

# **“AN OVERWHELMINGLY JEWISH STATE” - FROM THE BALFOUR DECLARATION TO THE PALESTINE MANDATE**

*Martin Gilbert*

On 22 July 1922, when the League of Nations announced the terms of Britain’s Mandate for Palestine, it gave prominence to the Balfour Declaration. ‘The Mandatory should be responsible,’ the preamble stated, ‘for putting into effect the declaration originally made on November 2nd, 1917, by the Government of His Britannic Majesty...in favor of the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people...’<sup>1</sup> The preamble of the Mandate included the precise wording of the Balfour Declaration.

Nothing in the Balfour Declaration dealt with Jewish statehood, immigration, land purchase or the boundaries of Palestine. This essay examines how British policy with regard to the ‘national home for the Jewish people’ evolved between November 1917 and July 1922, and the stages by which the Mandate commitments were reached.

In the discussions on the eve of the Balfour Declaration, the British War Cabinet, desperate to persuade the Jews of Russia to urge their government to renew Russia’s war effort, saw Palestine as a Jewish rallying cry. To this end, those advising the War Cabinet, and the Foreign Secretary himself, A.J. Balfour, encouraged at least the possibility of an eventual Jewish majority, even if it might – with the settled population of Palestine then being some 600,000 Arabs and 60,000 Jews – be many years before such a majority emerged. On 31 October 1917, Balfour had told the War Cabinet that while the words ‘national home...did not necessarily involve the early establishment of an independent Jewish State’, such a State ‘was a matter for gradual development in accordance with the ordinary laws of political evolution.’<sup>2</sup>

How these laws were to be regarded was explained in a Foreign Office memorandum of 19 December 1917 by Arnold Toynbee and Lewis Namier, the latter a Galician-born Jew, who wrote jointly: 'The objection raised against the Jews being given exclusive political rights in Palestine on a basis that would be undemocratic with regard to the local Christian and Mohammedan population,' they wrote, 'is certainly the most important which the anti-Zionists have hitherto raised, but the difficulty is imaginary. Palestine might be held in trust by Great Britain or America until there was a sufficient population in the country fit to govern it on European lines. Then no undemocratic restrictions of the kind indicated in the memorandum would be required any longer.'<sup>3</sup>

On 3 January 1919 agreement was reached between the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann and the Arab leader Emir Feisal. Article Four of this agreement declared that all 'necessary measures' should be taken 'to encourage and stimulate immigration of Jews into Palestine on a large scale, and as quickly as possible to settle Jewish immigrants upon the land through closer settlement and intensive cultivation of the soil'. In taking such measures, the agreement went on, 'the Arab peasant and tenant farmers shall be protected in their rights, and shall be assisted in forwarding their economic development.'<sup>4</sup>

The Weizmann-Feisal agreement did not refer to Jewish statehood. Indeed, on 19 January 1919, Balfour wrote to his fellow Cabinet Minister Lord Curzon: 'As far as I know, Weizmann has never put forward a claim for the Jewish Government of Palestine. Such a claim is, in my opinion, certainly inadmissible and personally I do not think we should go further than the original declaration which I made to Lord Rothschild.'<sup>5</sup>

Scarcely six weeks later, on February 27, in Balfour's presence, Weizmann presented the essence of the Weizmann-Feisal Agreement to the Allied Supreme Council in Paris, telling them that the nation that was to receive Palestine as a League of Nations Mandate must first of all 'Promote Jewish immigration and closer settlement on the land', while at the same time ensuring that 'the established rights' of the non-Jewish population be 'equitably safe-guarded'.

During the discussion, Robert Lansing, the American Secretary of State, asked Weizmann for clarification 'as to the meaning of the words "Jewish National Home." Did that mean an autonomous Jewish Government?' Weizmann replied, as the minutes of the discussion record, 'in the negative'. The Zionist Organisation, he told Lansing – reiterating what Balfour had told Curzon – 'did not want an autonomous Jewish Government, but merely to establish in Palestine, under a Mandatory Power, an administration, not necessarily Jewish, which would render it possible to send into Palestine 70,000 to 80,000 Jews annually'. The Zionist Organisation wanted permission 'to build Jewish schools where Hebrew would be taught, and to develop institutions of every kind. Thus it would build up gradually a nationality, and so make Palestine as Jewish as America is American or England English.'

