

DID THE SAN REMO CONFERENCE ADVANCE OR UNDERMINE THE PROSPECTS FOR A JEWISH STATE?

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As a Jew, I wish that the resolution signed 100 years ago had been what today's celebrants claim it was. As a historian of Israel, I must report that it was much less.

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Three years ago this month, Israel marked not one but two major anniversaries: the centennial of the Balfour Declaration, announcing British support for a Jewish national home in Palestine (November 2, 1917), and 70 years since the UN General Assembly partition resolution calling for separate Jewish and Arab states in Palestine (November 29, 1947). Both are widely recognized as landmarks on the road to Israeli independence.

This year, though, we've been told by Zionist organizations, Israeli officials, and political activists that we should really be celebrating a different date entirely: namely, this year's centennial of an international conference held in San Remo on the Italian Riviera in late April 1920. At that conference, a sequel to the post-World War I Paris peace conference of 1919, Britain and France (along with Italy and Japan) agreed on the division of the post-Ottoman Levant and Mesopotamia into League of Nations mandates.

As any glance at an Israeli calendar shows, this event is not something that's usually been commemorated. Is it nevertheless really the case, as some insist, that San Remo was and remains *more* important to Israel's legitimacy than the Balfour Declaration and the UN resolution? Advocates of this idea say things like this:

*At San Remo, "the title to Palestine was given to the Jewish people."

*The San Remo agreement is "the best proof that the whole country of Palestine and the Land of Israel belongs exclusively to the Jewish people under international law."

*"San Remo explains why Israel's borders include Judea and Samaria."

Indeed, in the judgment of one pundit, so important is San Remo that the street in Jerusalem named for the 1947 UN resolution—it's called the 29th of November Street—should be renamed for the San Remo accords.

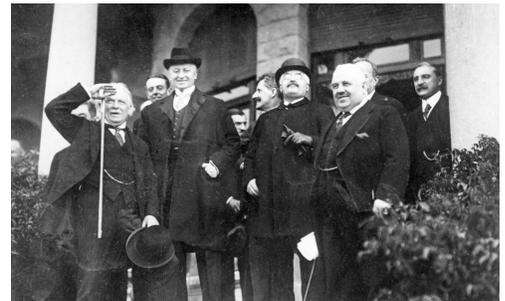
A reasonably informed supporter of Israel could be excused for not knowing any of these claims—and for good reason, since none of them is true. That doesn't make San Remo any the less interesting, but its real significance lies in the opposite direction: in, to be precise, Britain's history of imperial self-dealing, which at San Remo and as a consequence of San Remo nearly undermined any prospect of a Jewish state.

Some background: the remnants of the Ottoman empire in the Fertile Crescent were divided at the San Remo conference into two zones, one British and the other French. The Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 had already done this informally. Four years later, the San Remo conference did so in a formal agreement subsequently ratified in 1922 by the League of Nations, which also granted mandates over the respective territories. The mandates for Iraq and Palestine went to Britain; the one for Syria and Lebanon went to France.

The principal difference from the Sykes-Picot plan concerned Palestine. In 1916, the British and French couldn't agree over who should get it, so they resolved to share control. In 1920, at San Remo, the French formally yielded to the British insistence on exclusive control of Palestine in return for exclusive French control of Syria.

To help justify its solo mandate, Britain also insisted on including, within its preamble, the text of the recent Balfour Declaration of 1917 in which Britain "viewed with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." Eventually, expanding on Balfour, the mandate would also invoke the Jews' historical connection to the land and recognize their right to settle it "closely."

