2017— ISRAEL'S TRIPLE ANNIVERSARY YEAR

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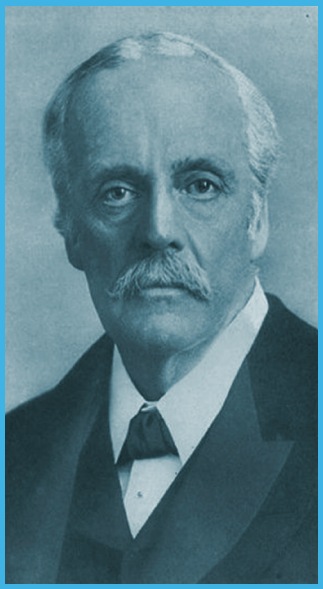

On the cover:

Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur James Balfour, whose Declaration of November 2, 1917, expressed the British government's support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Crowd in Tel Aviv celebrates UN passage of partition, November 29, 1947.

Israeli soldiers reach the Western Wall, June 7, 1967.

INTRODUCTION

2017 marks the centennial of the Balfour Declaration, the pivotal British government document that recognized the historical Jewish link to the land upon which the State of Israel would be established. On November 2, 1917, British Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur James Balfour wrote that his government favored "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people," setting the stage for eventual international recognition of the Jewish state.

In advance of the landmark anniversary, the Palestinian Authority has announced plans to file a lawsuit against Great Britain in an international tribunal. According to the PA's foreign minister, the Balfour Declaration "gave people who don't belong there something that wasn't theirs," making Great Britain responsible for "Israeli crimes."[1] PA President Mahmoud Abbas echoed these sentiments in a speech before the UN General Assembly, and the PLO has launched a yearlong campaign "to remind the world and particularly Britain that they should live up to their historical responsibility and atone for the big crime Britain committed against the Palestinian people."[2]

Palestinian leaders eager to place Great Britain in the dock for the Balfour Declaration are wrong on two counts. First, the Jews certainly did "belong" in Palestine since it was historically "theirs." Second, recognition of that fact was not just a British idiosyncrasy in 1917, but developed into an international consensus.

As it happens, the centennial of the Balfour Declaration in 2017 is not the only memorable anniversary this year marking an event the Palestinian leadership might like to reverse: there are two more that grew directly out of the Declaration.

Seventy years ago, on November 29, 1947—30 years post-Balfour—the United Nations General Assembly voted to approve the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. The decision was accepted by the Jews but rejected by the Arabs, who responded with war when the Jews declared the creation of the State of Israel, a war the Arabs lost.

And 50 years ago—chronologically midway between the Balfour Declaration and today—Israel, facing imminent invasion from Egypt and Syria, whose leaders had issued public calls for the liquidation of the Jewish state, acted preemptively on June 5, 1967. Israel won an astounding and complete victory in six days, a result that some in the Arab world have yet to internalize.

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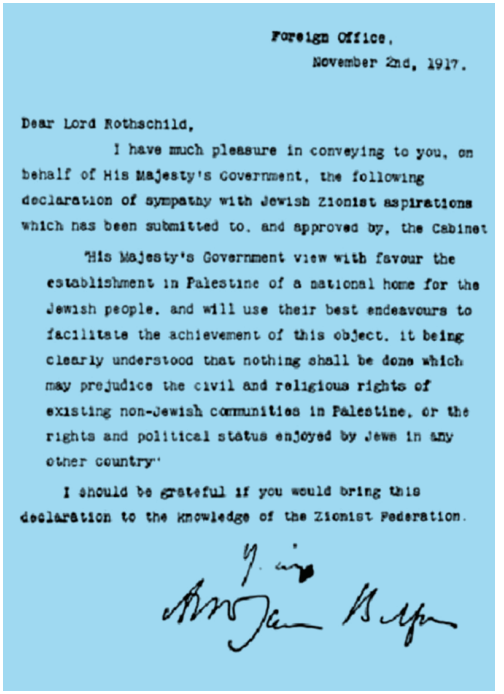
[1]"Palestinians gear up to sue the UK—over 1917 Balfour Declaration," *Times of Israel*, July 25, 2016.

