

Winston Churchill's complex Zionist evolution

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November 2 marks the 90th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, when British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour committed the British Empire to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. This pivotal event led 31 years later to the establishment of the State of Israel. The Declaration was a rare incident when a wildly exaggerated perception of Jewish power - an enduring anti-Semitic feature in Europe and now resurgent throughout the world - actually helped the Jews instead of leading to their persecution.

It is precisely on this anniversary that it is worth recalling one prominent British statesman whose attraction to Zionism was more idealistic than his peers, Winston Churchill. His commitment to Zionism waxed as Britain's waned, and he eventually emerged as a leading Gentile Zionist who contributed to the establishment of the State of Israel.

THE BRITISH first seriously considered establishing some sort of Jewish entity in Palestine early in WWI amid debate over divvying up the Ottoman Empire, which was allied with the Germans. Support for the idea grew in 1917 among various officials for religious, humanitarian, and historical considerations. They were also motivated by a strategic imperative. Imbued with an exaggerated sense of Jewish power, which the Zionists since Theodor Herzl encouraged, many British officials were convinced that a pro-Zionist declaration would bring them greater support for the war effort in the newly allied United States and the tottering pro-Allied government in Russia. For that narrow purpose the Balfour Declaration was a bust; by the time it was published in Russia on November 29 Lenin had entered Petrograd and the new Bolshevik regime withdrew from its wartime alliance and the war.

Enter Winston Churchill, who was naturally philo-Semitic and drawn to the romantic notion of Jewish restoration to their ancient homeland. In 1908, when most considered Zionism a foolish fantasy, he dramatically declared that the establishment of a Jewish political entity in Palestine "would be a tremendous event in the history of the world."

But his early Zionism was tenuous and in 1915 he suggested giving the Holy Land to Belgium, and said nothing amid the discussion and then issuance of the Balfour Declaration. After WWI he even opposed British acquisition of the Palestine and Iraqi mandates under the League of Nations because he thought they would drain dear resources and wanted to maintain the Ottoman Empire as a counter to Bolshevik Russia.

THE TURNING-POINT came in 1921, when as colonial secretary Churchill had to implement the increasingly unpopular Balfour Declaration. He knew very little about the Middle East and decided, based on advice from aides, to give 75% of Palestine to an Arabian prince, Abdullah, without even consulting the Zionists. After that decision he visited Palestine, where he encountered Palestinian Arabs, whom he considered backward and anti-British. He favored the Palestinian Jews, and he spoke to 10,000 of them at the site of the uncompleted Hebrew University in Jerusalem, declaring, "My heart is full of sympathy for Zionism." He was especially moved when he saw beautiful vineyards and pioneers of Rishon Lezion, asserting, "Nothing will stand in your way. You have changed desolate places to smiling orchards and initiated progress instead of stagnation."

He came to view the Zionists as kindred spirits and collaborators in the great mission to civilize the world - his preeminent objective - and remained forever a Zionist at heart.

Although skeptical of British control of Palestine, Churchill returned to England and ardently defended the government's pro-Zionist policy, insisted on the continued ability of Jews to immigrate into Palestine in the face of resistance from British officials in Palestine and hostility from Palestinian Arabs, encouraged the Jews to establish durable institutions, and claimed the Jews were in Palestine "as of right and not by sufferance."

In the 1930s, Churchill emerged as one of the leading Gentile Zionists in England as Britain increasingly turned against Zionism, culminating with the Neville Chamberlain government's 1939 White Paper that capped Jewish immigration into Palestine and sought to end the possibility of a Jewish homeland.

But Churchill, viewing the world very differently, became more anti-Arab, more sympathetic to Jews facing Nazi persecution, and intent for Britain to appear steadfast and strong in its commitments. He also came to feel a personal bond with the Jews and Zionists, who shared his besieged and isolated fate in the British wilderness. He led the charge against the White Paper, ultimately failing but undercutting the government's position.

During WWII as prime minister, Churchill eagerly battled anti-Zionist British officials and encouraged more Jewish immigration into Palestine, sought to arm Palestinian Jews against the Arabs, and worked hard to fashion a postwar regional settlement that would include a Zionist state, which he was prepared to impose on the Palestinian Arabs by force if necessary. He was unsuccessful in his bold diplomatic effort partly because of Franklin's Roosevelt's equivocation.

Churchill then ignored the Zionist issue after the war for various reasons, for which he felt guilty, until after Israel's War of Independence when he pronounced the Jewish state a great event in world history, and sought to reorient British foreign policy toward a more pro-Israel line.

Churchill's complex evolution as a Zionist was not linear but the trajectory was upward as Britain became increasingly hostile to Zionism, contributing to his unpopularity among fellow Conservatives. In some pivotal moments, he either advanced Zionist interests or at least prevented a more anti-Zionist turn by the government.

He eventually concluded that Zionism and then Israel righted an historical wrong, addressed humanitarian demands, advanced Western civilization, and contributed to British and Western strategic interests. Zionism fit into Churchill's broader worldview and his support for it endured.

The writer, foreign policy director of the Bipartisan Policy Center, is author of the new book, Churchill's Promised Land (Yale University Press/New Republic Books).

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