

## **Towards The Achievement of National Identity: The Role of British Jewry in the Creation of the State of Israel**

Yosra Amraoui

### **I. Introduction**

“Some ethnies<sup>1</sup> were transformed into nations in the modern era, while others, often due to their territorial dispersion, lack of political ambition or low level of self consciousness did not emerge as nations” (Kaufmann 2-3). This statement by Eric P. Kaufmann, editor of *Rethinking Ethnicity: Majority Groups and Dominant Minorities* (2004), demonstrates the ability of ethnic minorities to institute change and master their own destiny rather than simply accept the situation proposed by assimilationist strategies. Within the frame of political Zionism, British and American Jews were able to exercise large-scale pressure on the governments of the countries in which they lived in the hope of getting international assistance in obtaining a national home in Palestine.

For the purpose, the Jews formed what Kaufmann calls a “dominant ethnicity” within their host countries, a phenomenon he defines as one “whereby a particular ethnic group exercises dominance within a nation and/or state” (Kaufmann 3). The present study fits within a larger reading of the Jewish identity’s evolution process from a religious to a politico-national identity. Since Britain held a mandate over Palestine as early as the 1920s, the study of the Jewish identity’s role in the making of the State of Israel entails focus on the role of Jewish activism in Britain, its roots and main objectives and the background that led to the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) and to the Balfour Declaration (1917) which are considered two of the first most significant documents that paved the way to the establishment of Israel.

Therefore, as a continuation of the studies elaborated on Jewish political activism on the larger European scale since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the present article aims at focusing on one of the two sections of world Jewry which are considered highly, if not the most, influential in leading the Jewish Zionist cause to its ultimate realization which are the Jews of Britain and those of the United States who largely contributed to the sculpting of Anglo-American foreign policies in the Middle East and particularly in Mandatory Palestine, before and during the Second World War. It is heretofore my intention to first provide an overview of the situation of early Jewish settlements in Britain, then I intend to allot a significant section to study the role and impact of Anglo-Zionist internal activism, and by internal I mean all British backstage activism that had a hand in setting forth the terrain for the American recognition of the State of Israel in 1948.

### **Historical Overview Of The Jews’ Situation In Britain From Early Settlements To Modern Times**

The first Jewish settlers in British lands had not been archeologically or historically traced until the Norman Conquest of England that took place in 1066. It was only then that historical accounts<sup>2</sup> written about William the Conqueror reported that the latter brought the Jews with him from Rouen—one among many of his “continental possessions.”<sup>3</sup> The Jews then filled their usual positions of money lenders using usury (interest rate on loans) to make their living.<sup>4</sup> History attests of the degree of protection and prosperity the Jews enjoyed in these early times. During the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Jews were considered the “property of the king,” and therefore they profited from the king’s full protection displayed in the form of charters. The first charter of protection of the Jews in England was reported to have been issued by the end of Henry I’s reign (the year 1135).<sup>5</sup>

The troubles started with the first accusation of “ritual murder,” in which the Jews were accused of crucifying a 12 year-old child in a ritual celebrating Passover<sup>6</sup> in the town of Norwich—then the second largest city in England—in 1144. This accusation was reported to have been the first of its kind during the Middle-Ages. The perpetrator of the crime was never captured but the Jews were protected by the king and his Sheriff, who provided them with asylum in times of crisis.<sup>7</sup> Under the reign of Henry II, the Jews lived in relative peace and prosperity as they shared their profits from usury—a practice that was prohibited to Christians under the laws of the Church—with the British king. Yet, this relative peace the Jews enjoyed was later dissipated due to

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<sup>1</sup> The word here is used in its French origin

<sup>2</sup> William of Malmesbury. *History of the Kings of England* (1120)

<sup>3</sup> Raphael Langham. *The Jews in Britain: a Chronology* (2005)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 8

<sup>6</sup> A Jewish celebration that aims at commemorating the Jewish exile from Egypt, it lasts 8 days (if celebrated in the Diaspora) in Spring

<sup>7</sup> Raphael Langham. *The Jews in Britain: a Chronology*, p. 9

two new “ritual murder” libels involving killing two Christian children in the process of Jewish religious celebrations. The first of these murders took place in March 1168, the second in June 1181. In that same year, an act was passed prohibiting Jews from holding any type of weaponry,<sup>8</sup> which increased their feeling of insecurity and facilitated attempts at massacring them, a plight they suffered from during the year 1190 in York and Bury St. Edmunds, in the course of which over 200 Jews were either massacred or burnt to death.

By the year 1218, the Jews were obliged to wear a white ornament resembling the form of the two tablets of the Ten Commandments<sup>9</sup> in order to be distinguished from the other communities. This was followed by a series of “discriminatory regulations and restrictions” that were mostly “arbitrarily” introduced, cancelled and then reintroduced. The situation of the Jews of England worsened in the course of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, especially with the enactment of the king’s Statutes of the Jews, some of which ordered expulsion of the Jews from England (1233) while others prohibited the practice of usury (1275)<sup>10</sup> which jeopardized the only source of living of many a Jewish family at the time.

During the five centuries following the final expulsion of Jews from England that was enforced by an edict passed by king Edward I in 1290, the Jews could only enter British lands in secrecy. During the Spanish expulsions of 1492, a few Marrano communities settled in London, yet again they were to hide their creed from the rest of the population as those who were suspected of being Jews were arrested by the Privy Council.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, vain attempts had been made to reinstate the Jews and revoke Edward I’s expulsion act. It was not until 1685 that a “de facto readmission” of the Jews took place. The latter (who were mainly of Marrano origins) were living in secret communities in London but decided to present a petition to Oliver Cromwell—then Lord Protector of England, Scotland and Ireland—seeking permission to practice Judaism freely inside their homes.<sup>12</sup> The secret Marrano communities established themselves quietly in London, mostly keeping a low profile which enabled other persecuted Marranos to join them.