The Supreme Council wanted to know if such a 'nationality' would involve eventual statehood? Weizmann told them: 'Later on, when the Jews formed the large majority, they would be ripe to establish such a Government as would answer to the state of the development of the country and to their ideals.'<sup>6</sup>



*British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour, 1917 (Israel National Photo Collection)*

The British Government supported the Weizmann-Feisal Agreement with regard to both Jewish immigration and land purchase. On June 19 the senior British military officer in Palestine, General Clayton, telegraphed to the Foreign Office for approval of a Palestine ordinance to re-open land purchase 'under official control'. Zionist interests, Clayton stated, 'will be fully safeguarded.'

Clayton's telegram was forwarded to Balfour, who replied on July 5 that land purchase could indeed be continued 'provided that, as far as possible, preferential treatment is given to Zionist interests'.<sup>8</sup>

The Zionist plans were thus endorsed by both Feisal and Balfour. But on 28 August 1919 a United States commission, the King-Crane Commission, appointed by President Woodrow Wilson, published its report criticising Zionist ambitions and recommending 'serious modification of the extremist Zionist programme for Palestine of unlimited immigration of Jews, looking finally to making Palestine distinctly a Jewish State'.<sup>9</sup>

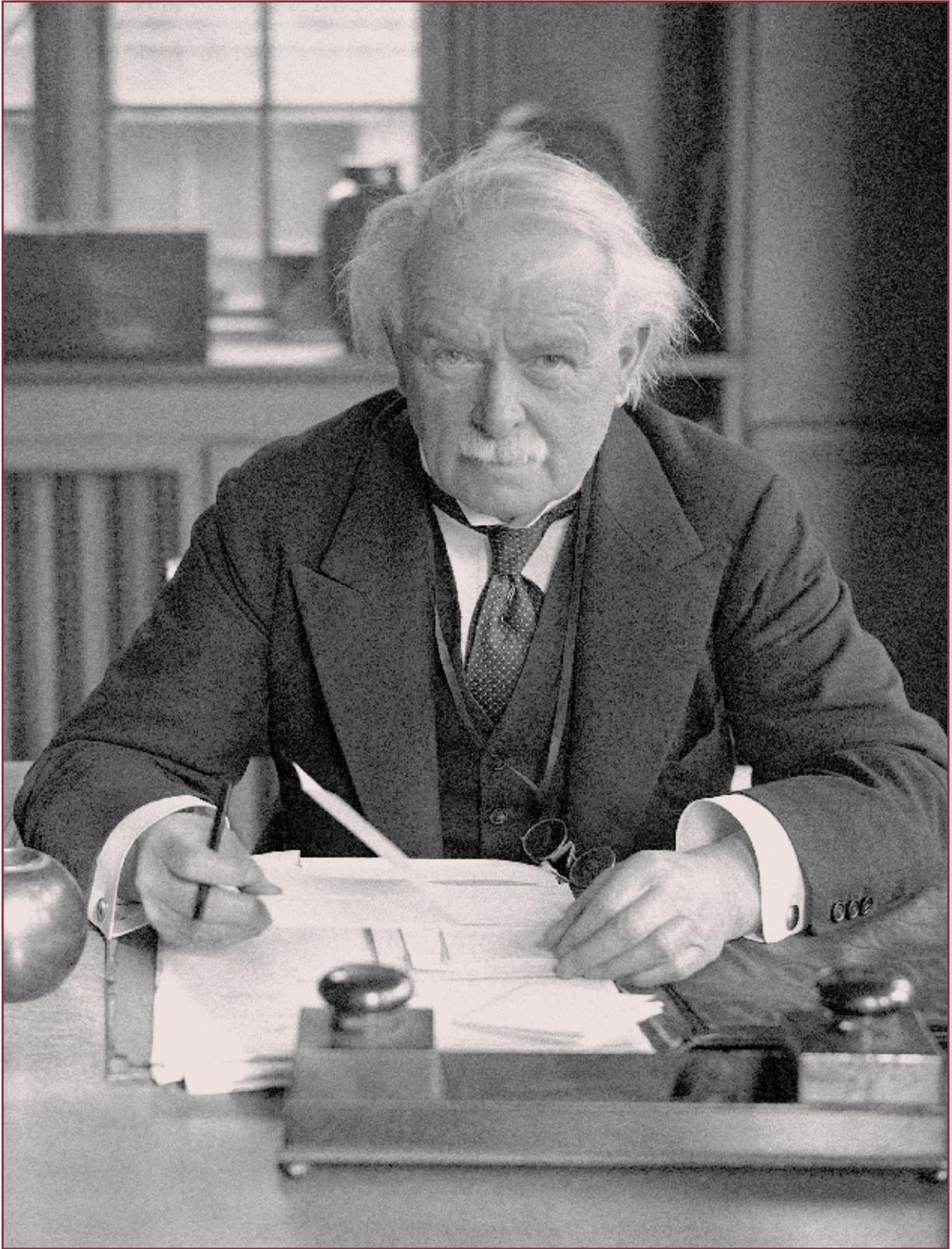
The King-Crane Commission went on to state that the Zionists with whom it had spoken looked forward 'to a practically complete dispossession of the present non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine, by various forms of purchase'. In their conclusion, the Commissioners felt 'bound to recommend that only a greatly reduced Zionist programme be attempted'; a reduction that would 'have to mean that Jewish immigration should be definitely limited, and that the project for making Palestine a distinctly Jewish commonwealth should be given up'.<sup>10</sup>

