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British Policy and the Creation of Israel

British policy in the Middle East and particularly, Palestine, has played a great role in aiding the creation of Israel. Not only did Britain open the door for possible Zionist aims to be recognized in Palestine, but the vast majority of the policies Britain established concerning Palestine would assist Zionist goals, directly or indirectly. Even when Britain wanted to hinder the creation of a Jewish state, their policies would work against them and ultimately, it would be because of these British decisions and actions that a Jewish state in the Middle East would eventually be created.

Britain's first major policy towards the Middle East came in July/October, 1915, with the advent of World War I earlier in the previous year. Fearing the loss of Egypt and the vitally important Suez Canal to the Ottoman Empire, Sir Henry McMahon, on behalf of the British Empire, wrote several letters and came to an agreement with a highly influential Arab leader, Sharif Hussein of Mecca, promising Arab independence in exchange for their cooperation in staging an Arab revolt against their Ottoman rulers. However, this promise of Arab freedom was never truly intended to be a reality by the British who instead had their own plans for dividing the Middle East between themselves and their ally, France, with France controlling Syria and Lebanon and Britain laying claim to Iraq, Trans-Jordan and Palestine. These plans were finalized in the secret, Sykes-Picot agreement of October 1916. With the Sykes-Picot agreement while Britain had erased any real hope for the creation of an independent Arab nation, they had opened up a new possibility, the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine and as the British cabinet had previously acknowledged and sympathized with Zionist aspirations for Palestine (in March, 1915) this possibility of a Jewish state was a very real one. These Zionist aspirations were again, officially, recognized in November, 1917, with the advent of the Balfour Declaration – "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object."

With these three early policies, Britain had managed to lay the first stone in the creation of a Jewish national home, while at the same time, greatly betray all the Arabs of the Middle East, especially the Palestinians, who were expecting freedom and a nation of their own. These decisions would cause much tension and violence in Palestine for many years to come (violence in this region is still raging in the present day) and as historians, Ahrom Bregman and Jihan el-Tahri

say in *The Fifty Years War: Israel and the Arabs* “Palestine proved to be the British Empire’s greatest mistake.”

Britain’s control of Palestine and the pro-Zionist framework they had laid out for it in the Balfour Declaration would become officially endorsed by the League of Nations on 24 April, 1920 at a conference in San Remo. From that moment, Palestine became an official mandate (or colony) of the British Empire however, where all other mandates decided upon in San Remo had the current inhabitants of the mandated lands working with their ruling powers (i.e. Britain, France) to establish self-governed, self supporting, nations within a set timeframe, the mandate on Palestine went against this general trend and made no such mention of an independent Palestinian nation to be formed. Instead the earlier Balfour Declaration was expanded and written into the San Remo Mandate, giving Zionist ambitions for Palestine a strong, legal, grounding. The San-Remo Mandate also helped the Jewish cause by calling for the establishment of ‘the Jewish Agency’ a “public body for the purpose of advising and cooperating with the Administration of Palestine in such economic, social and other matters as may effect the establishment of the Jewish national home.” In the following 2 years Britain went on to put into place the San Remo Mandate and its pro-Jewish policies, separating Trans-Jordan from Palestine in May, 1921, and then allotting the newly formed area of Palestine for Jewish immigration. Then in June, 1922, as if to show their commitment to Zionist goals, Britain gave a Jewish Zionist, Herbert Samuel, the role of Britain’s first High Commissioner (or Governor) to Palestine.

