

Other small communities lived in the midst of the Arabs inhabiting Palestine and the other Arab countries—Jews, Armenians, Kurds, and others. In all those Arab countries the Jewish communities lived in peace and security. They even found for centuries amongst the Arabs more tolerance, more security, and more happiness than they had encountered among some of the nations of Europe. In Palestine, in particular, the Jews represented in 1914 a small fraction of the population, about 6 to 7 per cent. of the total. They had their own schools, synagogues, and communal institutions; but one important fact should be noted. They had no national or political aims antagonistic or hostile to the Arabs. On the contrary, while retaining their religious, cultural, and racial characteristics, the Jews merged harmoniously in the Arab structure. That explains why there was then no friction between the Arabs and Jews, no riots, no disturbances. The contrast between the old era and the present day provides an understanding to the problem.

Politically, the Arabs of Palestine, like the Arabs of neighbouring countries, were not then independent in the sense of forming a separate political entity. They shared, however, the sovereignty of an independent country and enjoyed full rights of citizenship equal to the rights enjoyed by the Turkish citizens of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, Arabs rose to the highest executive, legislative, and administrative positions.

Notwithstanding their enjoyment of full political rights, the Arabs wished to establish a purely Arab State, independently of the Ottoman Empire. There were already several undercurrents aiming at the achievement of this objective. These undercurrents rose to the surface and gained strength and violence during the First World War.

The Allied Governments encouraged this struggle of the Arabs for their independence, as it fitted with their plans for a victorious termination of the conflict. In particular, the United Kingdom made several pledges for the recognition and establishment of Arab independence.

In 1915 there was the pledge of Sir Henry McMahon, the United Kingdom High Commissioner in Egypt, to King Hussein of Hedjaz, then Sherif of Mecca, declaring that the United Kingdom "was prepared to recognize and uphold the independence of the Arabs in all regions lying within frontiers proposed by the Sherif of Mecca." Sir Henry McMahon purported to exclude from the pledge certain portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. The portions excluded fell within the then French sphere of interest and claim. There was, however, no exclusion of that part of Syria now known as Palestine.

On 2 November, 1917, the United Kingdom Government issued the Balfour Declaration without the consent or even the knowledge of the Arabs and in contradiction of the McMahon Pledge made in 1915. When news of this declaration reached the Arab world doubts were created in the minds of the Arabs as to the sincerity of Allied aims concerning the future of the Arab countries, and the Sherif Hussein asked for an explanation. To allay Arab fears, the United Kingdom Government delivered to King Hussein what is known as the Hogarth Message, which pledged that Jewish settlement in Palestine would only be allowed in so far as would be consistent with "the political and economic freedom of the Arab population."

In other words, the Balfour Declaration was to be secondary and subservient to the "political freedom" of the population.