The United States was in a minority at the Supreme Council. On September 19 the Zionists received unexpected support from *The Times*, which declared: 'Our duty as the Mandatory power will be to make Jewish Palestine not a struggling State, but one that is capable of vigorous and independent national life'.<sup>11</sup>

Winston Churchill, then Secretary of State for War, and with ministerial responsibility for Palestine, took a more cynical view of Zionist ambitions. On October 25, in a memorandum for the Cabinet, he wrote of 'the Jews, whom we are pledged to introduce into Palestine and who take it for granted that the local population will be cleared out to suit their convenience'.<sup>12</sup>

Churchill's critical attitude did not last long. Fearful of the rise of Communism in the East, and conscious of the part played by individual Jews in helping to impose Bolshevik rule on Russia, he soon set his cynicism aside. In an article entitled 'Zionism versus Bolshevism: the Struggle for the Soul of the Jewish People', he wrote in the *Illustrated Sunday Herald* on 8 February 1920 that Zionism offered the Jews 'a national idea of a commanding character'. Palestine would provide 'the Jewish race all over the world' with, as Churchill put it, 'a home and a centre of national life'. Although Palestine could only accommodate 'a fraction of the Jewish race', but 'if, as may well happen, there should be created in our own lifetime by the banks of the Jordan a Jewish State under the protection of the British Crown which might comprise three or four millions of Jews, an event will have occurred in the history of the world which would from every point of view be beneficial, and would be especially in harmony with the truest interests of the British Empire.'

Churchill's article ended with an appeal for the building up 'with the utmost rapidity' of a 'Jewish national centre' in Palestine; a centre, he asserted, which might become 'not only a refuge to the oppressed from the unhappy lands of Central Europe', but also 'a symbol of Jewish unity and the temple of Jewish glory'. On such a task, he added, 'many blessings rest'.<sup>13</sup>



*Former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, January 16, 1943 (AP Photo)*

On 24 April 1920, at the San Remo Conference, the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George accepted a British Mandate for Palestine, and that Britain, as the Mandatory Power, would be responsible for giving effect to the Balfour Declaration. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, noted in his diary that there had been a 'two-hour battle' among the British and French delegates, 'about acknowledging and establishing Zionism as a separate State in Palestine under British protection'.<sup>14</sup>

In January 1921, Lloyd George appointed Churchill to be Secretary of State for the Colonies, charged with drawing up the terms of the Mandate and presenting them to the League of Nations. In March 1921, at the Cairo Conference, Churchill agreed to the establishment of a Jewish gendarmerie in Palestine to ward off local Arab attacks (Churchill preferred a Jewish Army). He also agreed that Transjordan, while part of the original Mandated Territory of Palestine, would be separate from it, and under an Arab ruler. This fitted in with what Britain had in mind as the wider settlement of Arab claims. On 17 January 1921, T.E. Lawrence had reported to Churchill that Emir Feisal 'agreed to abandon all claims of his father to Palestine' in return for Mesopotamia (Iraq) – where Churchill agreed at the Cairo Conference to instal him as King – and Transjordan, where Feisal 'hopes to have a recognised Arab State with British advice'.<sup>15</sup>