[2]https//gadebate.un.org/en/71/palestine-state; David Horovitz, "Palestinian campaign vs Balfour shows hostility to Jewish state undiminished after 100 years," *Times of Israel*, October 25, 2016.

1917: The Balfour Declaration

The leaders of the British government that issued the Balfour Declaration had grown up reading the Bible—including the part they called the Old Testament. The declaration's author, Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur James Balfour, and its champion, Prime Minister David Lloyd George, knew that the Hebrew Bible was centrally concerned with the Jewish people's connection to its Holy Land, a fact also known to just about every other literate Christian and Jew.



Foreign Office,
November 2nd, 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.

They were familiar with the verses: "And the Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Genesis 12:1). Abram's destination was Canaan, the biblical term for Palestine/Israel. "The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'I will assign this land to your offspring'" (12:7). The promise was repeated to his son Isaac (26:3) and his grandson Jacob (35:12). When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, God appeared to Moses and promised to free the slaves, declaring He would "bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and I will give it to you as a possession" (Exodus 6:8). After 40 years of wandering the desert, the Israelites entered the promised land under Joshua, Moses' successor. Around the year 1,000 BCE they established a monarchy there with a Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Two generations later the kingdom split into northern and southern states. The former was conquered by Assyria in 722 BCE and the latter by Babylonia in 586 BCE. The Israelites were exiled in both cases, but while the northerners (the "Ten Lost Tribes") disappeared, the Babylonian exiles were allowed to return to their land when the Persians defeated the Babylonian Empire.

A second Jerusalem Temple, erected in 515 BCE, functioned as the center of Jewish life for close to six centuries. Over that period Jews exercised varying degrees of self-rule under the Persians, the Syrian Greeks, the Hasmonean Jewish dynasty, and the Romans, who finally destroyed the Temple in the course of quelling a rebellion in 70 CE. Another uprising aimed at achieving independence in 135 CE met a similar fate, ending the dream of Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land until modern times.

Nevertheless, Jewish communities persisted over the centuries in what had been the Land of Israel under Byzantine Christian and then Muslim rule. Furthermore, the Jewish connection to the Land remained a centerpiece of Jewish religious practice even in far-flung exilic communities. The prayer book featured requests for God to "gather us from the four corners of the Earth to our land" (morning service immediately before the Sh'ma prayer); the Yom Kippur service and the Passover Seder ended with the declaration, "Next year in Jerusalem!"; the prayers for rain in the fall and dew in the spring were geared not to the agricultural calendar where most Jews actually lived, but to the seasons in Israel; and pious Jews all over the world arranged for their bodies to be buried in Israel, and, if that proved impossible, acquired small bags of Israeli earth to place in their graves.

The return of sizable numbers of Jews to Israel and the establishment there of a functioning, modern Jewish community along with a revival of Jewish national culture began to be discussed in the late 19th century, as rising anti-Semitism and economic hardship convinced many European Jews that they would never achieve full equality where they lived. Jews were already the largest religious group in Jerusalem in the 1860s, and over the next few decades Jews, mostly from Russia—where a wave of pogroms beginning in the 1880s set off a large Jewish emigration—and Romania, established agricultural settlements in previously barren locations. The Zionist movement, which explicitly called for a Jewish state as the only realistic antidote to anti-Semitism, was launched by the Hungarian-born Theodor Herzl, whose 1896 publication *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State) set the stage for the First Zionist Congress, which convened the next year in Basel, Switzerland, chaired by Herzl. The movement, committed to diplomatic action to secure a state, continued on its course after Herzl's untimely death in 1904, even as its annual congresses reported little progress.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 created a new reality for the Zionist cause. When hostilities began, the movement declared itself neutral. The land of ancient Israel, popularly referred to as Palestine, was part of the Ottoman Empire, an ally of Germany and the Habsburg Empire—collectively called the Central Powers. The opposing international coalition, the Entente, was led by France, Great Britain, and Russia. Early in the war British Prime Minister Lloyd George and some of his colleagues gave thought to the likelihood of the breakup and dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire should the Entente achieve victory. Securing control over Palestine, they understood, could accomplish two British goals: establish a presence to the immediate east of Suez to help protect the British-run canal, and set up a Jewish homeland there under British sponsorship, in a sense fulfilling the biblical prophecy of Jewish return that was so much a part of British Protestant culture. However, not only did other influential government figures disagree, but Britain's partner France also had designs on the region. For the moment, the matter lay dormant.