The Jews of Sephardic and Ashkenazi origins started gradually to enjoy a certain revival in the practice of their religious and public duties. The first Ashkenazi Synagogue in London was founded in 1690<sup>13</sup> and the first Sephardic hospital was established in 1747.<sup>14</sup> The first university to admit students from both genders and of all ethnic origins, classes and creeds was the University of London founded in 1826, in which a Hebrew department was opened, and financed on a great scale by Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, son of one of the wealthiest Jewish families in Britain. British subjects professing the Jewish religion in 19<sup>th</sup> century England were in a number of ways more “mildly treated” than other Jews living elsewhere in Europe. The wealthy Jewish families living in England—such as the Goldsmids and the Rothschilds—had been enjoying relatively preferential treatment and entertaining close relationships with the Royal and aristocratic classes in Britain<sup>15</sup> since the start of the century. By the year 1815, about 30,000 Jews were living in England, of whom two thirds were located in the capital.<sup>16</sup> English Jews had had the possibility to hold municipal offices since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the first Jew entering a municipal position, David Salomons, received the title of Lord Mayor of London in 1855, a nomination that launched “the municipal emancipation of English Jews.” It was thanks to Salomons’ public and financial activism that such an office was open to English Jewry since he was one of the founders of the Westminster Bank and a famous economic figure in the Anglo-Jewish community.

Yet the only sector to which the Jews were denied access in Britain was politics. Therefore, and in the hope of getting a more positive appraisal from the mainstream English society, a view circulated that if English Jewry tried to restructure Judaic practices and traditions in order to make them appear closer to Christian ones they would wipe out the common prejudice that depicted the Judaic religion as “foreign” and “not English.” As a matter of fact, “Sephardi and Ashkenazi congregations [located in London] established branch Synagogues”<sup>17</sup> which led to several reformist movements at the level of religious practices resulting ultimately in the opening of the first reformed English Synagogue in West London for British Jews in 1842.<sup>18</sup> These reforms were, to the Jews, their way to Westminster. But the fact that British subjects were to swear an oath—called the Oath of Abjuration<sup>19</sup>—that ended in the words “on the true faith of a Christian” before they were able to hold a parliamentary office/position presented a problem to British subjects who professed another religion than Christianity. Attempts that were nonetheless made to issue a “Parliamentary Oaths Bill” were met with approval

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 11

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 19, p. 21

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 26

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 34

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 39

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 44

<sup>15</sup> From the *Reader in Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* at the University of Oxford, p. 259, 1941

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 258

<sup>17</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 13, p. 181

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 259

<sup>19</sup> “This oath was introduced in 1701 to deny the rights of the Old Pretender to the crown (James Stuart who was Catholic) following the death of his father James II” (Langham 40)

on the part of the Commons but rejected on several occasions by the Lords (13 bills were rejected before a final agreement was taken in 1858). In the meantime, Jewish political activism continued in this direction hoping to get an exception to the law for Jewish practitioners who had political ambitions. At last, a text debarring Jews from offices that were denied to subjects professing Roman Catholicism was approved<sup>20</sup>. On Monday 26<sup>th</sup> July 1858, the first British Jew to have had a seat in the House of Commons as the MP for the City of London was Baron Lionel de Rothschild. With the economic expansion of British Jewry in the mid-nineteenth century, it was necessary to further render the Parliamentary Oaths Bill a “right rather than a privilege”. Therefore, an act was passed in 1866 omitting once and for all any reference that would block a British Jew from accessing a parliamentary position.<sup>21</sup>

In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and more precisely starting from 1883, the number of Jewish immigrants to the U.K. rose exponentially due to the rise of the Russian pogroms and the start of cultural anti-Semitism in Germany. As this coincided with the rise of Zionism in Europe, which found in the British a friendly proponent, political Zionism rapidly reached the U.K. and affected British Jews who, along with the rest of the British population, felt a deep sympathy for persecuted Eastern European Jewry. The number of Jewish immigrants in London rose from 47,000 to 150,000 between the years 1883 and 1902 and tripled in the whole country during the five first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>22</sup> which revived the practice of the Judaic religion in Britain and enticed the foundation of new synagogues to meet the demands of the rising number of new arrivals. At the economic level giving birth to trade unionism and to a Jewish press written in Yiddish.<sup>23</sup> Besides, London Jews greatly enjoyed the expansion and diversification of Jewish organizations and associations based in the capital. There were Jewish associations for the needy, the aged, the blind, the deaf and the disabled in addition to Jewish youth centers, charities and friendly societies operated by the London Jewish Welfare Board. Among other types of active artistic and societal life that saw the light in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one can cite the first Yiddish theatre group in London known as the Hebrew Dramatic Society (1886) and the Anglo Jewish Historical Exhibition (1887). There was also the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Anglo-Jewish Association, the Association of Jewish Ex-Service Men, the National Union of Hebrew Teachers, the Jewish Initiation Society, the Central British Fund for Jewish Relief, the London Board of Jewish Religious Education, and the Hovevei Zion association in England (1890) followed by the Zionist Federation (1899).<sup>24</sup>

Having found a suitable terrain of cultural revival and political emancipation, Zionism thus reached the United Kingdom as early as the 1890s with the starting activism of the Hovevei Zion Association and the Zionist Federation. The following part of the present article deals with the impact of the rise of Zionism in the U.K. and the extent to which the Zionist enterprise activism there managed to open doors for the realization of the Jewish national aspirations in Palestine, especially in terms of molding British foreign policies and strategic interventions in the Middle East during the First World War.