From Cairo, Churchill went to Jerusalem, where he was given a petition from the Haifa Congress of Palestinian Arabs, dated 14 March 1921, which began: '1. We refuse the Jewish Immigration to Palestine. 2. We energetically protest against the Balfour Declaration to the effect that our Country should be made the Jewish National Home.'<sup>16</sup> Churchill rejected the Arab arguments. 'It is manifestly right,' he announced publicly on March 28, 'that the Jews, who are scattered all over the world, should have a national centre and a National Home where some of them may be reunited. And where else could that be but in the land of Palestine, with which for more than 3,000 years they have been intimately and profoundly associated? We think it would be good for the world, good for the Jews, and good for the British Empire.'<sup>17</sup>

After Churchill's visit, Arab violence in Jaffa led the British High Commissioner in Palestine, a British Jew, Sir Herbert Samuel, to order an immediate temporary suspension of Jewish immigration. This did not find favour in the Colonial Office. A telegram drafted for Churchill by one of his senior advisers, Major Hubert Young, who during the war had played his part in the Arab Revolt, was dispatched to Samuel on May 14. 'The present agitation,' the telegram read, 'is doubtless engineered in the hope of frightening us out of our Zionist policy... We must firmly maintain law and order and make concessions on their merits and not under duress.'

On June 22 Churchill explained the British position on Zionism at a meeting of the Imperial Cabinet. The Canadian Prime Minister, Arthur Meighen, questioned Churchill about the meaning of a Jewish 'National Home'. Did it mean, Meighen asked, giving the Jews 'control of the Government'? To this Churchill replied: 'If, in the course of many years, they become a majority in the country, they naturally would take it over.'<sup>18</sup>



*Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime prime minister, arrives at the White House in Washington on March 11, 1946.  
(AP Photo/William J. Smith)*

Churchill was asked about this sixteen years later by the Palestine Royal Commission. ‘What is the conception you have formed yourself,’ he was asked, ‘of the Jewish National Home?’ Churchill replied: ‘The conception undoubtedly was that, if the absorptive capacity over a number of years and the breeding over a number of years, all guided by the British Government, gave an increasing Jewish population, that population should not in any way be restricted from reaching a majority position.’ Churchill went on to tell the Commission: ‘As to what arrangement would be made to safeguard the rights of the new minority’ – the Arab minority – ‘that obviously remains open, but certainly we committed ourselves to the idea that some day, somehow, far off in the future, subject to justice and economic convenience, there might well be a great Jewish State there, numbered by millions, far exceeding the present inhabitants of the country and to cut them off from that would be a wrong.’ Churchill added: ‘We said there should be a Jewish Home in Palestine, but if more and more Jews gather to that Home and all is worked from age to age, from generation to generation, with justice and fair consideration to those displaced and so forth, certainly it was contemplated and intended that they might in the course of time become an overwhelmingly Jewish State.’<sup>19</sup>

Whether the Jews could form a majority – the *sine qua non* of statehood – was challenged publicly by Herbert Samuel on 3 June 1921, when he said that ‘the conditions of Palestine are such as not to permit anything in the nature of mass immigration.’<sup>20</sup> But at a meeting in Balfour’s house in London on July 22, Lloyd George and Balfour had both agreed ‘that by the Declaration they had always meant an eventual Jewish State.’<sup>21</sup>

Churchill’s adviser, Major Young, likewise favoured a policy that, he wrote to Churchill on August 1, involved ‘the gradual immigration of Jews into Palestine until that country becomes a predominantly Jewish State.’ Young went on to argue that the phrase ‘National Home’ as used in the Balfour Declaration implied no less than full statehood for the Jews of Palestine. There could be ‘no half-way house,’ he wrote, between a Jewish State and ‘total abandonment of the Zionist programme.’<sup>22</sup>

When the Cabinet met on August 17 there was talk of handing the Palestine Mandate to the United States, but Lloyd George rejected this. The official minutes noted: ‘stress was laid on the following consideration, the honour of the government was involved in the Declaration made by Mr Balfour, and to go back on our pledge would seriously reduce the prestige of this country in the eyes of the Jews throughout the world.’

