, having discussed the matter twice and having ascertained the views of U.S. president Woodrow Wilson and ten "representative [British] Jewish leaders," both Zionist and anti-Zionist, the cabinet approved the text of the official statement and authorized the foreign secretary to have it published. He did so two days later in what came to be known as the Balfour Declaration.

While Berlin resented leaving the Zionist cause to London, its bargaining position was fundamentally weaker than that of its great-power rival: It could not issue a unilateral declaration affecting the territorial integrity of its war ally without obtaining Ottoman acquiescence in this move.

Thus, when on October 23, the German ambassador to Copenhagen received the text of the proposed German declaration from the director of the local Zionist bureau—probably the "communiqué" that was later submitted to Talaat—the idea went no further. Instead, the Germans sought to persuade their Ottoman allies to make their own concessions to the Zionists. In August 1917, for example, they attempted to win over Djemal to the idea with mixed results during his visit to Berlin: Though insisting that Jews could settle anywhere in the empire but not in Palestine, the pasha, nevertheless, indicated that the Ottoman leaders, including himself, might change their minds in the future.¹⁷

The German persuasion attempts gained momentum in September 1917 with the arrival of a new ambassador to Istanbul. Fresh from a ten-year ambassadorial assignment in Washington, Johann-Heinrich von Bernstorff had a high opinion of U.S. Jewry and its role in American society and politics.

The Germans sought to persuade their Ottoman allies to make concessions to the Zionists.

He needed little prodding when instructed by Foreign Minister Richard von Kühlmann to obtain Ottoman concessions on the Palestine question. In October, as the British cabinet deliberated the text of the Balfour Declaration, von Bernstorff met Talaat and suggested that Istanbul offer the Jews a national home under its auspices after the war. In his diary, the ambassador recorded that the pasha was ready to comply with this wish provided Palestine remained in Ottoman hands.¹⁸

Once the Balfour Declaration was announced, Berlin and Istanbul sought to exploit it to drive a wedge between Britain and its Arab supporters by accusing London of selling out to the Jews at the Arabs' and Muslims' expense. Vienna, by contrast, issued a statement (on November 21, 1917) supporting the Zionist efforts in Palestine,¹⁹ and before long, von Bernstorff resumed his efforts to convince the Ottomans to respond in kind to the British declaration.

On December 31, 1917, the ambassador scored a major success when Talaat announced in an interview with a German newspaper that Istanbul viewed the Jewish settlement of Palestine with benevolence, including free immigration according to the country's absorptive capacity, economic development, and the advancement of Jewish culture and local autonomy in accordance with existing laws.²⁰

Capitalizing on the interview, on January 5, 1918, the German undersecretary of state met Zionist leaders and told them of Berlin's readiness to support the Zionist enterprise with a view to a prosperous autonomous Jewish community in Palestine in line with Talaat's statement. This message was amplified on the same day in a letter from Foreign Secretary Kühlmann to the German Zionist leaders Otto Warburg and Artur Hantke, welcoming the alleged Ottoman support for a blooming Jewish settlement in Palestine.²¹

In the following months, von Bernstorff continued his efforts to translate Talaat's statement of intent into a concrete agreement with the Zionist movement. On July 20, 1918, he reported to his superiors—with an undisguised sense of satisfaction—that the negotiations between the grand vizier and the 16-member delegation of German and Austrian Jewish leaders was heading toward conclusion. He noted the existence of a powerful anti-Zionist movement that brought Turks and Arabs together, yet assessed that the undeniable economic advantages of the Zionist project in Palestine would eventually tilt the scales as the Ottomans were, above all, interested in self-enrichment and had no qualms about filling their coffers with money earned from Jewish tax revenues. This observation proved prescient, as within two weeks, Talaat made his historic declaration.²²

Conclusion

In a great, historical irony, ninety-nine years after the Ottoman Empire, the then-temporal and religious leader of the world's Muslim community and Palestine's longtime imperial master, voiced support for "the establishment of a religious and national Jewish center in Palestine," the Palestinian leadership demanded an official apology from Britain for endorsing the same idea at about the same time.

It is true that the Ottoman declaration came too late to make a real impact on the course of regional events and quickly faded into oblivion, in contrast to the Balfour Declaration which was endorsed by the entire international community. It is also true that the Ottoman pronouncement was largely driven by ulterior motives, notably the desire to harness the real or imagined "international power of the Jews" and the economic fruits of the Zionist project in Palestine to the Ottoman imperial interests—as was the Balfour Declaration as well.

Yet the fact that support for the Jewish national revival in Palestine was considered the natural quid pro quo for these prospective gains underscores both the pervasive recognition of the historic Jewish attachment to this land and the ability to transcend millenarian Muslim dogmas regarding non-Muslim communities.