### **The Rise of Zionism in the U.K.**

The Jews who supported Zionism in the U.K. were principally driven by the Zionist vision of a home in Palestine. There was a common agreement on the territory, the goal, and the beliefs targeted by what was started by European Zionism, in addition to the common bonds, memories, and history that the Jews as an ethnic shared. In his essay “Ethnic Cores and Dominant Ethnicities”, Anthony D. Smith also confirms that some core ethnic can be transformed into nations referring the concept of ethnic “to a named human population with a myth of common origins of ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture and a measure of solidarity.”<sup>25</sup> The Jews differed in a number of ways in terms of their sub-ethnic origins and halakic laws (moral principles) yet they had perceived themselves and had been perceived by the world as primarily united by their religion. Some Jews, such as British and American Jews, enjoyed the livelihood of a national identity within their countries and were able to enter the political scene. Yet the religious/Jewish identity of some of these nationals “dominated their thoughts and actions” (Verkuyten 50). It is then argued, in this respect, that one can possibly have more than one identity and that out of these “multiple identities”<sup>26</sup> one is likely to surface and become at the centre. Such is the case of the Jewish identity of British nationals who contributed to the elaboration of processes and strategies that were later undertaken by the ideology of Zionism. As Anthony D. Smith puts it: “to mobilize people to make the necessary sacrifices for the nation-to-be, one needs ethnic ties, shared memories and common myths, symbols and codes, as well as some widely held values

<sup>20</sup> The House of Lords voted 33 to 12, the House of Commons voted 129 to 55

<sup>21</sup> All quotations are taken from the *Reader in Post-Biblical Jewish Studies*, p. 266

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273

<sup>23</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 13, p. 181

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182

<sup>25</sup> Anthony D. Smith in his article “Ethnic Cores and Dominant Ethnicities” published in p. 19 of the volume *Rethinking Ethnicity : majority groups and dominant minorities* edited by Eric P. Kaufmann (2004)

<sup>26</sup> Maykel Verkuyten. *Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, p. 50 (2005)

and traditions—which can underpin the new national ‘construct’ and show the members of the core ethnic that they are one historical people of common devotion.”<sup>27</sup> Smith also insists on the importance of the attachment of the members of the “nation-to-be” to the targeted territory of its future establishment. It is this attachment that makes a difference between the ethnicities; because it is the strength of this attachment to the land that allows the core ethnic to “politicize” its ambitions.<sup>28</sup> For the Jews, this phenomenon came naturally and strategically in the form of Zionism.

Britain was of particular significance to the Zionist movement as British Zionist leaders had played influential roles in conducting their missions as members of Zionist organizations or simply as supporters of Zionism. It was in London—at the Maccabean Club—that Theodor Herzl made his first speech in 1895, and it was the oldest English Jewish newspaper *The Jewish Chronicle*<sup>29</sup> that first published Herzl’s program in an article he called “A Solution to the Jewish Problem” even before the program appeared in his pamphlet *The Jewish State* in 1896. *The Jewish Chronicle* was among the most reputable and widely respected papers in the country; it strongly came to uphold Zionist ideology under the editorship of Leopold J. Greenberg (1907) who influenced the paper’s content with his pro-Zionist ideas.<sup>30</sup>

London played a leading part in managing the operations of the large scale Zionist movement. The capital hosted the Fourth Zionist Congress and was the headquarters of several Zionist organizations; the Jewish Colonial Trust was even registered as a British corporation. In practically all the Zionist Congresses that were held there were always a dozen, if not more, British Jewish delegates. Hovevei Zion in England was led by Herbert Bentwich, a Zionist lawyer born in London and one of the first followers of Herzl. Bentwich (1856-1932) organized a pilgrimage to Palestine (then called Erez Israel) in 1897 and seized the occasion to help acquire land for the benefit of the Zionist settlements’ scheme in Gezer, west of Jerusalem, a very strategic town known for its rich water supplies and crossroads open to a number of routes leading to Jerusalem. Besides, Bentwich was one of the founders of the English Zionist Federation and the legal advisor for the Jewish Colonial Trust. His son, Norman Bentwich, took his father’s path. Also a lawyer, Norman wrote such influential books on Zionism as *Palestine of the Jews: Past, Present and Future* (1919), *Legislation for Palestine* (1926), *England in Palestine* (1932), *Fulfillment in the Promised Land* (1938) and *Palestine* (1946).<sup>31</sup>