On 3 June 1922 the British Government issued a White Paper, known as the Churchill White Paper, which stated: ‘So far as the Jewish population of Palestine are concerned it appears that some among them are apprehensive that His Majesty’s Government may depart from the policy embodied in the Declaration of 1917. It is necessary, therefore, once more to affirm that these fears are unfounded, and that that Declaration, re-affirmed by the Conference of the Principal Allied Powers at San Remo and again in the Treaty of Sèvres, is not susceptible of change.’

The White Paper also noted: ‘During the last two or three generations the Jews have recreated in Palestine a community, now numbering 80,000... it is essential that it should know that it is

**in Palestine as of right and not on the sufferance. That is the reason why it is necessary that the existence of a Jewish National Home in Palestine should be internationally guaranteed, and that it should be formally recognized to rest upon ancient historic connection.**<sup>23</sup>

To reinforce this concept of 'right', Churchill had granted the Zionists a monopoly on the development of electrical power in Palestine, authorising a scheme drawn up by the Russian-born Jewish engineer, Pinhas Rutenberg, to harness the waters of the Jordan River. To stop what critics were calling the 'beginning of Jewish domination', a debate was held in the House of Lords demanding representative institutions that would enable the Arabs to halt Jewish immigration. In the debate, held on June 21, sixty Peers voted against the Mandate as envisaged by the White Paper, and against the Balfour Declaration. Only twenty-nine Peers voted for it.

On July 4 it fell to Churchill to persuade the House of Commons to reverse this vote. He staunchly defended the Zionists. Anyone who had visited Palestine recently, he said, 'must have seen how part of the desert have been converted into gardens, and how material improvement has been effected in every respect by the Arab population dwelling around.' Apart from 'this agricultural work – this reclamation work – there are services which science, assisted by outside capital, can render, and of all the enterprises of importance which would have the effect of greatly enriching the land none was greater than the scientific storage and regulation of the waters of the Jordan for the provision of cheap power and light needed for the industry of Palestine, as well as water for the irrigation of new lands now desolate.' The Rutenberg concession offered to all the inhabitants of Palestine 'the assurance of a greater prosperity and the means of a higher economic and social life.'

Churchill asked that the Government be allowed 'to use Jews, and use Jews freely, within limits that are proper, to develop new sources of wealth in Palestine.' It was also imperative, he said, if the Balfour Declaration's 'pledges to the Zionists' were to be carried out, for the House of Commons to reverse the vote of the House of Lords. Churchill's appeal was successful. Only thirty-five votes were cast against the Government's Palestine policy, 292 in favour.<sup>24</sup>

The way was clear for presenting the terms of the Mandate to the League of Nations. On July 5, Churchill telegraphed Sir Wyndham Deedes, who was administering the Government of Palestine in Samuel's absence, that 'every effort will be made to get terms of Mandate approved by Council of League of Nations at forthcoming session and policy will be vigorously pursued.'<sup>25</sup>

On 22 July 1922 the League of Nations approved the Palestine Mandate (it came into force on 29 September 1923). One particular article, Article 25, relating to Transjordan, disappointed the Zionists, who had hoped to settle on both sides of the Jordan River. **'In the territories lying between the Jordan and the eastern boundary of Palestine as ultimately determined', Article 25 stated, 'the Mandatory shall be entitled, with the consent of the Council of the League of Nations, to postpone or withhold application of such provisions of this mandate as he may consider inapplicable to the existing local conditions, and to make such provision for the administration of the territories as he may consider suitable to those conditions, provided that no action shall be taken which is inconsistent with the provisions of Articles 15, 16 and 18.'**

The Zionists pointed out that Article 15 was clearly inconsistent with not allowing a Jewish presence in Transjordan, for it stated clearly, with regard to the whole area of Mandatory Palestine, west and east of the Jordan, that **‘The Mandatory shall see that complete freedom of conscience and the free exercise of all forms of worship, subject only to the maintenance of public order and morals, are ensured to all. No discrimination of any kind shall be made between the inhabitants of Palestine on the ground of race, religion or language. No person shall be excluded from Palestine on the sole ground of his religious belief. The right of each community to maintain its own schools for the education of its own members in its own language, while conforming to such educational requirements of a general nature as the Administration may impose, shall not be denied or impaired.’**