If only for these reasons, and having been an alternative option at a time when the war's outcome was yet to be decided and diplomacy was to be foreseen, the "Ottoman Balfour Declaration" needs to be re-examined and highlighted, especially at a time when Islamist intolerance and supremacism rear their heads.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz is a Hochberg Family Writing Fellow at the Middle East Forum, author of *Islam in Europe, Revolts in the Middle East; Middle East Mosaics 2013-15*, and co-author of *Nazis, Islamists and the Making of the Modern Middle East*.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East 1789-1923* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 166-70
- ² Leopold Perlmutter to Johann von Bernstorff, B62–64, Talaat-Declaration, Constantinople, 12.08.1918, signed Perlmutter, Political Archive of the Foreign Office (hereafter, PArchAA), Berlin, R14144, Konstantinopel, 394.
- ³ To Reichskanzler Grafen von Hertling, Jewish Palestine Efforts, 52-56, Pera, 20.07.1918, Bernstorff, PArchAA, R14144, B Konstantinopel, 394.
- ⁴ Leopold Perlmutter to Johann von Bernstorff, B62–64 Constantinople, 12.08.1918, signed Perlmutter, PArchAA, R14144, Konstantinopel, 394.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ "Talaat Pasha and the Future of Palestine," *The Jewish Chronicle* (London), Sept. 6, 1918
- ⁷ "The Turkish Government and Zionism, Talaat Pasha's Promises: An Ominous Interview," *The Jewish Chronicle*, Sept. 20, 1918.
- ⁸ Muhammad Amin al-Husaini, *Mudhakkirat al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husaini* (Damascus: al-Ahali, 1999), pp. 338, 388.
- ⁹ See, also, Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁰ Karl Friedrich Schabinger von Schowingen, ed. *Consul General in Jerusalem and Consul in Jaffa (1916-18)*; Karl Emil Schabinger Freiherr von Schowingen, *Weltgeschichtliche Mosaiksplitter* (Baden Baden: Manuscript, 1967), pp. 182-3.
- ¹¹ An Reichskanzler Grafen von Hertling, *Jüdische Palästina-Bestrebungen*, Istanbul, July 20, 1918, PArchAA, B Konstantinopel, 394; Johann-Heinrich von Bernstorff, *Deutschland und Amerika* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1920), p. 414. For pre-WWI Ottoman subscription to anti-Semitic tropes of "international Jewish power," see Daniel Pipes, "[A Benign Antisemitism](#)," *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (Greenwich, Conn.: Touchstone, 1999).
- ¹² Max Bodenheimer and Henriette H. Bodenheimer, *Die Zionisten und das kaiserliche Deutschland* (Bensberg: Schäuble, 1972), pp. 82-4.
- ¹³ Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, *Islam in Europa, Revolten in Mittelost* (Berlin: Weist, 2014), pp. 107-11; facsimile of Talaat's declaration, p. 118.
- ¹⁴ Karsh and Karsh, *Empires of the Sand*, pp. 166-7
- ¹⁵ Karl Emil Schabinger Freiherr von Schowingen, *Weltgeschichtliche Mosaiksplitter* (Baden-Baden: Manuscript, 1967), p. 183; Friedrich Freiherr Kress von Kressenstein, *Mit den Türken zum Sueskanal* (Berlin: Schlegel, 1932), p. 264; Jacob Landau, "A Bibliographical Note on Jews and Dönme-s in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey," in Philippe Geley and Gilles Grivaud, eds., *Les Conversions à l'Islam* (Athens: École Française D'Athènes, 2016), pp. 109-15.
- ¹⁶ Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn* (München: Oldenbourg, 1994), p. 485; Hansjörg Eiff, "Die jüdische Heimstätte in Palästina in der deutschen Außenpolitik, 1914-1918," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 3 (2012): 205-27.
- ¹⁷ Leonard Stein, *The Balfour Declaration* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), pp. 439-41, 538-42
- ¹⁸ Johann-Heinrich Graf von Bernstorff, *The Memoirs of Count Bernstorff* (London: Heinemann, 1936), p. 171.
- ¹⁹ Francis R. Nicosia, ed., *Nazi Germany and the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 23-4.
- ²⁰ Gespräch mit Talaat Pascha, Konstantinopel, Dec. 12, 1917, gez. Dr. Julius Becker, PArchAA, B Konstantinopel, Bd. 394, pp. 1-7; *Vossische Zeitung* (Berlin), Dec. 31, 1917.
- ²¹ Richard Lichtheim, *Rückkehr* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1970), p. 376; *Jüdische Rundschau* (Berlin), Jan. 11, 1918; Josef Cohn, *England und Palästina* (Berlin: Vowinckel, 1931), p. 69.
- ²² An Reichskanzler Grafen von Hertling, *Jüdische Palästina-Bestrebungen*, Istanbul 07/20/18, PArchAA, B Konstantinopel 394; von Bernstorff, *Deutschland und Amerika*, p. 414; Lionel Gossman, *The Passion of Max von Oppenheim* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2013), pp. 99-105.