In early 1917, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, a leading Russian Zionist and naturalized British subject, who, as a chemist, had aided the war effort by developing a new technique for extracting acetone (a substance used in explosives), built upon his contacts with senior officials to initiate talks about a British-Zionist alliance. The course of the war and a perhaps exaggerated estimate of Jewish political power aided Weizmann's efforts. The conflict appeared deadlocked, and an increasingly desperate Great Britain sought American intervention on its side to turn the tide, and, in the wake of the February revolution in Russia, hoped to keep that ally in the war so that Germany would not be able to shift its armies from the Eastern Front to the West. Espousing the Zionist cause, the thinking went, would please the Jewish communities of the two countries and help tilt their governments' policies in a pro-British direction. Indeed, some in the government feared that Germany might preempt them and issue its own declaration of support for Zionism. The fateful decision was made to attach the British cause to Zionism.

The Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, was actually a letter from the foreign secretary to the eminent British Jew, and Zionist, Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild. Balfour informed Rothschild that the following "declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations" had been 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 endeavors 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.[3]

The letter's repercussions went far beyond Britain. Endorsed by the United States (which had entered the war against Germany in April), France, and Italy, Balfour's declaration made the Zionist project a war aim of the ultimate winners. In December, when General Edmund Allenby and his British troops entered Jerusalem and ousted the Ottomans, astonished Jews around the world, bereft of their homeland for over 1800 years, could be forgiven for thinking in messianic terms. The war ended in 1918 with the defeat of Germany and its allies. The San Remo Conference of 1920, convened by the victors to decide the fate of the territories of the defunct Ottoman Empire, adopted the terms of the Balfour Declaration, and three years later the new League of Nations, created to resolve international disputes peacefully, designated Palestine a mandate of Great Britain, which restated its aim to work toward the establishment of a Jewish national home there, although it specifically excluded the area east of the Jordan River from Jewish settlement. Britain indeed made a separate agreement with the Hashemite royal family to create a new entity there, the emirate of Transjordan, in 1921, which emerged as an independent state in 1946 and was subsequently renamed Jordan.

[3] David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York, 1989), p. 297.

1947: UN Adopts Partition

UN General Assembly Votes on Partition of Palestine, November 29, 1947.

Neither the British government nor the Zionist leadership itself expected significant Arab opposition to the implementation of the Balfour Declaration. During the war the British had reached an agreement with Sherif Hussein, then in control of Mecca, to lead an Arab revolt against the Ottomans in return for the promise of Arab independence afterwards. Although later critics would charge that the Balfour Declaration contradicted the pledge to Hussein, that pledge did not mention Palestine as part of the proposed Arab state, and in any case the planned Arab revolt never took place.

"Immediate Arab reaction to the Balfour Declaration," writes the eminent historian Walter Laqueur, "was not one of unmitigated hostility."[4] Arab speakers participated in events celebrating the declaration, and some newspapers in the Arab world suggested that the native population had much to gain from cooperation with the Zionist enterprise. Hussein's son Faisal, eager to attract British backing for his claim to the kingship of Syria, met with Chaim Weizmann in 1918, and the two signed a document in January 1919 that recognized the legitimacy of both Arab and Jewish nationalisms, and specified that the Arab state would not include Palestine (Faisal would later disavow this).