These provisions were hailed as a triumph for Zionism. There were only about 80,000 Jews in the whole country, yet here came the League of Nations, a world body, to recognize the Jewish people's historical right to its "national home." The British Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann,



Prime Minister Lloyd George and Earl Curzon of the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Alexander Millerand of France, and Prime Minister Francesco Nitti of Italy at the League of Nations Peace Treaty Conference in San Remo on May 13, 1920. *Getty*.

widely regarded as having single-handedly secured the Balfour Declaration, openly took credit for this victory as well. Once back in London from having personally worked the halls at San Remo, he announced to the British Zionist Federation: “We stand before you with a declaration of independence in our hands, the independence of Eretz-Israel and the Jewish people.”

As against Weizmann’s triumphalism, other leading Zionist figures harbored serious doubts about San Remo. In particular, they focused on the phrase “national home,” brought over from the Balfour Declaration, and the failure of Zionist diplomacy to achieve something more substantial than that. The phrase may have been good enough for the Declaration, which was not a legal but a moral statement. In fact it had been coined by the Zionists themselves (in the person of Nahum Sokolow) precisely because of its helpful ambiguity, which would make such a declaration easier to secure. San Remo’s job, by contrast, was to produce a binding legal commitment, and there Zionists had pushed in vain for a British mandate that would promise a “Jewish commonwealth”—that is, a state.

It was Ze’ev Jabotinsky, the future leader of Revisionist Zionism, who saw the consequences most clearly. The term “national home,” he said, “lacked precision,” and by now “its vagueness has been universally recognized.” Nevertheless,

the tenacity with which the term has been retained in the [San Remo] draft betrays a deliberate intention to leave wide margins for interpretation at the discretion of the Mandatory Power. . . . I need not elaborate the truism that any principle of a constitution (especially if couched in vague terms) can be rendered inoperative by a willful administration.

The Zionist thinker [Ahad Ha’am](#) pointed to exactly the same problem:

When the British promise was confirmed at San Remo, we began once more to blow the messianic trumpet, to announce the “redemption.” . . . But essentially it added nothing, and the text of the earlier promise [i.e., Balfour] remains absolutely unaltered. . . . Everything, therefore, depends on the good will of the [British] “guardian,” on whom was placed at San Remo the duty of giving the promise practical effect. Had we paid attention to realities, we should have restrained our feelings and waited a little to see how the written word would be interpreted in practice.

It’s not that Jabotinsky and Ahad Ha’am saw no progress at all in San Remo. Jabotinsky thought that “from the strictly juridical point of view, these clauses of the mandate give us a base for defending our claim against eventual attempts at a restrictive interpretation.” For his part, Ahad Ha’am noted that the mandate raised the Balfour Declaration “to the level of an international obligation, and from that point of view it is undoubtedly of great value.”

But, for them, these considerations couldn’t obscure the fact that at San Remo, Palestine had been given not to the Jews but to the British. Previously, Britain had been in Palestine by conquest. Now British rule enjoyed the full recognition of Britain’s wartime Allies, soon followed by the League’s grant to Britain alone of “full powers of legislation and of administration, save as they may be limited by the terms of this mandate.” The British made sure that those terms left them ample leeway to interpret the “national home” obligation as they saw fit.

Of equal moment, but less known at the time, was the fact that San Remo also upgraded Arab rights in Palestine.

The Balfour Declaration had famously included a sentence qualifying British support for a Jewish national home—namely, that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.” Some interpreted this passage as conferring superior rights on the Jews. The Jews, that is, were to enjoy national and political rights, whereas the “non-Jewish communities”—read: the Arabs—were accorded lesser “civil and religious rights.” To many Zionists, this was a virtue of both the Declaration and the mandate. For the same reason, Arabs and other anti-Zionists denounced both documents.

This is why, till today, British governments have felt the need to apologize for this part of the Balfour Declaration. To take one recent example: on the occasion of its 2017 centennial, then-Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson told the House of Commons that its drafters “should have spoken of the political rights” of the Palestinian Arabs.

At San Remo, however, both Britain and France had already gone a step farther, agreeing between them that “civil rights” *included* political rights. This is revealed in the (French) record of the deliberations.