The rest of the Mandate was strongly in support of Zionist aspirations. Article 2, while making no reference to the previous four and a half years’ debate on statehood, instructed the Mandatory to secure **‘the development of self-governing institutions.’** In a note to the United States Government five months later, the Foreign Office pointed out that ‘so far as Palestine is concerned’ Article 2 of the Mandate ‘expressly provides that the administration may arrange with the Jewish Agency to develop any of the natural resources of the country, in so far as these matters are not directly undertaken by the Administration’. The reason for this, the Foreign Office explained, ‘is that in order that the policy of establishing in Palestine a national home for the Jewish people could be successfully carried out, it is impractical to guarantee that equal facilities for developing the natural resources of the country should be granted to persons or bodies who may be motivated by other motives.’<sup>26</sup> It was on this basis that the Rutenberg electrical concession had been granted as a monopoly to the Zionists, and on which representative institutions had been withheld for as long as the Arabs were in a majority.

Article 4 recognised the Zionist Organization as the ‘appropriate Jewish Agency’, to work with the British Government ‘to secure the co-operation of all Jews who are willing to assist in the establishment of a Jewish national home.’ Article 6 instructed the Palestine Administration both to ‘facilitate’ Jewish immigration, and to ‘encourage’ close settlement by Jews on the land, ‘including State lands and waste lands not required for public purposes.’<sup>27</sup>

On the evening of 22 July 1922, Eliezer Ben Yehuda, the pioneer of modern spoken Hebrew, went to see his friend Arthur Ruppin. It was more than forty years since Ben Yehuda had come to live in Palestine. He had just seen a telegram announcing that the League of Nations had just confirmed Britain’s Palestine Mandate. ‘The Ben Yehudas were elated,’ Ruppin recorded in his diary, with Ben Yehuda telling Ruppin, in Hebrew, ‘now we are in our own country.’ Ruppin himself was hesitant. ‘I could not share their enthusiasm,’ he wrote. ‘One is not allocated a fatherland by means of diplomatic resolutions.’ Ruppin added: ‘If we do not acquire Palestine economically by means of work and if we do not win the friendship of the Arabs, our position under the Mandate will be no better than it was before.’<sup>28</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Council of the League of Nations, League of Nations Permanent Mandates Commission, 22 July 1922: *League of Nations – Official Journal*.
- 2 War Cabinet minutes, 30 October 1917; Cabinet Papers, 23/4.
- 3 Foreign Office papers, 371/3054.
- 4 The text of the Weizmann-Feisal Agreement was quoted in *The Times*, 10 June 1936.
- 5 Curzon papers, India Office Library.
- 6 Supreme Council minutes: *Event 4651: Zionist presentation to the Supreme Council of the Paris Peace Conference*.
- 7 Foreign Office papers, 371/4171.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Henry C. King was a theologian and President of Oberlin College, Ohio. Charles R. Crane was a prominent Democratic Party contributor who had been a member of the United States delegation at the Paris Peace Conference.
- 10 *Report of American Section of Inter-Allied Commission of Mandates in Turkey: An official United States Government report by the Inter-allied Commission on Mandates in Turkey. American Section. First printed as 'King-Crane Report on the Near East', Editor & Publisher: New York, 1922, Editor & Publisher Co., volume 55.*
- 11 *The Times*, London, 9 September 1919.
- 12 Churchill papers, 16/18.
- 13 *Illustrated Sunday Herald*, 8 February 1920.
- 14 Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, diary (unpublished).
- 15 Churchill papers, 17/20.
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 *ibid.*
- 18 Minutes of the Imperial Cabinet: Lloyd George papers.
- 19 Palestine Royal Commission, notes of evidence, 12 March 1937: Churchill papers: 2/317.
- 20 Samuel papers.
- 21 Weizmann papers.
- 22 Colonial Office papers, 733/10.
- 23 *Statement of British Policy in Palestine*, Command Paper 1700 of 1922, 3 June 1922.
- 24 *Hansard*, Parliamentary Debates, 4 July 1922.
- 25 Colonial Office papers, 733/35.
- 26 Communication dated 29 December 1921, Command Paper 2559 of 1926.
- 27 Council of the League of Nations, League of Nations Permanent Mandates Commission, 22 July 1922: *League of Nations – Official Journal*.
- 28 Arthur Ruppini diary, Ruppini papers.