Through their activism, British Zionist leaders managed to procure international support for their cause as Zionism was rapidly spreading all over the world. Such international support could only be ensured through the work of British Jews who had strong Zionist loyalties such as Chaim Weizmann, Joseph Cowen, JehielTschlenow and Nahum Sokolow, who managed to establish networks of contacts with Zionists abroad. Joseph Cowen, one of the leaders and founders of Zionism in Britain was a relative of the famous playwright Israel Zangwill (author of the play *The Melting Pot*), who was also a prominent Zionist. Cowen was a major player in British Zionism thanks to his special position as chief associate and coordinator of Theodor Herzl’s activism in Great Britain. He was also the one who accompanied Herzl in his talks with the Turkish Sultan about the acquisition of an area in Palestine for the establishment of the Jewish center. Cowen also served as president of the Zionist Federation many times, in addition to his post as the director of the Jewish Colonial Trust. His most important role was played during World War I when he assisted Chaim Weizmann in paving the way for the Balfour Declaration.<sup>32</sup> As for JehielTschlenow (1863-1918), he was born in The Ukraine and finished his studies in Medicine in Moscow, but he had settled in London from 1915 until his death. He was a regular attendee of the Zionist Congresses and among the fiercest opponents of the scheme to establish a home for the Jews in Uganda (called the Uganda scheme). His special status as an influential Zionist British figure was also due to the fact that he was among the negotiators of the Balfour Declaration.<sup>33</sup>

Nahum Sokolow (1859-1936) was a tremendously influential Zionist figure in Britain thanks to his oratory skills and passionate writing style in addition to his excellent negotiation capacities. He was a prominent academic and Hebrew journalist and president of the World Zionist Organization. At his first encounter with cultural Zionism, Sokolow attacked Leon Pinsker’s *Autoemancipation* and read *The Jewish State* with some reservation, considering the idea for a home for the Jews as a mere illusion. However, when he first met Herzl during the First Zionist Congress, the one he attended as a correspondent for his daily paper *Ha-Zefirah*, he admired Herzl’s personality and ideology to the extent that he dedicated his column in *Ha-Zefirah* to the service of Herzl’s Zionist project; he even tried to solicit Orthodox Jewish groups to join the movement. Sokolow was among those who helped refute the plan to establish a home for the Jews in Africa.<sup>34</sup> Sokolow served as the

<sup>27</sup> Smith, p. 22

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9

<sup>29</sup> It dates back to 12 November 1941

<sup>30</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 11, p. 284

<sup>31</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 03, p. 381

<sup>32</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 05, p. 255

<sup>33</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 20, p. 164

<sup>34</sup> Discussed during the Sixth Zionist Congress (1903)

member of the Zionist Organization's investigation committee and headed the Comité des Délégations Juives and the Zionist Executive. He represented the Jews at the League of Nations and had several diplomatic connections. He was the first Jew to have had an audience with the Pope twice to discuss Zionist aspirations and he participated in the Balfour Declaration negotiations.

To further stress the ability of Zionism to outweigh hostility to its ideology, Benny Morris, one of the prominent Israeli historians, states in his volume *Righteous Victims: a History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict 1881-2001* that "the religious energy generated by this idea over the centuries was transmuted during the decades of Zionist fulfillment into that potent political force which swept all before it and ultimately forged a state in circumstances and in an environment where crude logic dictated that no Jewish state could ever arise" (Morris 14). By "circumstances", "environment" and "crude logic," Morris probably hints at the Arabs' non acceptance of the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine, but in my view he most definitely refers to the circumstances surrounding Zionism in Britain, which through the decisions issued during the British mandate proved to be more in favor of securing friendly relations in the Arab-Middle East than satisfying the British Zionist activists. Yet Zionism in Britain did not always enjoy support on the part of the Jews of England, for there were times when strong and prominent adherents of Zionism seceded to form an opponent current. Outside Britain, more specifically in Russia and the U.S., this was the case of the assimilationists and supporters of what was called militant or revisionist Zionism, started by Vladimir Jabotinsky. In Britain, such was the case of Israel Zangwill's Territorial Zionism. It was actually thanks to Zangwill's efforts that Theodor Herzl managed to get his first audience in London with masses of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the year 1896. It is reported that Herzl himself first approached Zangwill in 1895 as follows: "I am Theodor Herzl. Help me to rebuild the Jewish state."<sup>35</sup> Regarding this encounter, Zangwill wrote: "I was the first person that Mr. Herzl came to in London [...] I worked for him loyally as a perfect slave for a great many years."<sup>36</sup> Zangwill founded "The Jewish Territorial Organization," which aimed at creating a Jewish home in any place in the world that need not necessarily be in Palestine. The trend that this organization was following was known as Territorialism—as opposed to Zionism; therefore, it attracted mostly anti-Zionist Jews and all those who since the rise of

Apart from the role that some organizational structures played in shaping British Zionist policy prior to WWI, one should mention the role that British politicians played in the realization of the Jewish scheme. It is possible to argue that those politicians who were not Jews were either pro-Zionists for political and imperial reasons—such as Prime Minister Lloyd George and Lord Arthur James Balfour—or just people who wanted the Jews out of Britain. This last assumption was elaborated in 1911 by Najib Al-Khuri Nassar in his book *Al Sohyuniyya* (Arabic for Zionism), the first Arab book written about the subject (Morris 63). Nassar was a Protestant of Greek Orthodox origin; his position as a middle-man in land acquisition for the Jewish Colonization Organization enabled him to formulate his own opinion about the Jews and their aims in Palestine. Yet that did not prevent academics from considering him anti-Zionist after he published *Al Sohyuniyya*. Such is the view of Benny Morris, who describes the book as anti-Zionist when he reports Nassar's above mentioned assumption: "Zionism enjoyed the support of the Great Powers because they themselves wished to be rid of their Jews" (Cited in Morris 64).