Britain’s main goal at San Remo was to cut the deal that would keep Palestine for the British alone in exchange for giving the French exclusive writ over Syria. During the negotiations, however, while the Zionists were pressuring the British to upgrade their commitment to the Jews, the French sought to water it down. Lord Curzon, the British foreign secretary, thought to put off both sides by the simple device of importing the Balfour Declaration into the mandate “as is.” But French Prime Minister Alexandre Millerand, who headed his country’s delegation, had other ideas.

Latching on to the Declaration’s concern for the “civil and religious rights” of non-Jews, Millerand insisted that this was inadequate: “I urge that these rights include political rights as well as civil and religious rights.” Curzon balked: “I have undertaken not to modify anything in the Declaration.” Millerand: “In French, the words ‘civil and religious rights’ do not include ‘political rights,’” so perhaps the text should simply say “rights.” Curzon: “I cannot accept this suggestion because it would imply a change in the terms of the Declaration.”

There then followed this exchange:

Millerand: So I ask that it be formally heard and entered into the record that “civil and religious rights of non-Jewish communities” includes in the minds of the British government, as in ours, *political*, civil, and religious rights.

Curzon: I don’t understand the difference between civil and political rights. In English, the word “civil” also refers to political rights. Besides, I have no objection to Mr. Millerand’s statement being included in the minutes. . . .

Millerand: I agree; I personally accept the [Balfour Declaration] text proposed by the British delegation as long as it is understood that nothing has changed in the current situation of non-Jewish communities in Palestine.

Curzon: Exactly.

This was the price exacted by France for allowing the Balfour Declaration to enter international law. By mutual agreement, the powers recognized the political rights of the Arabs of Palestine under the rubric of (the English meaning of) “civil rights.”

Two weeks after San Remo, Millerand related its outcome to the commander of French forces in the Levant. France, he told him, “had never admitted that Palestine could become a Zionist state or that a Zionist regime could be established in Palestine.” To the contrary, it had always made clear,

in the most explicit way, that Jewish groups would not enjoy any degree of political, civil, or religious rights superior to those of other populations or Christians or Muslims. . . . At the San Remo conference, the explanations exchanged between Lord Curzon and myself left me in no doubt on these points.

Ahad Ha’am immediately reached the same conclusion. While the mandate did include “the recognition of the historic right of the Jewish people to build its national home in Palestine,” it simultaneously “negat[ed] the power of that right to override the right of the present inhabitants and to make the Jewish people sole ruler in the country.”

The spinning of the mandate in the direction of “even-handedness” found another expression in the wording of the mandate itself. While the Zionist draft proposed that the mandate should license the Jews “to reconstitute Palestine as their national home,” the mandate’s final text stipulated only that they were to be allowed “to reconstitute their national home *in* that country” (my emphasis).

The rejection of the Zionist draft owed to Curzon, whose suspicion of Zionism far exceeded his sympathy for it. As he himself wrote,

[W]hile Mr. Balfour’s Declaration had provided for the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine, this was not the same thing as the reconstitution of Palestine as a Jewish National Home—an extension of the phrase for which there was no justification.

So out the “extension” went.

It has been argued that this didn’t matter— that, in the words of the late attorney Howard Grief, champion of the San Remo thesis, “the changes engineered by Curzon watered down the obvious Jewish character of the mandate but did not succeed in suppressing its aim—the creation of a Jewish state.” In fact, it did succeed in suppressing that aim—or would have if that had indeed been the mandate’s aim.

Later that same year, Weizmann complained privately that “so much water has been poured into the wine that I am quite sure there will be great disappointment when the mandate is published.” In 1931, he admitted publicly that “the mandate also includes qualifying clauses which in a way impair the weight of the Zionist provisions.” Those “qualifying clauses” were loopholes the British made for themselves, in anticipation that they might need them.