Anti-Jewish riots in Palestine during 1920-21 suggested that Faisal's views did not necessarily represent those of ordinary Arabs there, who feared the effects of Jewish land purchases and the eagerness of the Zionists to promote "Jewish labor," potentially endangering their jobs. Far more serious violence broke out

[4] Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York, 1972), p. 236.

in August 1929, ignited by disturbances at the Western Wall and whipped up by Muslim religious authorities—Haj Amin el Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, in particular—and it spread to other cities. One hundred and thirty-three Jews were killed, 60 of them in Hebron; the surviving Hebron Jews escaped the city, leaving it without Jews for the first time in centuries. As conditions for Jews deteriorated in Europe—and especially with the rise to power of Adolf Hitler in Germany in 1933—Jewish immigration to Palestine rose, and by 1935 Jews made up some 30% of the population. Palestinian Arab leaders responded by organizing an armed revolt against the British in 1936, demanding formation of an Arab state and the prohibition of further Jewish immigration and sale of land to Jews. The uprising was not put down until 1939. While the Arab demands were not officially met, the British government sought to assuage Arab resentments by sharply reducing Jewish immigration to Palestine beginning in 1936, ostensibly for economic reasons.

That year Great Britain also sent a commission to investigate the situation in Palestine. The recommendations it made, conveyed in the Peel Report published in 1937, called for partition into Jewish and Arab states, a solution that would maintain the Balfour Declaration's promise of a Jewish homeland and also furnish self-government for the local Arabs. While the proposed Jewish state was severely truncated and would be almost impossible to defend against attack, the majority of delegates at the Zionist Congress that year voted their approval, desperate to provide a haven in Palestine for the Jews under threat in Hitler's Europe. The Palestinian Arab leadership, adamant in opposition to Jewish sovereignty in any part of Palestine, announced it would accept only a unitary government in which the Arab majority would rule.

With war against Germany looming and the British fearful that the Nazi regime might attract significant support in the Arab world, London issued the White Paper of 1939 stating that after five years immigration to Palestine would be allowed only with consent of the Arabs—an outright repudiation of the Balfour Declaration that would close off Palestine to Jews fleeing for their lives from World War II, which would begin that fall, and from the Holocaust. Addressing the House of Commons on the subject of the White Paper, Winston Churchill noted the success of Zionism in building up a Jewish national presence in Palestine and asked, "How can we find it in our heart to strike them this mortal

blow?"[5] Yet when Churchill became prime minister in 1940 he kept the White Paper in force, and throughout the war British naval forces sought to block "illegal" Jewish immigration into Palestine.

As the horrific news of Germany's destruction of European Jewry got out to the world, the closing off of the Jewish national homeland to those managing to escape Hitler's inferno provided a potent argument that a Jewish state in Palestine was needed, if for no other reason than as a haven for the refugees. Yet even after the war ended in 1945 the new Labour government in Great Britain, eager to remain in the good graces of the Arab world, continued to enforce the White Paper of 1939 and barred Jewish immigration to Palestine. Illegal immigration continued and armed Jewish resistance groups—the mainstream Haganah and the more militant Irgun and Stern Gang—fought the Mandatory authorities.

In 1947 Great Britain announced it was washing its hands of the Palestine problem and would give up the mandate. It asked the newly created United Nations to decide the fate of Palestine. On May 15 the UN General Assembly appointed a committee, known by the acronym UNSCOP, to visit the region and investigate the matter. The majority report, issued August 31, called for partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states as had the Peel Report ten years earlier, and, like that document, set constricted boundaries for the Jewish state that deeply disappointed the Zionists. Realizing nevertheless that this was the best deal they could hope for at the moment, Zionist leaders announced their support. Predictably, the Arab world once again refused to countenance a Jewish state in any part of Palestine, and condemned partition.