But British politicians were not just either pro-Zionists, imperialists or sick of the Jews as some scholars would argue. One of the significantly influential British politicians closely active in Palestine during the First World War and holding a high position thereof was actually an Orthodox Jew. The first Viscount Herbert Louis Samuel (1870-1963) was a well brought up and educated British "statesman and philosopher" who was known for his great enthusiasm for social reforms.<sup>37</sup> Samuel served as Home Secretary in 1916 for a while during the premiership of Herbert Asquith, but soon left the office when Lloyd George was elected Prime Minister out of loyalty to Asquith.<sup>38</sup>

Prior to the outbreak of WWI, Samuel did not believe in Zionism but he soon adhered to the movement's mission when Britain decided to fight against the Ottoman Empire. Only then did the scheme of a land for the Jews in Palestine seem feasible to Samuel and he started approaching the war cabinet about the issue. As Morris argues, "the outbreak of war, and particularly the Ottoman adhesion to the Central Powers, had unleashed Zionist energies."<sup>39</sup> In a letter he sent to the British war cabinet in 1914, Samuel highlighted the need for Britain to support the Zionist cause and include acquiring Palestine in the war aims' agenda, arguing that it "would be a strategic asset for the British Empire."<sup>40</sup> David Lloyd George, then holding the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer and a reputable finance minister, answered Samuel's proposals with a high degree of enthusiasm.

<sup>35</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 21, p. 455

<sup>36</sup> Cited in *Israel Zangwill*, p 180 by Joseph Leftwich (1957)

<sup>37</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 17, p. 764

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims*, p. 72

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

Samuel continued working on pushing the decision to establish a Jewish state in Palestine forward to its highest decisional levels. He met Chaim Weizman in 1914 and both started working on the project that later led to the Balfour Declaration.<sup>41</sup> From 1920 to 1925, he was appointed first high commissioner of Palestine, thus becoming the first Jew to legally govern—under the British flag—the land of Palestine in about twenty centuries.<sup>42</sup> During his service in Palestine, the Jewish population doubled from 55,000 in 1919 to 108,000 in 1925 and the Jewish settlements rose from 44 to 111. It certainly did help the Zionist enterprise and the British imperial aspirations alike to have a British Jew placed at the highest decision making levels in Palestine during a time when the fate of the Palestinian territory was being decided by Britain, France and the Jews. At this stage, considering the most relevant facts and decisions that were taken during the First World War, and assessing the outcome of the British-French relations and ambitions in the Middle-East during that specific period is primordial.

The outbreak of the First World War was the perfect occasion for the Jews in Britain and other activists on behalf of Zionism to formalize their quests and demands. This was mainly due to one major reason: Britain was now more than ever closer to getting a grasp over the Palestinian territory after the declaration of war against the Turks. This decision to fight the Ottoman Empire was not taken at random; it was calculated to suit several objectives and it was due to several factors. The most significant reason behind British self assurance and great confidence in its war against the Ottoman Empire was the latter's gradual decline to such an extent that it acquired the nickname of "the sick man of Europe" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The reasons behind the demise of the Turkish Empire revolved around internal disintegration caused by political, social and economic dysfunctions. Tyranny, despotism and corruption were at the core of the Turkish regime. Lack of rigid laws and firm decision making in addition to the deterioration and corruption of the army system contributed to the political instability of the Empire that was led by weak emperors that were described as "effeminate sultans."<sup>43</sup> Such was the case of Sultan Ahmet III (1703-1730), for example, who was unable to take decisions related to wars or even lead his army in one. Consequently, and starting from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the general economic situation in the Ottoman Empire experienced a great setback and a large "decrease in revenues."<sup>44</sup>

Before the degeneration of the situation in the Ottoman Empire, the latter enjoyed the protection and alliance of the British who saw their best interest in preserving the Turks' might in order to prevent European countries, Germany in particular, from lurking around the rich and strategic Ottoman territories "stretching from Hungary to the Crimea (a sub-part of the Ukraine) and from Tunis to the Persian Gulf"<sup>45</sup> for their own imperialistic aspirations. Actually, the British sought to preserve what they named "a balance of powers" between the top European countries. In this respect, William M. Hale states in his book *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1774-2000* (2000) that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, international politics were dominated by the five indisputably 'great powers' of Europe—France, Prussia/Germany, Austria, Russia, and Britain—with no power in a hegemonic position. The preservation of peace and the survival of small states, rested essentially on the preservation of a balance of powers between the main European states.<sup>46</sup>

The direct circumstances that paved the way for a British declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire, which was once a protégé and an ally, were due to the sudden alliance between Turkey and Germany and the latter's decision to attack Russia in August 1914. Hale describes Germany's plans in the following passage: On 11 October the German ambassador secretly promised delivery of £ T2 million (£1.8 million sterling) in gold if war was declared; the arrival of gold on 16 and 21 October sealed the deal [...] Enver<sup>47</sup> ordered the German admiral Souchon, now commanding the Ottoman fleet in the Black Sea, to attack the Russians. [...] Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire on 2 November and Britain and France followed suit three days later (Hale 35).

The rivalry between the two new major alliances that are Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey on the one hand, and Russia, France and Britain on the other destroyed the system of the balance of powers. This rivalry opened up prospects for further territorial ambitions from practically all the participants in the war. Britain and France, in particular, had set their eyes on the Middle East, whence the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 765

<sup>43</sup> AslıÇirakman. *From the "terror of the world" to "the sick man of Europe": European images of Ottoman Empire and Society from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth*, p.p. 164, 165 (2002)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> William M. Hale. *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1774-2000*. Frank Cass Publishers: London (2000), p. 13

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 2, 3

<sup>47</sup> Ismail Enver Pasha, Ottoman military officer described as the architect of the Ottoman-German alliance in WWI

### **Impact Of The Sykes-Picot Agreement And The Balfour Declaration On The Jewish State Idea**

Now that Britain was at war against Turkey, strategic thinking led the war minister Lord Horatio Kitchener to envisage helping and sponsoring the rise of an Arab revolution against the Ottoman Empire in order to weaken the Turkish power on the one hand and to obtain Arab friendship on the other. To achieve such a scheme, Kitchener counted on his most faithful assistant and representative in war decision making and negotiations, Sir Mark Sykes, a Tory MP and a prominent diplomat who was also of the view that the Ottoman Empire should be destroyed.