In sum, the mandate’s interpretation as agreed upon at San Remo added only so much to the Zionist arsenal. And that became clear from day one. Major-General Sir Louis Bols, the chief military administrator of Palestine in 1920, announced the San Remo outcome to the inhabitants of Palestine with this reassurance to the Arabs:

Immigrants will be allowed only as required for the development of the country, and immigration will be controlled by the British Government of the country. . . . The British Government will govern and in no sense will a minority be allowed to control the majority of the population when the time arrives for any form of representative government.

At the time he issued that statement, Arabs outnumbered Jews nine to one in Palestine.

The following year, Sir Herbert Samuel, the first British civilian High Commissioner, made clear in his report to the League how Britain would interpret the mandate:

The measures to foster the well-being of the Arabs should be precisely those which we should adopt in Palestine if there were no Zionist question and if there had been no Balfour Declaration. . . . The degree to which Jewish national aspirations can be fulfilled in Palestine is conditioned by the rights of the present inhabitants.

This same Herbert Samuel, a British Jew, had been a favorite of the Zionist lobby at San Remo, where he’d cooperated with Weizmann and Sokolow. Yet little more than a year later he could frame “Arab rights” as limits upon Jewish “national aspirations.” Truth be told, so vague was the mandate that his interpretation could not be said to have contradicted it.

This became the story of the British mandate. In the very earliest stages, the British interpreted “national home” as allowing Jewish immigration on a scale that might have made the Jews a majority in the fullness of time. Then they reinterpreted it more narrowly:

immigration would be limited by the “absorptive capacity” of the country. Finally they reinterpreted it to impose strict limits on immigration, so that the Jews would remain a minority in a predominantly Arab Palestine. They could pivot in this way because “national home,” as Jabotinsky said once again in 1937, was an “evasive and elusive term.”

For all of these reasons, there have always been those Zionists and Israelis who have seen the Balfour Declaration itself, not to mention the San Remo conference, as serving a British scheme—Menachem Begin called it “the British Master Plan”—for seizing Palestine under the guise of support for Zionism.

Britain, Begin wrote in his memoir *The Revolt* (English edition 1951), coveted Palestine for strategic reasons, but it couldn’t just annex it. Instead, it adopted a “clever” ruse “to take over control of Palestine without seeming to”:

Britain would promise the Jews a Home—in Palestine. Not Palestine as a Home, but a Home *in* Palestine. Britain would have Palestine, and the Jews would have a Home in it. Such a policy would also help British interests in America, for the Jews there had influence. . . . Arabs, when required, would “rebel” against the “foreign invasion”; and the Jews would be forever a threatened minority. Each would have to be protected from the other—by British bayonets. That, roughly, was the flavor of thought underlying the Balfour Declaration. That was how the British mandate was hatched, and how British policy in Eretz-Israel developed.

To Begin’s mind, the British at San Remo had dealt themselves Palestine under a League of Nations cover. And the text of the mandate was the clue: the Jews merely got a home *in* (British) Palestine, which the British could restrict as they pleased.

Of course, Begin knew how to play all cards. In 1944 he reproached Prime Minister Winston Churchill for failing to uphold the Balfour Declaration, and in 1977 he even cited the mandate in his reply in the Knesset to Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat during the latter’s historic visit to Israel. But he clearly believed, as he wrote in *The Revolt*, that both texts had been cunningly crafted to *limit* Zionist rights.

And that brings us to an irony and a curious turn in the spiral: today, some of Begin’s heirs, including some quoted at the beginning of this essay, claim that actually the mandate *expanded* Israel’s future rights, including even its right to Judea and Samaria.

How so? The argument, pioneered by Howard Grief, goes like this: the mandate enjoined Britain to “encourage . . . close settlement by Jews on the land,” and Britain had a mandate for *all* of Palestine. So Jewish settlement anywhere in the land cannot be illegal. Moreover, although in 1947 the UN General Assembly passed a partition resolution calling for a Jewish and an Arab state, it wasn’t ever adopted by the Security Council but remained a mere recommendation. Thus, in the absence of a Palestinian Arab state, Israel stands as the sole successor state to the League of Nations mandate, and application of Israeli sovereignty to any territory of the mandate cannot be challenged on legal grounds. (The legal principle invoked here is known as *uti possidetis juris*, “as you possess under law.”)