The UN General Assembly voted on the UNSCOP report on November 29, 1947, approving the partition plan by 33 to 13, with 10 abstentions. Both the United States and the Soviet Union—which at the time saw it as a means to weaken British influence in the Middle East—voted with the majority. Most of the dissenting votes came from Arab states. Great Britain abstained. Fifty years since Herzl's First Zionist Congress and thirty years after Lord Balfour issued his declaration, the world body representing the community of nations brought into

[5] Quoted in Laqueur, *History of Zionism*, p. 510.

existence the sovereign Jewish homeland that the former had foretold and the latter had envisioned.

The Arab world, though, was no more favorable to that concept now than it had been in 1917. Immediately after the UN acted, Palestinian Arabs launched attacks on the Jews. And on May 14, 1948, when the British officially relinquished the Palestine Mandate and the Jews declared the new State of Israel, the armed forces of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq attacked, fully expecting to bring the Zionist dream to a crashing end. They failed, and by the time the UN arranged an armistice in 1949, Israel was in control of more land than had been allotted by the UN plan. The Arab state that was to have been set up never came into being, Jordan occupying territory on the West Bank of the Jordan River that the UN had designated for that state—plus the Old City of Jerusalem, which was to a have been internationalized—and Egypt controlling the Gaza Strip. The hundreds of thousands of Arabs who fled Palestine in the course of the fighting ended up in refugee camps, and a roughly equivalent number of Jews living in Arab countries were forced to leave, most finding haven in the State of Israel.

1967: Israel Defeats Those Seeking Its Destruction

Israel's Declaration of Independence stressed the historic connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel where "their spiritual, religious and national identity was formed," the UN partition plan that authorized a Jewish state, and the new nation's commitment to "the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of religion, race, or sex."[6] But even the creation of the democratic State of Israel and the international recognition conferred by its admittance into the UN did not alter the Arab refusal to countenance its reality or own up to its legitimacy. The Arab nations denied Israel diplomatic recognition and insistently proclaimed their abiding intention to destroy it.

[6] Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, eds., *The Israeli-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict* (New York, 2008), pp. 81-83.


INTERNATIONAL

Herald Tribune

Published with The New York Times and The Washington Post

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Israel Battling Arabs in 3-Front War

Rey Gets Top Post With EEC

Chosen to Head Joint Executive

Nasser's Allies Rushing Planes and Men to War

Negev Tank Clash; Firing in Jerusalem

CAIRO CROWDS—Excited Egyptians run through a Cairo street after the announcement by Cairo radio that fighting had broken out against the Israeli forces.

U.S. Bans

During Israel's early years Arab terrorists would often infiltrate across the border and attack Israelis—encouraged, in particular, by the new Egyptian regime headed by Gamal Abdel Nasser—triggering Israeli reprisals. By 1956 Nasser had nationalized the Suez Canal, was receiving large quantities of arms from the Soviet bloc, and spoke publicly of invading and dismantling the Jewish state. Israel countered by invading the Sinai, in cooperation with the British and the French who were eager to oust Nasser and retake the canal. Forced to retreat from the Sinai by international pressure, Israel insisted upon, and received, assurances that its ships could pass freely through the Straits of Tiran off the Sinai coast, a key trade route to Africa and Asia.

Nasser violated that very pledge in the spring of 1967, blockading the Straits after convincing the UN to withdraw its peacekeeping force from the area. Egypt announced the mobilization of its armed forces and Nasser declared that, in coordination with Syria, it was about to erase the shame of 1948 and 1956 and deal Israel a knockout blow. Government-controlled Cairo Radio broadcast on May 25, "The Arab people is firmly resolved to wipe Israel off the map and to restore the honor of the Arabs of Palestine."[7] When diplomatic efforts to avert hostilities failed, Israel launched preemptive attacks on Egyptian and Syrian airfields on June 5, and after Jordan, ignoring Israeli warnings to

[7] Ibid, p. 107.

stay out of the war, joined the anti-Israel coalition, on Jordanian forces as well. It was Israel that delivered the knockout blow: six days later Israel was in control of the Sinai and Gaza Strip, the formerly Syrian Golan Heights, and the entire West Bank of the Jordan, including the Old City of Jerusalem. The threat of annihilation was removed.