Sir Mark Sykes (1879-1919) was a renowned Middle-East expert. Thanks to his wide knowledge and past travels to Syria, Iraq and Kurdistan, he was appointed honorary attaché to the British embassy in Constantinople. Then he was promoted to the position of Assistant Secretary in the British war cabinet, “a position in which he prepared regular intelligence summaries on the Middle East for the Cabinet’s information.”<sup>48</sup> Sykes was known for his support of Arab semi-independence under British trusteeship; he was also known for his fear and skepticism of the Jews (Morris 68). But, it is reported that Sykes had become attracted to Zionism during the negotiations that led to the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 after he read Herbert Samuel’s letter addressed to all members of the war cabinet asking for their support for the Zionist cause.<sup>49</sup>

It is important to highlight at this stage the historical background that preceded Sir Sykes’ negotiations with France or what was called the Sykes-Picot secret agreement. The direct cause that led the British to back the rise of Arab nationalism was a letter sent by Sharif Hussein Bin Ali, who proclaimed himself Emir of Mecca and King of Hijaz from 1904 to 1917, to the attention of Sir Henry McMahon, the high commissioner in Egypt, regarding the future of the Arab territories that were under Ottoman rule. The negotiations were mainly done through an exchange of letters between the two parties.

These letters were known as the McMahon-Hussein correspondence (from 14 July 1915 to 30 January 1916) during which the case of Syria, which was practically a French dependency, was laid on the table. The British, fearing to disrupt the Triple Entente between them, France and Russia, invited first the French to decide over a secret partition of the Ottoman lands and later invited Russia to validate the idea. This concern was first raised by Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, who thought that eventual British support of Syria’s independence would irritate the French; as he said: “our primary and vital object is not to secure a new sphere of British influence, but to get the Arabs on our side.”<sup>50</sup>

In order to preserve the entente with France, the British government summoned a French representative to discuss the matter and planned a “round of discussions”<sup>51</sup> for the purpose. In a first meeting held in London on 23 November, 1915, France sent François-Georges Picot, a Middle-East expert and a knowledgeable diplomat, who occupied the position of consul-general in Beirut before the war. The British were represented by Sir Arthur Nicolson, a simple British diplomat who did not manage to come to terms with Picot regarding a partition of the lands owned by the Ottomans. Thus the first meeting ended in disappointment for the British who thought that Picot was “uncompromising,”<sup>52</sup> yet they did not refrain from trying again during a second meeting with Picot. This time the British representative equaled the French one in both position and expertise; the British had chosen Sir Mark Sykes. The reunion of Sykes and Picot, which took place in December 1915, resulted in a presumably acceptable division of territories between the British and the French. The resolution was officially called the 1916 Asia Minor Agreement but was widely and informally known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

The secret agreement did not enjoy a great support for it was criticized years later by both the French and the British. Lloyd George, then occupying the position of Prime Minister as of 1916, thought that the agreement did nothing but “mutilate” Palestine. Yet, it was argued that the British-French decision to divide the territory as such was at the time agreed so as to meet British ends: to initiate an Arab revolt and be able to intervene militarily in the region, which would have not been possible had France not been amiably in agreement. “Without a British offensive, there could have been no Arab revolt, and without the Sykes-Picot Agreement there would have been no British offensive. The compromise with the French was the price that the British had to pay.”<sup>53</sup>

The archives made available today on this agreement show that Sykes disclaimed his responsibility on a number of occasions after having signed the document.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, having realized that his agreement with the French was like a commitment from which he needed to escape, he became convinced more than ever of the importance of supporting Zionism. In a letter he wrote to Lieutenant General Sir George Arthur on March 18,

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<sup>48</sup>*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 19, p. 349

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 19, p. 350

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> ElieKedouri. “Sir Mark Sykes and Palestine 1915-16”. *Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol. 06, N° 03 (Oct. 1970, p. 340)

1916, Sykes wrote To my mind the Zionists are now the key of the situation--the problem is how are they to be satisfied? With "Great Jewry" against us there is no possible chance of getting the thing thro'. ... I put it to Picot this way "Zionists want us for obvious reasons"—so he and I set to work to draft a scheme which I forwarded. As regards that scheme if it will satisfy Zionists, I think it can be worked, but always on terms, if the Zionists think [the] proposal good enough they will want us to win—If they [want] us to win they will do their best which means they will (A) calm their activities in Russia, (B) pessimise in Germany, (C) stimulate in France England & Italy (D) enthuse in U.S.A. This will be subconscious, unwritten, and wholly atmospheric.<sup>55</sup>

Such was the extent of Sykes' belief in the advantages of supporting Zionism. The Jews were able to instigate change and to stir the atmosphere naturally to their favor. Further encounters with such influential Zionists as Weizmann and Sokolow in 1917 further contributed to attracting Sykes to Zionism. The latter held a meeting with nine Zionist leaders on 17<sup>th</sup> February 1917 in which he reassured those present that "the Arabs would come to terms with Zionism". During the same year, Sykes travelled to Rome and met some of the Vatican authority figures and reassured them that "Zionism would not clash with Christianity or Catholic wishes concerning the holy places in Palestine."<sup>56</sup> Therefore, Sykes can be categorized among the considerably influential people that assisted Zionism in Britain, even though before the war he was quite skeptical of the Jews and their Zionist scheme.