It’s an arcane argument. But whatever its legal merits, it’s no surprise that Zionists never advanced it during most of the century since San Remo. From Jabotinsky to Ahad Ha’am to Begin, the view prevailed that the Zionists at San Remo failed to get an unambiguous commitment to Jewish sovereignty, and failed to get the entire land designated as the “national home.” It wasn’t for lack of trying, as the record shows. Unfortunately, however, while the British-crafted mandate recognized Jewish national rights, it didn’t concede any Jewish right to interpret them. This right the British reserved to themselves.

Not surprisingly, then, San Remo quickly faded into obscurity. The Jews of Palestine celebrated Balfour Day for years, and for sound reason. In that declaration, Britain made no claim for itself, ostensibly appearing instead as a disinterested friend offering moral support. At San Remo, by contrast, Britain staked its own claim to Palestine. San Remo provided Britain with a license to assimilate the country into an empire that already covered a quarter of the earth’s surface, and that country was to be governed according not to Jewish but to imperial imperatives.

In the ensuing decades, both the British and the Jews soured on the mandate, and Jewish resistance to the British percolated. San Remo sank into oblivion. In Palestine, where the name of Balfour appeared on prominent streets in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa, the name of San Remo appeared on a lone beachside hotel in Tel Aviv whose owners intended to evoke not the diplomatic conference but the belle-époque glitter of the Riviera.

Upon Israel’s creation in May 1948, its founders situated its international legitimacy within the UN General Assembly resolution of 1947, which explicitly recommended the establishment of a Jewish *state*. True, Israel’s declaration of statehood also cites the mandate, specifically for having provided “international sanction to the historic connection between the Jewish people and Eretz-Israel and to the right of the Jewish people to rebuild its National Home.” But the crucial line in that declaration refers only to the 1947 action of the UN:

By virtue of our natural and historic right and on the strength of the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, we hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel, to be known as the State of Israel.

So does San Remo’s centennial deserve to be commemorated? It does—and precisely as one more pillar of legitimacy for the state of Israel. But invoking it to legitimate more than that, such as Israeli sovereignty over all of mandate Palestine, is itself a deviation from the past Zionist and Israeli understanding both of San Remo and of the mandate. In that understanding, San Remo left an unfortunate legacy of ambiguity regarding Jewish sovereignty and its extent, an ambiguity that Zionism had to struggle to overcome.

This should be acknowledged—precisely out of respect for the grit of the founders, who perfectly grasped the ambivalence of the “international community” on the matter of a Jewish state. Only in 1947 did the idea of such a state receive any shred of international legitimacy. To think otherwise is to minimize the uphill struggle of Zionism under the British.

Consider this example, from the World Zionist Organization itself. At San Remo, the WZO proclaims in its centennial [video clip](#), the Allies

gave Britain the mandate for Eretz-Israel, with an explicit declaration in favor of an independent Jewish state in the territory. This was the first time in 2,000 years that the world had recognized the idea of Jewish sovereignty in Eretz-Israel.

Alas, not so. Had San Remo conformed to this depiction, perhaps a Jewish state would have arisen before the Holocaust and been able to save millions of European Jews from annihilation. Precisely because San Remo failed to produce an explicit declaration in favor of a Jewish state and Jewish sovereignty, it took almost 30 more years of struggle, and the Holocaust, to elicit that recognition. It came at a steep price in Jewish blood, and even then was issued with the usual proviso that the Arabs were also entitled to a share.

As a Jew, I wish that San Remo had been what today’s celebrants claim it was. As a historian, I must report that it was much, much less.