As a direct result of Britain’s mandate on Palestine, Jewish immigration to the country increased. However, as Ahrom Bregman and Jihan el-Tahri say in *The Fifty Years War: Israel and the Arabs* “[The Arabs] quickly began to fear that increased Jewish immigration would swamp them.” With rising, Arab, insecurity came violence and as a result many Jews (and Arabs) were killed. This led to British concern for the stability of the region and in July, 1937, a Royal Commission concluded with the ‘Peel Report’ that the partitioning of Palestine into separate territories, individually controlled by the Jews, Arabs and British, was the only way to quell unrest. The report also suggested that Jewish immigration should be limited to 12,000 people a year. While the report seemed to be somewhat anti-progressive towards the Zionist aspirations that Britain were so eager to meet in the San Remo Mandate, Zionists still accepted the report. This was because it would still provide an official Jewish national home and in the face of violence it re-affirmed Britain’s commitment to Zionism. However, the real significance of the Peel report towards the creation of Israel lies in that, for the first time, partition would be recognized as the only perceivable way to satisfy both Jewish and Arab ambitions for Palestine and it was this system of partition

that the UN would later implement in the aim of creating Jewish and Palestinian nations.

While the Jew's accepted the Peel Report, the Arabs did not and violence was on the increase (over 5000 were killed from Arab revolt between 1936 to 1939). Europe was also on the verge of another war and Britain would need to secure their Arab allies in order to keep oil flowing and the Suez Canal safe. These two combined factors forced Britain to scrap the Peel report in favour of something undeniably pro-Arab and on the 17th of May, 1939, the Macdonald White Paper was born. The White Paper stated that "The objective of His Majesty's Government is the establishment within ten years of an independent Palestinian State" and that "For the next five years a quota of 10 000 Jewish immigrants will be allowed" and "After the period of five years no further Jewish immigration will be permitted unless the Arabs of Palestine are prepared to acquiesce in it." This was a devastating blow towards Zionist objectives in Palestine, however, it would also, indirectly, become one of the greatest factors that contributed to the eventual creation of Israel.

This was because the White Paper came at a very unfortunate time for the Jewry of Europe - it was in full swing during the atrocities of the Holocaust. As a result, during the war, approximately 26,000 Jews who had spent their life savings trying to flee Europe and start a life in Palestine were turned away (sent to detention camps in Cyprus) by the British who stood firmly by the White Paper. After the war, the situation was much the same with approximately 100,000 Jews begging to be allowed into Palestine, however the difference was that Britain now had the full gaze of the world media upon them. Incidents like the one involving the battered American ferry, Exodus, in which 4,500 survivors of the Holocaust were forced onto three British prison ships and sent back to camps in Germany fueled international condemnation of Britain's Palestinian policy and created mass global sympathy for the plight of the Jew's. As Ahron Bregman and Jihan el-Tari say in *The Fifty Years War* "To fair-minded observers, Britain seemed to be adding to the horrors that the Jews in Europe had suffered". In direct retaliation to the White Paper and incidents such as the Exodus, Britain also had to contend with Jewish terrorism from groups such as the Irgun and the Stern Gang. These terrorist groups would blow up bridges, raid military camps and destroy rail roads – anything in an attempt to try and scare Britain out of Palestine. One such notable act of terrorism from the Irgun came on the 22nd of July, 1946, when the headquarters of British administration and armed forces (located in the southern wing of the King David Hotel) was blown up, taking the lives of 91 people.

After suffering international criticism and Jewish terrorism as a result of the White Paper, Britain decided to hand Palestine over to the United Nations (who would then partition it and create Israel). Then on the 15th of May, 1948, a disgraced

Britain withdrew from Palestine, leaving behind a country in turmoil, a turmoil it had created through its 33 years of differing policy.

Overall, British policy has played an integral role in the creation of Israel. Initially it opened up the possibility of a Jewish state in Palestine and gave the Zionists the strong European support it would need if their ambitions were ever to be recognized. British policy would then lay the groundwork for the Jewish state and facilitate more Jewish immigration, giving the Zionists their first real foothold on Palestine. It would pioneer the idea of Partition and even the British policy designed to work against Zionist aspirations (in the form of the White Paper) would inadvertently lead to global sympathy for the Jews. This in turn would lead to Britain's departure from Palestine, the partitioning of the country by the UN and finally an official Jewish state – Israel. Without any British intervention in Palestine, it is hard to see many of the above conditions occurring, conditions which were *all* necessary for the creation of Israel to actually occur. It is for this reason that British policy was absolutely vital to the creation of Israel.