Sykes and other British officials directly involved in Middle Eastern affairs saw in Zionism their only means to delegitimize the "regrettable" 1916 Asia Minor Agreement, and therefore, move the French out of Palestine. Zionism thus managed to attract British decision makers, especially after the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The year 1917 was crucial in getting a firm grip over the long sought for strategic area of Palestine—as was initially framed by Samuel Herbert in his 1914 letter to the war cabinet—whence the need to draft a legal document that would guarantee British commitment to Zionist aspirations. The following part will elaborate the effects of such a scheme.

### **British Zionist Activism And The Conclusive Effect Of The Balfour Declaration**

Benny Morris argues that the major turn in events related to the Jewish Zionist project took place during the years 1915-1916. This was not only due to the agreement between Sir Mark Sykes and his French counterpart Picot, but also to what Morris called "a crucial change in personnel [that] resulted in an unprecedentedly pro-Zionist constellation in Whitehall" during those two years (Morris 72). By change in personnel, Morris first cites the new Prime Minister David Lloyd George replacing Herbert Asquith. Lloyd George was assisted by the influential trio Sir Mark Sykes, William Ormsby-Gore (MP)—an intelligence officer based in Palestine supplying information about the Ottomans—and Leopold S. Amery (also MP), who suggested the Jews should fight along British lines against the Turks, hence the reason to embrace Zionism. In addition, Arthur James Balfour, described by Morris as a "philo-Zionist", occupied the position of foreign secretary. Finally, and to crown the ensemble of those who were in favor of a Jewish state idea, Winston Churchill was appointed the First Lord of the Admiralty. Morris quotes Churchill saying: "the establishment of a strong, free Jewish state astride the bridge between Europe and Africa, flanking the land roads to the east, would not only be an immense advantage to the British Empire but a notable step toward a harmonious disposition of the world among its peoples" (Cited in Morris 72).

It is argued that the inclination to Zionism in Britain started to intensify as of 1917 and continued after the Balfour Declaration (Gillon 132), yet what has been presented so far only shows how British Jewry actively prepared the terrain for an acceptance of Zionism in Britain. British Jews were able to convince their government of the necessity to endorse Zionism to get through the war and achieve far more important gains than the ones originally planned for. This can be concluded from the clumsy and much regretted decisions taken during the Sykes-Picot meeting to make of a part of Palestine a partly international zone that would be open to German threat and partly under French tutelage. One also recalls that at the beginning of the war, the war minister Lord Kitchener stated that there could be no interest in Palestine for the British, which was his argument for refusing Samuel's proposals advanced in 1914 to encourage the building of a Jewish state in Palestine through sponsoring "gradual but steady immigration" (Morris 72).

During the time preceding the Balfour Declaration, the close friendship between Chaim Weizmann (the president of the World Zionist Organization) and David Lloyd George (before the latter ascended the Premiership of Britain) became apparent and known to all (Gillon 133). The history of this friendship is referred to the scientific achievements of Dr. Weizmann, who on top of his political career was also a renowned chemist and a university lecturer. Weizmann had discovered that by isolating an organism from a bacterium, *clostridiumacetobutylicum* and fermenting it with cooked corn he could generate some important substances

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 344

<sup>56</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 19, p. 349

such as acetone, which is largely used in the manufacture of explosives.<sup>57</sup> Weizmann helped reinforce British war ammunitions with such a discovery, especially after the ammunition shortage crisis that Lord Kitchener was blamed for in 1915. This achievement earned Weizmann the position of director of the British Admiralty Laboratories from 1916 to 1919 (the most critical years of Lloyd George's Premiership).

Following the setback of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, pressure for a sort of proclamation in favor of the Zionist cause grew from all sides. However, there were some issues to settle before such a proclamation would be written, as Britain's main concern during WWI was to avoid irritating its allies. Sensing France's complete turn in foreign policy, Nahum Sokolow was sent to Paris to approach the French as to the British primary goal of supporting Zionist aspirations. Sokolow found that the French were supportive of "Jewish national aspirations" which was to be taken as a positive step.<sup>58</sup> Then he went to Italy, to visit the Vatican to reassure the Christian faith followers that they should have no fear of Zionism. Pope Benedict XV heartily replied: "God has willed it...I believe that we shall be good neighbors," then followed Italy's declaration of sympathy for Zionism on May 8, 1917.<sup>59</sup>

With the rise of the Turco-German threat of control over Palestine, the British also approached Russian Jewry with a campaign propagandizing Zionist British war aims, bearing in mind that the 6,000,000 Russian Jews were known for their inclination to favor Germany rather than Britain;<sup>60</sup> yet if Britain stressed its Zionist intentions, Russian Jews would surely cooperate. The rise of Zionism in Russia greatly affected the political scene in 1917, as the Zionist party there was the most considerable with a number of enrolled members increasing over five times the number of members before the war (from 25,000 to 140,000).<sup>61</sup> Thus Russian support for British war aims in Palestine was guaranteed.