Addressing the UN on June 19, Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban expressed the hope that Israel's complete victory would finally convince the Arab world to accept the Jewish state and make peace. He said:

> In free negotiation with each of our neighbors we shall offer durable and just solutions redounding to our mutual advantage and honor. The Arab states can no longer be permitted to recognize Israel's existence only for the purpose of plotting its elimination. They have come face to face with us in conflict. Let them now come face to face with us in peace.[8]

But even the stunning Arab debacle made no dent in the wall of Arab rejectionism. Meeting at Khartoum in August, Arab leaders announced "no recognition, no negotiations, no peace" with Israel. The same Arab refusal to accept the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and to come to terms with the UN partition plan of 1947—decisions that had brought war and Arab defeats—was repeated after 1967, even as Israel controlled all of the land from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.

It took another military bout—the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, when Israel at first reeled from a surprise Egyptian and Syrian attack, but then recovered and beat it back—to break the unanimous wall of Arab rejectionism. Four years later, on November 20, 1977, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat addressed the Israeli Knesset and told the Israeli people "we accept to live with you in permanent peace based on justice."[9] Negotiations at Camp David under the sponsorship of U.S. President Jimmy Carter followed, and a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt was signed in March 1979: Israel relinquished the entire Sinai to Egypt, which pledged to keep it demilitarized, and the two countries normalized relations and exchanged ambassadors.

[8] Ibid, p. 110.
[9] Ibid, p. 214.

The View from 2017

The peace treaty with Egypt—by far the dominant Arab power—has held up until today. It demonstrates what the Zionist movement has claimed since Balfour's time, that cooperation with the Jewish national movement would bring far greater benefits to the Arab world than continual denial and delegitimization. The Kingdom of Jordan has drawn the same conclusion: in 1988 it officially severed all ties with the West Bank, which it had lost to Israel in 1967, and in 1994 established full diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. In recent years Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States have shown interest in following a similar course and developing diplomatic and economic ties with Israel—if only out of a shared fear of Shi'ite, non-Arab Iran—but no concrete steps have yet been taken.

Sadly, the Palestinian leadership—now divided between the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority on the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza—remains saddled with the obsolete mindset that the Jews have no legitimate right to a state, and hence the repeated Palestinian refusals to negotiate face-to-face with Israel for a peaceful two-state solution, and the ludicrous Palestinian diatribes against Balfour, his country, and his 100-year-old Declaration. All too often, the international community goes along with the farce—as happened when UNESCO denied the historical Jewish link to Jerusalem.

Balfour maintained his interest in the Zionist project in retirement, and in 1925 traveled to Jerusalem for the laying of the cornerstone of the Hebrew University. Balfour, who died in 1930, could hardly have imagined that a century after his Declaration the "national homeland" he envisioned for the Jewish people would be the democratic, confident, prosperous, boisterous State of Israel of today, and that the Arab enemies of peace would be reviling his name. But he did have a premonition that he had laid the groundwork for something of lasting importance. Toward the end of his life Balfour told his niece that of all the accomplishments over his long public career, the Declaration—he referred to it as what he did "for the Jews"—was "the thing he looked back upon as the most worth his doing."[10]

[10] Barbara W. Tuchman, *Bible and Sword: England and Palestine from the Bronze Age to Balfour* (New York, 1956), p. 203.

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Across the U.S. and around the world, AJC is fighting for a safer, more peaceful future for the Jewish people, Israel, and all humanity. You have the power to amplify our advocacy. Won't you join us? Now is the time to stand up and be counted.

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