While propagandizing for the Wilsonian principle of self-determination, British Zionists were able to escape any charges of self-centered territorial aims, and by doing so guaranteed to their existing and future potential allies (such as the U.S.) that all they wanted from Palestine was to solve the Jewish problem and put an end to their traumatic and diasporic existence. Influenced by the rising Zionist lobby in the U.S., President Woodrow Wilson lent his total support to the Zionist scheme in Palestine.<sup>62</sup> By October 1917, the British press started exercising considerable pressure on the government to document its claims of support to the Zionist cause. Lord Balfour, who had already asked Lord Rothschild and Weizmann to write a draft for such a proclamation months earlier, initiated a debate on the Jewish question in the war cabinet. The debate was ended by a letter Lord Balfour sent to Lord Rothschild stipulating the following

Foreign Office

November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1917

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet. "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country." I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours sincerely,

Arthur James Balfour<sup>63</sup>

The content of this letter became internationally known as the Balfour Declaration. It affected the course of events in the Middle East for the years to come and demonstrated the extent to which the Jews were able to be influential when the matter concerned their national determination. This declaration was Britain's key to acquiring a Mandate over Palestine, now that they had secured the allies' approval. The Mandate was first a provision stated in the Peace Treaty of Versailles (1919), and then it was sealed in the San Remo Conference (April 1920) that cancelled the French claim to areas in Palestine, as was agreed in the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916.

British Zionism thus led its quest to a suitable end, especially with the change of British government personnel during and after the British Mandate and with the rise in power of the United States. The preservation of British protection of Jewish interests in the Middle-East could hardly be guaranteed. Moreover, with the advent of WWII, Britain started shifting its policy in Palestine towards making double promises to both Arabs

<sup>57</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 20, p. 752

<sup>58</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, V. 03, p. 87

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> [http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The\\_Balfour\\_Declaration](http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Balfour_Declaration).

and Jews in the hope of securing Arab relations and avoiding further troubles in the region, a chapter that requires a larger space than the present article to be discussed I believe. A handover of Zionist role play was passed from British to American Jews, and it was then the turn of American Zionists to play their propagandist and fund raising role in the creation of a state for the Jews from the 1920s to 1948.

## II. Conclusion

As some prominent Arab scholars such as Abdelwahab Al Masiri, Rashad Abdallah Al Shamy, Ahmad Shalabi and Abdulfattah Al Ghounaymy seem to concur on the fragmentation of the Jews before and after the creation of the State of Israel, I personally argue that, on the contrary, the Jews have been united for more than twenty centuries thanks to their inner politics of recognition that reinforced their sense of ethnic and religious identity. The above mentioned scholars contend that the Jews are so fragmented and anarchic that they cannot be considered a social unit and that Zionism has nothing to do with the collective memory or the religious identity of the Jews. They also argue that it is Western Imperialist ideology that inspired the Jews to put an end to their diasporic existence. Such an argument is primarily based on a non-grounded theory called “the Jewish human surplus” that believes that the U.S. and the U.K. desired to expatriate the Jews in the world to any place outside Europe, Britain and the U.S., hence their support of the establishment of the State of Israel.

Taking the example of the Egyptian scholar Abdelwahab AlMasiri in his book *Man hom al Yahud? wa ma hia Al Yahudia?*<sup>64</sup> (Arabic for Who are the Jews? and What is Judaism?),<sup>65</sup> the theory of the “Jewish human surplus” posits that Palestine seemed the right place to which the Jews could be sent without considering this act of migration as one that aimed at ridding them from their countries of residence but one of a “return to the promised land”<sup>66</sup> (9). Al Masiri’s major arguments regarding the unity of the Jews, as he contends that the deconstruction of the notion of Jewish unity allowed him to conclude that Zionism has nothing to do with the reality of Jewish groups and sub-groups throughout the world (14). Therefore, Zionism—in his view—has never unified the Jewish people. In his survey, he casts a major focus on an identity crisis caused by the multicultural aspect of contemporary Israeli society but without analyzing the far/near consequences/implications of this crisis. On the contrary, he confirms that this identity schism is not at the root of any fragmentation in the Israeli society and that it is not a sign of collapse from within. He disclaims any contention attributed to him in this regard and suggests that the collapse of Israeli society will not take place as long as there is American support of Israeli policies and Arab absence from the Palestinian struggle since he perceives these two facts as the major elements backing the stability of Israeli society (14).

The establishment of the State of Israel, as partly demonstrated in this article through a focus on the role of British Jews, testifies of the existence of powerful politics of identity within the Jewish diaspora prior to 1948. My argument, contrary to Al Masiri’s, supports the existence of a Jewish bond that had always united the dispersed Jewish communities until 1948. This unity was cemented, in my view, through a collective traumatic history, a powerful collective memory and mainly through religion and historiography. These ideas I elaborate in a soon-to-be published study. One of the reasons that drive me to qualify the journey of the Jews prior to 1948 as one of self-fulfillment is their incessant need, whatever the nationality, to establish a separate and independent national identity for their co-religionists and probably for them as well in a very specific territory. The determination with which British Jewry strove to push all decision makers to help and fund a Jewish settlement in Palestine is nothing but a striking demonstration that the Jewish identity is probably under-evaluated in its purely religious form only. The uniting bond has always been a national feeling that was, throughout the means of historiography, a determining factor in the affirmation of Jewish national aspirations. Although there are studies by Israeli sociologists (Uri Ram for instance) asserting the existence of an Israeli identity crisis, a proper examination of historical politics of recognition among the Jews only confirms the power of the Jewish religious identity and the fragility of the national secular one.

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